

Possibility of Southeast Asian Philosophy

Moderator: Taro Mochizuki (Osaka University)

Speaker 1: Dr. Mohammad Alinor bin Abdul Kadir (Chairman of PPFPM, Malaysia)

Speaker 2: Dr. Kasem Phenpinant (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand)

The world philosophy advocated by the Philosophical Association of Japan has produced the result of *History of World Philosophy* (8vols). However, "... even when turning to Asia, ... apart from China and India, other regions such as Southeast Asia, ... have hardly been taken into consideration" (Introduction). In order to amend the lack of Southeast Asian philosophy in world philosophy, we will invite two philosophers active in Malaysia and Thailand to explore how the thoughts nurtured in this region can be considered "philosophy."

'Malay Philosophy : An Ethno-Philosophy Approach' by Dr. Mohammad Alinor bin Abdul Kadir:

The topic I am asked to discuss is solely about Malay Philosophy, but I find it quite difficult to discuss because, until now, there has not been a single written work that adequately explains this topic. To discuss this topic, a researcher must at least study as many texts as possible within Malay culture that can be classified under the field of Philosophy. If these texts are in Malay (both ancient and classical), the challenge is even greater.

What is Philosophy in Malay culture? What kind of writing can be classified as Philosophy? Has such writing ever existed, or do we need to analyze more texts from various fields and interpret Philosophy within them? However, this still requires us to answer: what is Philosophy?

Another issue is whether Philosophy in Malay culture was borrowed from Indian, Arab, Persian, European, Chinese, Japanese, or other cultures. If borrowed, we may be able to use this as a guide to define it within Malay culture. For example, if we borrow from Europe (let's say Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French brought it here), then we might agree that Philosophy consists of

Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ontology, Ethics, Aesthetics, and so on. With this, we can explore Malay cultural texts to find discussions of similar themes. If the concept of Philosophy is taken from Indian, Arab, Persian, Chinese, or Japanese traditions, then its meaning would be different.

However, I have never encountered a work that specifically discusses Malay Philosophy, whether it originates from Malay culture itself or is adapted from foreign traditions. In fact, I have often come across books titled Malay Philosophy, Javanese Philosophy, Batak Philosophy, Minangkabau Philosophy, Bugis Philosophy, and so on. Yet, their contents usually consist of old knowledge from those cultures, often without any philosophical analysis—just compiled without reflecting the true meaning of Philosophy.

That is why I have added the term Ethno-Philosophical Approach to the original title. I need to explain this. In cultures that do not have a well-developed discourse on Philosophy, discussions on the subject can be found scattered everywhere—in myths, manuscripts, inscriptions, songs, folklore, and more. Thus, an Ethno-Philosophical study is needed to extract philosophical elements, which can then be structured into a coherent framework. This is a rather challenging task.

One of the difficulties is determining whether a particular source contains philosophical elements. We must examine it in detail. The most demanding part is that we must analyze each text one by one, identify the philosophical aspects within, and compile them. This is like searching for coins in a pile of flour using only our mouth—it requires extensive effort and time to sift through irrelevant material. Once we identify philosophical elements, we must further analyze them to collect more, hoping that, with some luck, we can eventually compile them into a well-structured philosophical framework. The next step is to compare this local philosophical structure with external philosophical systems, such as those from Europe. What is the purpose of this? Ideally, we want to determine how the philosophical concepts found in local sources align with discussions in Europe today.

Moreover, this discourse can evolve into new domains such as physical sciences, social sciences, and technology, thereby elevating the quality of local philosophical concepts to match contemporary knowledge.

‘There Is No Such a Thing as Thai Philosophy: A (De)construction’ by Dr. Kasem Phenpinant: While the world philosophy increasingly gains a global recognition, regional philosophies gradually receive more attentions in the Western academia. However, Southeast Asian philosophy is unfortunately a missing link from the global philosophical landscape. Just as it is limited by an intellectual fashion centered in the East/West divide, so it is not perpetuated by the great traditions from Greek to Indian and Chinese traditions. Consequently, the quest for its own philosophical stance arises from the construction of its own based on local wisdom.

Is there such a thing as Thai philosophy? This is a remaining question to be asked and answered, even though nobody today raise the question. However, in the past, there were several attempts to formulate Thai philosophy as a part of world philosophy, it remains vague, whose sources has been imported from many philosophical and religious backgrounds: from Western to Eastern philosophy, from different religious doctrines to local cults.

‘Philosophy in Thailand’ is rather the good term. It reflects the state of philosophy upon the academic practice. There are several institutions that provide curriculums and support researches on philosophical subjects. If we emphasize only on academic works, then we will found that volumes of philosophical writings in Thai are massively dominated by Theravada Buddhist philosophy and religious studies. While literatures on Western philosophy are limited, Eastern philosophy texts, namely, Chinese, Indian and Japanese philosophy, are a few.

‘Philosophy in Thailand’ is historically new. It never situates itself in relation to Southeast Asia regional areas. It rather associates itself with their philosophical roots. Theravada Buddhist philosophy dogmatically refers to the Buddhist doctrine, whereas Chinese

philosophy associates with Chinese philosophers or sages. There has been a strong Analytic philosophical practice, whose subjects consist of logics, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The other Western philosophy tradition, particularly Continental philosophy, mushrooms in Social and Human Sciences.

So much so, indeed, that ‘Philosophy in Thailand’ is a passive recipient of flowing ideas from Eastern and Western philosophy. It hardly develops its own accounts to contest the prevailing philosophical thoughts. Although Thailand has historically cultural heritages substantially influenced by Indian and Chinese civilization, it never brings out a self-understanding of its own foundation as well as a reaction to internal difference, external influence, diversity and heterogeneity. It has rather fostered the Buddhization of Thai society, since the early nineteenth century. Consequently, it has made Buddhism as the dispositif of Thai mind, while neglecting other thoughts: animism, various religious accounts, and even Western ideas. Unfortunately, this has never led to a constitutive development of Thai philosophy. It rather turns out to be a dogmatically interpretative effect of Buddhist doctrines that are collaboratively produced and practiced by those who follow and believe in Theravada Buddhism, and those who reflect upon such belief.

Needless to say, one more time, if there was such a thing as Thai philosophy, it would have been examined by a series of questions: How to do Thai philosophy in relation to religious doctrines? How to do Thai philosophy, without referring to Buddhism? How to avoid a creation of Thai philosophy as national philosophy? How does it go across the East/West divide? Can one transcend the world/regional philosophy, while speaking of Thai philosophy? Can it raise the tone of philosophy and its conversation of mankind?