

# Uncolonized Thailand: A Historical Perspective on Modern Thai Archival Education

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## *Abstract*

Historical context significantly shapes archives management practices and archival education within a country. This article aims to examine how Thailand's recordkeeping traditions, both pre-modern and during the era of Western imperialism, have evolved to influence the current state of archives management and archival education in the country. By comparing the Thai context to other countries, it is found that Thailand's status as a non-colonized nation has led to relatively fragmented recordkeeping knowledge and practices. Ultimately, the study identifies essential elements learned from other countries in the region that can help address the gaps in Thailand's archival development.

**Keywords:** Archival education, Thailand, History of recordkeeping

## INTRODUCTION

As an archives educator, engaging with international perspectives through participation in international conferences presents a valuable opportunity for professional growth and knowledge exchange. In 2023, I contributed to two panels focusing on archival education. The first panel took place at the Southeast Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA) Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, in November, followed by the Asia-Pacific Library and Information Education and Practice Conference (A-LIEP) conference held in Taipei, Taiwan, in December. This history, as well as other factors, formed the current situation of archival education in Thailand, which I will present in this article, along with comparisons with other experiences from countries in Southeast Asia.

## TRADITIONAL THAI RECORDKEEPING

Prior to the onset of imperialism in the 19th century, Siam maintained a traditional governance structure that encompassed a recordkeeping system akin to other kingdoms of the era. Songsan Nilkamhaeng (1974) conducted an investigation into Thai recordkeeping history as a part of her thesis, delineating its evolution across distinct historical periods. Notably, during the Sukhothai period (1238–1438), renowned for the creation of Thai script following the discovery of King Ramkamhaeng's inscription in 1292 (UNESCO, n.d.), inscriptions and palm leaves were found as two main pieces of historical evidence (Nilkamhaeng, 1974, p. 22). These inscriptions and palm-leaf manuscripts presented reading and writing culture as well as the recordkeeping landscape.

The subsequent Ayutthaya period (1351–1767) left behind a diverse array of documentary heritage comprising chronicles, documentation of foreign travelers, palm leaf manuscripts, *samut Thai*<sup>1</sup>, and various communication materials akin to records (Nilkamhaeng, 1974, pp. 26–31). The royal palace notably housed the *Ho Luang*, serving as a repository for knowledge in the form of books and archives (p. 31). Within this milieu, a professional class emerged. Scribes known as *alak* were responsible for recording court proceedings in daily diaries termed *jotmai*het - a term used for the word archives in Thai today. The *alak* played a crucial role in documenting daily events, a practice instrumental in chronicling historical narratives.

The chronicle has served as a vital historical testament in shaping mainstream narratives that often center on monarchs and their lineages. This method of recording events through the interpretations of historiographers embodies the fundamental essence of archives. The scribe, possibly the initial archivist in traditional Thai contexts, reflects a practice that could have been influenced by Chinese scribes (Sucha-xaya, 2021). Moreover, the tradition of chronicling events in Thai culture bears traces of Indian influence, where kings are revered akin to gods and believed to reincarnate across multiple lives, echoing parallels with the Hindu deity Narai (Vishnu).

Hence, it is evident that traditional Thai archival practices do not solely originate from Thai roots but bear influences from ancient civilizations and other kingdoms. Despite subsequent Western influences during the *Thonburi* (1767–1782) and *Rattanakosin* (1782–present) periods, these kingdoms persisted in their commitment to recordkeeping practices. This enduring legacy of meticulous event documentation remains a cornerstone of contemporary Thai archival practices, a facet that will be elaborated in subsequent discussions.

### COLONIAL ERA AND WESTERN INFLUENCE

Transitioning from traditional governance, the nineteenth century marked a significant shift in recordkeeping practices in Siam, driven by strong Western influence. This influence not only urged Siam to modernize and align with contemporary standards but also served as a defensive measure against Western imperialism. Under the reign of King Rama

<sup>1</sup> A kind of manuscript made of *khoi* leaves to document different kinds of knowledge such as literature, medicine, horoscope, and so on.

V, records management was embraced as a mechanism to transform traditional governance for the demands of the modern era. Historical evidence indicates Siam's deliberate adoption of a modernized recordkeeping system to align with evolving administrative standards.

The transition from traditional administration to a Westernized, modernized system necessitated the establishment of educational institutions to produce a new workforce capable of serving the new system. The Royal Pages School, which later evolved into Chulalongkorn University, was founded in 1910 to fulfill this imperative. However, evidence pertaining to recordkeeping training suggests that such recordkeeping practices had been adopted across various government ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then referred to as the Pavilion of Foreign Affairs, emerged as a leader in recordkeeping endeavors. The document “Regulations of Pavilion of Foreign Affairs” delineated four distinct positions dedicated to recordkeeping tasks. One position entailed maintaining a register of sent and received records, while the remaining three positions were responsible for the creation of records (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regulation, 1889, pp. 1–2). Governance in Absolute Monarchy time impacted quite a centralized recordkeeping system, with the same standards and training.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs served as a role model and training ground for other ministries. For instance, the Ministry of Murathathorn (the king's stationery) sent staff to receive recordkeeping training at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chaijindasut, 1991, p. 77). The Ministry of Interior also adopted these practices (Chaijindasut, 1991, p. 86). One plausible reason for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' pioneering role in modern recordkeeping is that the ministry's mission was prioritized as the most crucial for the nation, as its policies could determine the country's destiny during the imperialist era. Nevertheless, after the decline of imperialism, the Siamese Revolution of 1932 occurred. This event impacted the centralized recordkeeping system, rendering it the responsibility of each individual ministry. Subsequently, the recordkeeping system in Siam declined (Prudtikul, n.d.).

On the side of archives management, the establishment of an agency working like the National Archives was initiated in 1916 as a part of Wachirayan

Library, according to Prince Damrong<sup>2</sup>'s initiative. He stated that public records should be kept in this institution so that in the future, there will be records available for making history (The National Archives of Thailand, 2024). However, it is also stated that people who were recruited as keepers at the beginning of this archives are expected to be ladies as they are not breadwinners. This could suggest that the archival profession was not held in particularly high regard during that period. The archival work then was a part of the National Library and became the National Archives in 1952.

Regarding archives management, the establishment of an agency akin to the National Archives was initiated in 1916 as part of the Wachirayan Library resulting from the initiative of Prince Damrong. He stated that public records should be kept in this institution to ensure the availability of records for historical purposes in the future (The National Archives of Thailand, 2024). However, it is also noted that the initial keepers recruited for this archives were expected to be women, as they were not breadwinners (The National Archives of Thailand, 2024). This might imply a lack of professional esteem for the archival profession at that time.

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND FORMATION OF ARCHIVISTS

Archival work in the modern sense was not practiced at the Wachirayan Library but was done in Ministries and the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary until the establishment of the National Archives in 1952. Archival documents created by the National Archives around that time showed the formation of archivists in the early period. The archival document entitled National Archives Project (2497 B.E.) delineated two primary functions within the National Archives: the documentation of events, reflecting the legacy of traditional Thai archives, and modern recordkeeping (The National Archives, 1954, pp. 4–5). Initially, the traditional mission held greater significance, involving activities such as sourcing news from newspapers and onsite documentation of key events. In contrast, modern recordkeeping played a relatively smaller role. Some national archivists at the time left their study notes on archival administration practice in the National Archives of the US (The National Archives of Thailand, 1944, p. 4), and Sir Hilary Jenkinson<sup>3</sup>'s definition of archives was

studied (The National Archives of Thailand, 1944, p. 27), implying that archivists were trying to educate themselves on modern archives management. Archivists underwent in-house training, with recruitment criteria emphasizing proficiency in Thai, foreign languages, and documentation skills (The National Archives, 1954, p. 4). Over time, modern recordkeeping gained prominence within the National Archives of Thailand, aligning with the expansion of records in contemporary public administration.

In sum, the archival documents from the National Archives I studied suggest that modern recordkeeping initially received less emphasis at the National Archives in early times. Furthermore, the education of national archivists during that period primarily involved internal training (Sucha-xaya, 2017, p. 161). However, as time progressed, a few archivists were selected to pursue education and training opportunities abroad, contributing to the development of modern archives management practices.

### FORMAL EDUCATION FOR ARCHIVISTS

For formal education, archival management programs were formed in some universities in two disciplines. One side is in archaeology, and the other is in library and information science.

For the archaeology side, Silpakorn University offers a postgraduate program titled "Master of Arts Program in Archives and Cultural Heritage Information Management." This program caters predominantly to practitioners seeking to augment their practical experience with theoretical knowledge through the pursuit of a master's degree. The program's longstanding establishment aligns with the country's emphasis on cultural heritage. Notably, it maintains a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Archives of Thailand, which operates under the Fine Art Department.

Within the library science education, archives management is typically taught as elective courses. Librarians often encounter special collections, including archives and ancient manuscripts, necessitating familiarity with archival principles. Similar to other Southeast Asian countries, library and information science departments primarily offer bachelor's degrees to meet the workforce demands of various information institutions. Postgraduate programs in these departments also include elective courses in archives management. Consequently, archives have historically constituted an additional

<sup>2</sup> Prince Damrong is called the Father of Thai history.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Hilary Jenkinson (1882-1961) is a renowned British archivist at the Public Records Office.

component of early education. At present, archives management remains part of the undergraduate curriculum, although some universities mandate records and archives management as a compulsory course.

Recently, the field has witnessed a shift, with information science programs introducing postgraduate offerings specifically focused on archives and records management. Notably, Chulalongkorn University launched its postgraduate program in Data and Information Curation in 2021. The primary objective of this postgraduate program is to equip archivists and related professionals, including data curators, with the necessary skills to manage both traditional physical materials and newly born-digital materials artifacts within archives and other responsible institutions. These professionals play a critical role in preserving our cultural heritage and ensuring the accessibility of information for future generations.

The program comprises a balanced blend of compulsory and elective courses:

Compulsory courses from both physical and digital sides, namely Principles of Records and Archives Management, Principles of Digital Curation, Linking Structured Data, and Professional and Communication Skills for Data and Information Curators. For elective courses, the program also offers courses focusing on archives theories and practices such as archival appraisal and acquisition, document preservation and conservation, history of recordkeeping, and so on, but also a pathway to new technology such as building trustworthiness of digital repositories, digital preservation management, interaction design for information exhibits, to name but a few.

In summary, this program bridges theory and practice, preparing graduates to navigate the dynamic landscape of archival management while embracing technological advancements.

### **THAI ARCHIVAL EDUCATION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

When comparing Thailand to other Southeast Asian countries based on my experiences attending two conferences, a notable disparity emerges. Most countries in the region have established governmental systems that mandate formal education and training for archivists and records managers. These

requirements ensure that professionals are well-prepared to handle the complexities of archival work. The historical context may also contribute to this phenomenon.

The examination of archival education revealed that certain nations have enacted laws or regulations to bolster the recruitment of archivists through formal archival education programs. This can be attributed to the well-established role of recordkeeping within governmental administrative systems. For instance, legislation in Indonesia supports the archival profession, resulting in robust records management and archival programs within institutions of higher education. Annually, a substantial number of students gain admission into these programs (Nurtanzila, 2023). Similarly, Malaysia and Singapore, influenced by their colonial history under British rule, have adopted recordkeeping systems with close ties to various governmental agencies and the position of Departmental Record Officer. In Malaysia, archivists must possess specific qualifications to work in archival institutions.

Other countries have demonstrated knowledge in archival management, which is a legacy of colonization. For example, Vietnam received many such influences throughout its history, such as from China and France (Henchy, 1998, pp. 2–3), as well as the Soviet Union. Vietnam still strictly adheres to the Soviet Union's influence when it comes to archival education. Also, the Philippines, with its historical ties to Spain and the USA, has a rich archival history that significantly impacts its archival education. Nevertheless, education in LIS in the Philippines and archival studies has also evolved, with some, such as Buenrostro (2015), proposing that education shift further from focusing on storage to access and a shared paradigm of social memory.

Interestingly, the history of colonization plays a pivotal role in shaping modern records and archives management systems across many Southeast Asian nations. It is essential to note that this historical context does not necessarily imply a positive outcome. Instead, it serves as a critical factor influencing archival practices and education in the region. It should be noted that this summary is based on my own investigation. However, further in-depth comparative research, particularly conducted by archival educators in Southeast Asian countries, should be done collaboratively.

Turning our attention to Thailand, despite resistance

from elites during the colonization period, the country lacked a strong foundational archival system. Consequently, Thailand's approach to archives became a blend of traditional and modern systems, albeit only briefly integrated into the administrative framework. Up until now, archival education in Thailand remains an option primarily for practitioners seeking to deepen their knowledge or a select group of students dedicated to pursuing this field of study.

### FUTURE OF THAI ARCHIVAL EDUCATION

While the past cannot be changed, the future of Thai archival education warrants examination, particularly in the context of neighboring countries. Several key elements are necessary for the development of Thai archival education.

**Professionalization of Records Managers and Archivists:** The government should establish records manager and archivist positions as professional roles requiring formal education. This would ensure graduates have access to relevant jobs and that these positions are filled by individuals with essential knowledge and skills.

**Competency Framework for Records Managers and Archivists:** The lack of standardized knowledge and skills for archivists has impeded the recognition of archival work as a profession. Establishing a clear competency framework would allow regulatory bodies like the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC) to formally recognize archival work as a distinct profession.

**Awareness and utility of archives:** archives in Thailand are mainly perceived solely for their historical and cultural values, with their preservation often focused on serving historians and researchers only. There is a need to raise awareness of the broader societal benefits of archives and promote their utility in more concrete and impactful ways.

### CONCLUSION

The development of archives management in Thailand has been significantly influenced by historical factors. These factors have shaped both the archival system and the composition of the workforce within the profession. During the imperialist period, Siam faced temporary pressures, leading to the adoption of modern records and archives management practices. However, these practices were only implemented for a brief period. Archival education, initially catering to a niche group of learners, has gradually expanded.

Meaningful change can only occur when archives are recognized as an integral part of society, with the understanding that they have the potential to enhance the lives of citizens.

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