

TESTING THAIS:  
ESTABLISHING THE ORDINARY IN THAI NATIONAL EXAMS

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

The Thai national exam, explicitly aimed to standardize education, limits acceptable forms of knowledge and normalizes divisions of citizens. While branches of the Ministry of Education claim to use exam results as a means to objectively measure students' and schools' capacity, these results also reflect sufficient adherence to state rhetoric. Through the form of the exam questions, social divisions are normalized and reified through graphs and maps that make them seem rational and apolitical. Although citizens accept the form of the exam as a necessary evaluative tool in this international testing milieu, the education system in Thailand is not a unitary one, so it cannot reflect what every student learns in the classroom and thus is subject to critique.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Goodman studied the Master of Arts in Asian Studies, specifically Southeast Asian Studies, at Cornell University. She received her BA with honors in 2005 from Scripps College in Claremont, California in Politics and International Relations with a focus on Asia and minor in Hispanic Studies. As a Peace Corps volunteer, she spent two years in the northeast of Thailand with the Teacher Collaboration and Community Outreach program.

For my first teacher, my mother—  
This is for you Herby, and I really mean it.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- A-Net: Advanced National Educational Test  
O-Net: Ordinary National Educational Test  
I-Net: Islamic National Educational Test  
V-Net: Vocational National Educational Test  
U-Net: University National Educational Test  
N-Net: Non-Formal National Educational Test  
GAT: General Aptitude Test, used as a replacement for A-Net  
PAT: Professional Aptitude Test, used as a replacement for A-Net  
NIETS or สทศ: National Institute for Educational Testing Service or  
สถาบันทดสอบทางการศึกษาแห่งชาติ  
ONESQA or สมศ: Office for National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment or  
สำนักงานรับรองมาตรฐานและประเมินคุณภาพการศึกษา  
PISA: Program for International Student Assessment is a branch of OECD  
OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development  
SAT: Originally stood for Scholastic Aptitude Test, then Scholastic Assessment Test, and  
since 1993 has been considered an “empty acronym.”  
ACT: American College Testing  
GRE: Graduate Records Examination  
GMAT: Graduate Management Admissions Test  
MCAT: Medical College Admission Test  
IMD: International Institute for Management Development  
NCLB: No Child Left Behind  
AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress, a system developed under No Child Left Behind

## EDITORIAL NOTE

### ***Romanization and Translation***

In this document proper names are in line with common spellings or the individual's preference. The consonant *j* is spelled with a *j* here, unless the individual spells it with a *c* or *ch*. The initial consonants *p*, *t*, and *k* are written *ph*, *th*, and *kh*. Thus, although it would be spelled in some academic works as "Uthumpon Jamonman," I use the common spelling "Utumporn Jamornmann." All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

### ***Chronology***

In Thailand years are counted according to the Buddhist Era/Thai lunar-solar calendar, which is 543 years ahead of the Gregorian (Western) calendar. Therefore, 2012 A.D. is 2555 in Thailand. I have noted both styles for Thai and non-Thai readers.

### ***Chronology of Schooling and Exams***

The Thai school year begins in May and ends in March. Final exams and standardized tests are primarily administered in February and March. The Thai education system refers to a school year as the single year in which it begins; it does not hyphenate the two-year span. The O-Net that represents the 2010 school year was administered in February 2011. In official documents and in popular media this one exam is referred to in two ways: 1) the 2010 school year O-Net and 2) the O-Net that was administered in 2011. To avoid confusion I limit myself to the latter system, in accordance with the date they were administered, which is the date printed on the exams.

### *Schooling System*

Since 1977, formal education in Thailand has consisted of six years of primary school, three of lower secondary, and three of higher secondary, in a 6-3-3 pattern. Primary school is known as Pratom 1-Pratom 6 (P.1-P.6) and secondary school is Mathayom 1-Mathayom 6 (M.1-M.6).

Since nine years of education became mandatory, some primary schools in rural areas expanded from what was originally just P.1-P.6 to also include M.1-M.3. For the American reader's ease I have translated the grade levels to the U.S. school system equivalents: Pratom 6 is Grade 6, Mathayom 3 is Grade 9, and Mathayom 6 is Grade 12.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE 'NATIONAL' EXAMINATION

Since 1966, the Thai government has standardized education through the creation of national tests under a national curriculum within state-funded formal basic education. The state standardized testing with the stated goal of improving the country by revealing and rectifying school weaknesses. According to the National Education Act of 1999,

The economic, political, cultural and social crisis has caused all concerned to realize the expediency for the reform of Thai education. The urgently needed reform will undoubtedly redeem the country from the downward spiral, so that Thailand will arise in the immediate future as a nation of wealth, stability and dignity, capable of competing with others in this age of globalization. (ONEC website)

In a milieu of international meritocracy, the state assumes that standardized testing can provide a “scientific” judgment of educational quality. The administering of tests based on the national curriculum implicitly alleges to evaluate students based on merit alone, eliminating influences such as urban or rural location, class, ethnicity, gender or religion. All twelfth-grade students in Thai government-supported schools take a state-mandated multiple-choice test, called the Ordinary National Educational Test, used to create an educational standard. Several organizations use O-Net test scores to evaluate the quality of both students and schools. For the individual student, a low score can affect his or her ability to gain acceptance into university. While admissions criteria change from year to year, many students, including aspiring doctors, must receive at least a score of at least 60 percent to gain entrance to some universities. This evaluation, conducted three times every five years, decides each school’s national ranking and, in turn, its reputation and ability to gain valuable resources.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One example of valuable resources would be extra government funding for special projects, given if the school’s scores (and an additional extensive evaluation) merits its ranking as a “lab” school (rongrian tuayang).

The explicit and implicit goals of administering a national exam do not always overlap. The National Institute of Educational Testing Service has the stated goal of creating and consistently administering a national educational exam to manage and operate education, conduct research, develop education, and provide results for school evaluation. It is the central center of cooperation on the levels of national and international testing (NIETS 2011). Therefore, the standard exam offers a method for comparing students and comparing schools aimed at school transparency, making schools responsible to a higher authority.

Despite the Ministry of Education's rhetoric that standardized testing addresses disparities in the educational system, the everyday realities of standardized testing do not create an equal playing field. Rather, the examination system creates a hierarchy of Thai students based on their test-based responses to state-endorsed forms of class-based, cultural, religious, and gendered knowledge. All students who attend government-funded schools in Thailand are supposed to be taught from a uniform national curriculum. In the national imaginary, Bangkok students are taught from the same national curriculum as rural students. However, the resources are not equal, and the educational priorities of the schools, teachers, and students are not homogeneous. In some rural areas during the rice planting and harvesting seasons, school is cancelled while families rally together during the period of particularly hard labor. Some schools have an adequate number of well-maintained computers with Internet connection for students to do research and send email, while others do not have these kinds of resources. In the face of these inequalities, some rural Thai teachers state that it is impossible for their schools to compete with well-funded urban schools.<sup>2</sup> Students with the resources to do so, enroll in cram schools that

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<sup>2</sup> For the article from *The Nation* that expresses the surprise of educators and journalists when a small rural school in Thailand's politically restive Muslim majority south scored in the top ten in the nation see Wannapa Khaopa's April 23, 2012 article, "Small Primary School Became a Winner."

teach them how to manipulate the system and narrow the answer choices by guessing the state-sanctioned rhetoric. Test makers thus make the exam questions less clear to deter guessing. Some Thai teachers and students from various social and cultural backgrounds critique exam questions, citing specific questions treat subjective issues as if they were objective. Said parties with a stake in education do not passively accept the exam as a hegemonic tool, but instead question why students must select “proper” answers on the exam when the social situations depicted are out of context.

In this introduction, I briefly explain the historical development of the standardized national examinations, paying particular attention to the O-Net, which was developed in 2005 and utilized for the first time in 2006 by the National Educational Institute Testing Service (NIETS), a public organization of the Thai government. I argue that the Thai government’s stated objective in utilizing the O-Net is to promote educational equality across the nation, but the consequences do not reflect this stated goal. Instead, the O-Net serves to create and support a populace compliant to a strong government. Schools that prioritize the O-Net and scores well are rewarded with accolades, and their students can better access their chosen institutions and fields in higher education. I reveal that the tests create privileged categories based on national objectives, while simultaneously concretizing categories that were previously fluid. These categories are gender, regional, and demographic hierarchies. I prove this by considering, in distinct chapters, how the O-Net is not a benign instrument of measurement, but rather a tool that creates hierarchies of knowledge and reinforces social divisions among citizens.

## *The History of National Exams in Thailand*

International pressures and an internal civilizing mission shaped Thailand's modern education system (Wyatt 1969). Although the Thai national exam is a product of a long history of modernizing reforms following both British and American models, it can be linked more precisely to the influence of American education standards from the test-driven period after World War II. The national exam in Thailand took root after the period in which the United States developed the SAT, based on U.S. Army IQ tests, and established the Educational Testing Service in 1947. In Thailand, standardized exams were utilized in establishing the bureaucracy before the education sector began utilizing them. As William Siffin notes, the Thai state's demand for bureaucrats normalized the form of the exam for use in selecting government employees:

An examination process that did little more than regularize access to the bureaucracy—and in a way which was largely acceptable to the candidates for admission—contributed to the continuance of the bureaucracy and to the maintenance of an orderly relationship with its environment. (Siffin 1966, 148)

The American influence is quite evident from looking at O-Net: it utilizes a Scantron with originally four, and now five, multiple-choice answers.<sup>3</sup> From my personal correspondence with the College Board Communications Coordinator Katherine Levin, I found that the addition of the fifth answer (in 2012) on part of the Grade 12 O-Net gave it the same number of answer choices as the post- 2005 psychometrically-designed U.S. SAT college entrance exam.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Scantrons are machine-readable answer sheets used for multiple-choice testing. They consist of “bubble” or circle answer options that must be filled in completely with a #2 or 2B pencil to count. If bubbles are not filled in and students circle answers or put a check mark or X through the answer the machine that reads the answer will not give any points.

<sup>4</sup> “In the past, the SAT has included questions with three, four and five answer choices in the multiple choice sections, but the current exam format [since 2005] only features questions with 5 answer choices. Before 1994, when the SAT featured quantitative comparison questions in the Math section, questions offered 4 answer choices because of the nature of the questions (i.e., answer ‘a’ if the quantity in column A is greater; ‘b’ if B is greater; ‘c’ if they are equal, and ‘d’ if not enough information is provided to determine which is greater). The main reason that the current SAT format only features multiple-choice questions with five answer choices is based on psychometric

The idea of a national exam in Thailand must be understood within a global framework of standardized testing. Sometime between 1995 (2538) and 1998 (2541) the Thai standardized exam was reformed and “weighted,” meaning that some questions became worth more points than others, making the exams seem more accurate through their mathematical complexity. NIETS modeled the Thai version of the standardized test on ASEAN countries’ exams. The ASEAN country of Singapore, for example, modeled on the British system, is becoming the new reference point for the Thai government to construct modernity with Asian characteristics. The O-Net and A-Net, first utilized in 2006, have the same name as the Singaporean “O” and “A” exams. Regardless of stated or unstated points of reference for the Thai national exams, it is evident that Thailand’s educational system made adjustments to adapt to an international testing milieu.

The Thai national educational exam was first administered around 1966 (Oratip 2006). This was not the first standardized test to be used, as other bureaucratic bodies utilized standardized exams for bureaucratic assessment. The exam called “Entrance” was used for entrance into university. Another exam, this one unnamed, was issued by the Bureau of Educational Testing (BET).<sup>5</sup> As years passed, the exam changed from short-answer and essay questions to multiple-choice only exams. As late as 1998, the exam still included short answer questions, but NIETS (established in 2005) doubted the accuracy of grader’s personal evaluation of the short answers and hoped to increase efficiency in grading short answer questions, so these were kinds of questions were eliminated in favor of multiple-choice exams. The names and kinds

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research; the exam needs to have enough answer choice options so that the wrong answers a student might feasibly come up with can be listed, but not so many choices that students are wasting time going through long lists of possible right answers. Also, the more options you have, the less susceptible the questions are to guessing and so the reliability of every question is improved. Through research and the test development process, five answer choices has been determined by psychometricians to be the happy medium, which is why the SAT uses it whenever possible” (Katherine Levin, personal communication).

<sup>5</sup> BET is a bureau that is still in existence but has ceased to administer this exam.

of national exams have changed constantly over the past five years and if current trends are predictive, they will continue to change. Over the years, exams and exam titles have included Entrance, A-Net, O-Net, I-Net, N-Net, LAS, GAT, and PAT. By the time these words are printed, some of the exams will have changed in form or in name, or will have become obsolete.

Regardless of the name changes, national exams in Thailand are rapidly becoming more consequential for Thai citizens in two main ways: 1) they are more pervasive than before, having expanded to include people who did not previously take them, and, 2) the results have had greater impact on test-takers and education curricula, changing the ways that teachers teach. Educators term this phenomenon of the exam dictating what is taught as “washback.” For example, in the United States, the addition of the essay section on the SAT promoted “teaching of persuasive writing in American high schools” (College Board History 2011).

### ***The History of the O-Net***

In 2006, in the heightened atmosphere of international testing, the O-Net was first administered by the National Institute Educational Testing Service (NIETS) based on the 2001 curriculum. The O-Net has been administered to the U.S. equivalent of students in Grade 6, 9, and 12 to measure knowledge in eight subjects, namely Thai, social studies, English, mathematics, science, health and physical education, art, and vocational skills (NIETS 2010). Every student present on the day of testing who attends a government-funded school in Thailand takes the O-Net these three times during their schooling. The exam is administered once a year and all students take it on the same day in February, at the end of the school year but before the school’s final exams that test students on the material they learned in their classrooms.

The O-Net is intended to measure a student's learning and to hold teachers accountable for teaching the national curriculum. The logic is that those diligent students who are competently taught the national curriculum will score high on the exam. Students who do not take their studies seriously or whose teachers do not teach them material appropriate to their grade level or do not teach it well will score poorly. So if a single student's scores are poor, that is due to his lack of diligence in studying, but if an entire class does poorly, that shows a general lack of preparation and the fault lies with the teacher. If a whole school's points are low, the fault lies with the principal. If a district does poorly the fault lies with the ESAO, but if an entire province scores poorly, another kind of logic comes into play that has to do with notions of being more or less Thai or being *ön kwa*—mentally weaker.

All schools that are government-funded are mandated to administer the O-Net. Schools must administer the LAS for Grades 2, 5, 8, and 11, the NT in Grade 3, and the O-Net for Grades 6, 9, and 12. Schools that are outside of the system, or *nok-rabob rongrian*, do not administer these tests. These charter schools teach according to alternative curricula that are not state-defined. Charter schools cannot be conflated with *rongrian ekachon* or private schools, due to their government funding. However, NIETS will expand testing in 2012 by administering the first N-Net, or Non-Formal National Educational Test, to measure students in outside schools that do not adhere to the national curriculum.

The exam impacts education by producing an educational shift that methodically privileges what the state considers standard knowledge over divergent knowledge, thus subordinating supposedly undesirable ideas. This also subordinates non-conformists whose

mentalities diverge from what is defined as standard nationalist Thai thinking.<sup>6</sup> Divergent thinkers could be political or social non-conformists in their daily lives, or they could be simply approaching O-Net questions with a different frame of reference. As I discuss in detail in chapter 2, O-Net questions standardize conformity and middle-class, urban (Bangkok-centric), Buddhist-centered, “ethnically Thai” thinking.

The O-Net is a high-stakes exam for both Grade 12 students and for schools.<sup>7</sup> Although the National Institute Educational Testing Service (NIETS), the creator of the O-Net, does not mandate formal consequences for poor test results, it assembles and distributes the results widely and these results become part of the Office for National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) school evaluation process. The scores are reported back to the Educational Service Area Office (ESAO) in each province that announces the results. One consequence is consistent among provinces; the O-Net scores will affect a school’s evaluation by The Office for National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment or ONESQA.

Although a poor evaluation does not officially mandate fiscal sanctions, teachers and administrators understand that it indirectly affects many aspects of the school’s operation, including, but not limited to teacher’s salaries and the possibility for extra funding to support the school’s extracurricular activities. Aside from these indirect effects that are not explicitly stated in state documentation, a school that does not pass the evaluation must be reevaluated and lose standing within the community because all results from the evaluation are made public.

Community members may base their donations of time and money on the school’s standing, and

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<sup>6</sup> I do not attempt to exhaustively define nationalist Thai thinking here, nor do I attempt to treat it as an immutable category. Based on context and era, being Thai was appropriated by different parties and it was treated to varying levels of culture, militarism, and ethno-ideology. See Vella (1978, 178-179) and Kasian (2001,42).

<sup>7</sup> Students in grades 6 and 9 are also affected by the scoring because some teachers perceive them differently based on their scores and treat them accordingly. Some well-known schools also use the O-Net scores as a component for entrance into grade 7 and grade 10, respectively.

respectively increase or decrease these based on the school's reputation. Teachers who seek to work in schools with high standings, and students who wish to study in well-regarded schools generally avoid schools that have a poor reputation. If intelligent and determined students avoid the school, this can affect the school and even cause teachers to garner a lower salary because one of the factors for teacher bonuses is their students' excellence in local and regional competitions. These indirect effects are currently (in May 2012) under revision to make them more direct.<sup>8</sup>

ONESQA evaluations are made up of twelve criteria, of which O-Net scores are one part. A low evaluation score sparks a cycle of negative impacts. If a school does not pass the ESAO evaluation, teachers must create new lesson plans, engage in special projects, and generally work hard to balance an already challenging number of school responsibilities with extra paperwork and involvement of outside actors, such as the ESAO jurisdiction officers, who will approve or deny the plan for improvement. A poor evaluation can also hurt the school's reputation, which deters well-qualified teachers from applying to work there and deter potential financial donors from donating extra resources. If the school has few quality teachers and few resources, serious, gifted, or wealthy students may avoid attending this school. Without these students the school will not be able to compete with better schools in regional and national school competitions, and

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<sup>8</sup> Aside from the current negative repercussions for scoring poorly, plans are underway to increase the stakes of standardized testing for students, administrators, and teachers. The current minister of education, Suchat Thadatamrongwed, is currently making plans to: 1) create a NIETS standardized test for every level of education, 2) increase the consequences for teacher evaluations based on their students' standardized exam scores, 3) incorporate standardized scores into student grades. These changes are being considered in order to make the stakes higher so that teachers will take teaching more seriously and follow the educational standards. Suchat states, "if there is a standardized test, teachers won't be able to teach according to their own desires, they'll have to stay along the lines of the standardized test and teach in the right way. In the past, some teachers taught according to their own desires because they didn't have to be responsible to anything. This made students lose opportunities. In the future, if teachers don't teach well, their students won't be able to do well on the test, so it will affect the teachers directly. Therefore, teachers must try harder when teaching. It will also influence administrative evaluations because normally evaluating administrators is done through assessing teacher and student results" ("Suchat" 2012).

the school's reputation will deteriorate further. Therefore, schools take O-Net scores seriously and often prioritize cramming for the O-Net over other educational goals.

Branches of the Ministry of Education intervene in school operations if those schools poor ONESQA evaluations. In recent history, schools have been evaluated every five years. If a school passes three evaluation rounds, they have succeeded and are not evaluated again. However, if the school does not pass the third round, it must draw up an improvement plan and begin the evaluations over from the first round. Of all the criteria that are used to evaluate the school, the O-Net scores are the most heavily weighted, making up twenty percent of the total points. If a school improves upon its O-Net scores from the previous year—in 2012 they will need to improve over their 2011 score by four percent—then they pass that indicator. The O-Net scores are not the linchpin in the evaluation, even though many administrators and educators believe that those schools whose O-Net scores did not improve will not pass the evaluation. While other categories can be “decorated” by scrambling to highlight non-quantifiable skills, insufficient O-Net scores cannot be obscured.

Success and failure on the test is entirely relative. The national average generally delineates success or failure, requiring that some provinces be deficient. If a province scores above the national average, that province has succeeded, but if the province scores below that line, it has failed. Doing poorly or well is based only on comparisons to other provinces, not on a fixed percentage of correct questions. The top fifteen provinces and the lowest fifteen provinces are also marked as negative and positive examples for other provinces (see chapter four).

### ***Reforms and the Changing Structure of the National Exams***

The form of the national exam has evolved to appear more accurate. I utilize exams from twenty-three out of forty-six years' worth of exams, the oldest dating to 1988. Overall, the changes make the exam appear to be more mathematically accurate. Instead of weighing the questions equally, the questions are given different numbers of points based on the number of bubbles one must fill in per question. For example, on the Thai portion of the exam from 1993, one point and one Scantron "bubble" was allotted per question, but on the Thai portion of the 2011 exam eighteen questions were worth fifty points and six questions had two parts (with two corresponding bubbles) per question. Each question was thus worth 2.77 points. This point system, which works in the hundredths, appears more accurate and mathematical. Yet in some of these multi-part questions, points are given for one correct portion, but in others, especially in the English exam, all parts must be correct for any points to be awarded, thus they give points *only for complete sets of skills*. In other words, although the point methodology appears to pinpoint student capacity to the hundredth of a point, the multi-part question system actually hides students' correct answers.

NIETS has changed the exam from year to year so as to demonstrate the capacity to more accurately assess student knowledge. While many protesters call the exam "illogical and nonsensical," my analysis attempts to make sense of the exam as a logical apparatus utilized by the state. One of the ways to show this is to chart, both literally and figuratively, the changes in the exam. The national exams have changed on different levels, from banal changes such as the number of minutes allotted for every question, to the sociological, such as the change in what the questions attempt to measure. The changes in the exam questions are indicative of what kinds of knowledge the government privileges or encourages.

Thailand's 2002 national curriculum re-focused teaching to emphasize analytical thinking and student-centered activities; this change was born out of international emphasis on the dangers of rote memorization and teacher-centered learning. Eventually this approach manifested itself on the standardized exams as well. Multi-part questions were introduced on the English section of the exam in 2010 (2553), and then were introduced on the social studies, Thai, and art portions in 2011 (2554). Multi-part questions measure complete skill sets. Students must have the relevant knowledge, be able to synthesize that knowledge, and analyze it. If a student can answer the "knowledge" portion of the question, but not the "synthesis" or "analysis" portion, no points are given.

Instead of becoming a more accurate gauge of knowledge with these formatting adjustments, the exam is in fact becoming less accurate because it makes more sweeping generalizations about student capacity. Thus, a student could answer two parts of a three-part question correctly, but still get zero points. This does not accurately identify student weaknesses and does not give students credit for questions that they answer correctly. Arguably, assessments like this serve to widen the point gap between those who know the answer and those who do not know, which could serve to discourage those students with *some* knowledge by lumping them in the same point category with those students with *no* knowledge.

The 2011 (2554) O-Net exam instituted a new taxonomy of subjects. After 2011, social studies remained one of the eight subjects, but "religion" and "culture" became newly labeled subsections within it. This 2011 change in labeling is worth further analysis. Perhaps it is an attempt to distinguish the O-Net from Western secular exams that do not test religion and

culture, and to show pride in being distinct from the West, as it is perceived in Thailand.<sup>9</sup> The usage of such categories could also be in order to combat implications that NIETS is blindly copying Western examination styles, since categories labeled “religion” and “culture” are not used in international standardized exams. Regardless of motivation, the division threatens to make nationally endorsed categories of religion and culture more rigidly defined by breaking them apart into two sections of the exam. Also, students and educators might be encouraged to think of cultures and religions that do not appear on the exam under these categories as *not* culture or *not* religion, such as those locally manifested.

### ***Implications for the Individual Student***

For individual students, the Grade 12 exam is one of the qualifications used to determine entrance into a university. The Thai system is a bit complex, given that there are two possible pathways to entering university, namely the state-centered way, and university-centered way. For example, if a student from Ubon Ratchathani province wants to attend Chiang Mai University, she will do so by way of the central system, using her O-Net scores and school Grade Point Average (GPA) to apply. As a backup, she may also apply to Ubon Ratchathani University by way of taking the Ubon Rathchathani University entrance exam, which tests the specific subject that the student will need for his or her major. In the case of students who take specific university exams, O-Net scores are not as vital for student admittance as for students who seek admittance through the central system. A student who scores well on the exam will more likely gain the reputation of being a good student, gaining more opportunities to participate in annual local and regional competitions, performances, or leadership positions.

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth treatment of the West and Occidentalism, as they relate to constructions of Thai national image through acquiring modernity (scientific-rationalist) and maintaining tradition (spirituality), see Pattana Kitiasara (2010) and Thongchai Winichakul (2010).

### *Literature Engaged*

In Thailand, articles about the O-Net focus primarily on the possible methods to get students and teachers to take it more seriously, since the low scores are linked to the perception that students and teachers do not care about the scores. The O-Net is also discussed in popular news programs and on programs like Thai PBS, where academics discuss potential methods to improve the quality of the exam questions. However, there is a dearth in academic scholarship on the O-Net as compared to popular, often sensationalized, media coverage. One probable reason for this lack is that problematic questions do not appear systematic. Those questions appear to be individual instances of test makers' lapses in judgment. Academics have not yet read the ordinary exam questions looking for a discernable pattern. Therefore, in my research, I read the questions carefully, assessing not just what students have pulled out and contested as ridiculous, but also what is considered to be ordinary. In light of a lack of Thai scholarship on the O-Net, I utilized television interviews, newspaper articles, opinion pieces, and contestation videos to assess the Thai critique of the O-Net questions.

The focus of my study is on the language used in the O-Net to articulate the Thai government's parameters of citizenship, liberty, and law. Authors such as Anderson (1991), Mulder (1985), Thak (2007), Thongchai (1994), and Reynolds (2002), can help illuminate some of these phenomena in the context of the creation and reaffirmation of Thai nationalism. I will introduce their relevant concepts here briefly, but I will use them concretely in reference to the exam questions.

## *Methodology and Sources*

For this study, I have collected and translated selected O-Net questions from 2006 to 2012. Before 2006 the exam was known as “Entrance,” which was the university entrance exam. I chose to focus on the period since the creation of the O-Net for several reasons. First, the O-Net has become more comprehensive in its reach, testing students from sixth, ninth, and twelfth grades. Second, the O-Net has become more transparent and the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) now provides an answer sheet for it. And finally, third, the O-Net makes up twenty percent of the ONESQA school evaluation, so the testing influences the choices of school officials, not just those of individual students.

I analyze questions from O-Net booklets on both sides of the testing age-range, from the sixth grade exam (P.6) and the twelfth grade exam (M.6).<sup>10</sup> Most journalists—writing in both English and in Thai—and Thai language news anchors only report on the twelfth grade exam because it is the exam that affects students’ chances of entrance into university, but their questions are different from mine. Most reporters ask if the questions are generally fair to the students or if they are appropriate for a college entrance exam. My investigation is wider because I attempt to decipher what the exam teaches students, so I include questions from the sixth grade exam to balance the questions from the twelfth grade exam that are more popularly discussed. A balance is necessary because the sixth grade exam engages students differently than the twelfth grade exam, cultivating a less sexualized national spirit. Questions from the social studies and

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<sup>10</sup> I collected my primary sources, the exam booklets, by visiting schools in the Thai provinces of Buriram and Trang. Administrators, principals, and teachers in both Buriram and Trang have anxiety about training their students to perform well on the exam, which they demonstrated to me in conversations and informal interviews. In this way, I was able to gain an increased understanding of the meanings of the exam—both real and imagined—for these stakeholders. Buriram is in the northeast region of Thailand and Trang is in the south. These areas are considered to be marginal communities at the peripheries of both the map and hegemonic culture. In 2011, Buriram reportedly came in seventy-seventh place ranking on the O-Net, the lowest in the country. In Trang, most students and teachers follow Muslim social protocol, so they are outside of the Buddhist foundations tested on the O-Net.

health sections are my primary focus because those are the questions most densely loaded with cultural signals. Other sections, such as vocation and math, also include national rhetoric, but to a lesser extent, so I will utilize them in a minor way.

The exam questions themselves reveal their own logic, so I engage in a close textual reading, explaining the questions on their own terms. Often the exam's incorrect answers are just as revealing about national rhetoric and indoctrination as are the correct answers, so I analyze the questions and answers as a whole. To supplement my own close reading, I draw from newspaper articles, news interviews with Thai education experts, informal interviews that I conducted while working in Buriram from 2008-2010, and online video sources from universities and private schools that tutor students to understand the logic of the exam and teach them tricks to increase their scores.

### ***Thesis Overview***

In this thesis I argue that the administration of national standardized tests in contemporary Thailand has produced unacknowledged consequences. Internationally, standardized tests have been understood to be a great equalizer. As an impersonal, and thus “objective” technology, they supposedly nullify school and teacher bias. The O-Net is also allegedly blind to class, ethnicity, gender, religion and urban/rural location. It aims to not only measure a student's knowledge of the national curriculum, but also measure a student's general capacity, without specifying to what capacity this refers. However, rather than leveling the playing field of education, the O-Net has reified the same categories it supposedly cuts across. The O-Net mechanically privileges students and schools that adhere to its preferences by offering them benefits while subtly denying others the same access.

In chapter two, “Dividing the Nation,” I analyze a variety of O-Net questions from the Grade 6 and Grade 12 (P.6 and M.6) tests primarily from social studies exam sections, but also utilizing questions from the Thai language and vocational sections where applicable. In each case I assess what kind of knowledge is prioritized and what type of citizen is intended to score well. Because the O-Net is both a measuring tool and a teaching device, I address how these questions mold and guide nascent citizens to normalize national priorities over competing identifications or tendencies think divergently.

As I describe in chapter three, “Encountering Gender in the O-Net,” gendered representations are part of a historical legacy of “traditional” and “cultural” categories that are a continuation of the legacy of bureaucratization from the 1940s. One such bias normalizes representations of men as either the scholar-monk or the morally/sexually uncontrolled heterosexual male. By contrast, women are represented as being *the* responsible party. As such, women are depicted as bearing the burden of “worldly” responsibility alone.

Chapter four, “Reading the Results,” assesses how the results of the O-Net have been examined and utilized to make specific claims about high scoring and low scoring populations. The results of the O-Net cement administrative hierarchies of Thai citizens by producing “scientific proof” of superiority among certain privileged groups. Scoring well depends on the extent that Thai students subscribe to types of knowledge privileged by the Thai state. Not only does the O-Net give students points for demonstrating their assimilation into the “center,” of Bangkok-centered, Buddhist, and “modern” priorities, but the text itself also cements and normalizes particular biases born out of political motivations.

In chapter five, “Contestation and Creativity,” I address the forms in which citizens who protest the O-Net express themselves and their opinions about the O-Net and its creators.

Protesters use multiple media formats on television and the Internet to give them an increased audience and an outlet for their skills in writing, composing and producing music, singing, and graphic design. The forum of the Internet has allowed a certain level of anonymity, which aids in protesters' individual artistic expression. While the exam allows no freedom of expression in its multiple-choice answers, in the videos students simultaneously attack the exam and demonstrate abilities that the exam does not test, including creative use of language.

In chapter six, "Conclusion," I address the increased emphasis that administrators and teachers place on the test results, transforming classrooms into cram schools. I focus on one school in Buriram province to illustrate the influence of the exams in creating the effect that educators refer to as "washback," in which schools alter their teaching practices to better fit the exam. The exam is influential; it determines what is considered *ordinary*, in terms of knowledge, students, teachers, schools, provinces, and countries, so it is important to uncover what exactly the exam tests and makes normative.

## CHAPTER 2

### DIVIDING THE NATION

*The kind of terrain that humans chose to settle in from ancient times until today is:*

1. *River basins*
2. *Plateaus*
3. *Mountains*
4. *Valleys*

While “humans,” or *manut*, have lived and settled in all of these diverse terrains from ancient times until today, this O-Net question allows only one answer, only one imagined geography for human habitation.<sup>11</sup> This question clearly shows geographical differentiation, asking students to privilege lowland inhabitants over highland ones. Those in river basins are the humanity that the O-Net counts. It also encourages students to think of the human relationship with the land as having continuity from ancient times until current times. Framing this question in this way insinuates that real humans only live in the river basins and not in the mountains, making mountain people into lesser beings than their lowland counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter I show that students who are potential model citizens will score higher on the exam than those who are not, and those model citizens are defined in part by their standing within the country. Model citizens are also rewarded for their knowledge about the state’s political priorities, at least in terms of their responses to exam questions. A close reading of the O-Net reveals logics that support the state’s vision of the ideal social order. I argue that the state’s ideal social order divides of citizens based on class, urban-rural location, religion, and culture. The national culture, or hegemony, that the O-Net fosters privileges certain citizens over others. Citizens are differentiated in order to promote central control. In assessing the didactic

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<sup>11</sup> This question, number thirty-one on the Grade 6 2010 social studies O-Net asks students to complete the sentence.

<sup>12</sup> The reader does not need to be familiar with James Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) to understand this question reifies the concept that the lowland people are civilized people and highlanders are less civilized, and therefore do not count as humans. Students living in the mountains, having heard stories of their ancestors, might easily come to the wrong conclusion and choose that humanity has chosen to settle in number three, mountains.

nature of the exam questions I show which citizens the language of certain questions privilege, based on those citizens' geographic location, urban/rural status, class, religion, and political leanings.

The social divisions are discussed in this chapter are not the only social divisions that the O-Net reifies. Gender, as expressed in a male/female binary, is a social division expressed in the exam questions very clearly, so I treat it separately in chapter three as an in-depth case study. Ethnicity, while not directly expressed in the exam, can be inferred in the other categories. Thai citizens that are ethnically Malay, Laotian, Cambodian, Indian, and from the many northern “hilltribe” minorities such as Hmong, are concentrated in the less advantaged regions of the north, northeast, and south, while the ethnic Chinese and Central Thai dominate Bangkok and the other regions.

The O-Net is a state mechanism used to create a national narrative through delineating hegemonic knowledge and citizenship. Through multiple-choice questions, the state is able to administratively exclude certain *divergent* kinds of knowledge as “non-Thai.” During certain periods of Thai history, this binary of authentically Thai versus non-Thai has assisted in political projects such as deterring communism and supporting the monarchy. This deliberate political bifurcation is partially the historical legacy of prime ministers Phibun and Sarit, two promoters of Thai nationalism. Scot Barmé (1993), Rosalind Morris (2000), and Pasuk and Baker (2009) argue that Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898-1962) was one of the most significant cultural architects of Thai nationalism. Luang Wichit Wathakan, during the period between 1932 and 1963, advised the two prime ministers in designing ways to increase the sense of Thai nationalism among the population through conformity to their definitions. Nationalism, in this context, was demonstrated through dress and manners, which reflected reverence to a

paternalistic authority, whether that authority rested in the King, prime minister, other government officials, or in the father.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Political Leanings***

The O-Net is a political mechanism that normalizes the state intervention in citizens' lives. As a mechanism of the state, the O-Net questions can be analyzed as a tool to promote different governmental branches' ever-changing long-term and short-term goals. The long-term goal, to suppress certain characteristics among the Thai people, was determined by the National Cultural Commission in the 1980s. Remnants of these goals can still be found in some O-Net questions.

In the 1980s, the National Culture Commission launched a spiritual development project that identified twelve undesirable Thai values. These included: 1) immorality, 2) materialism, 3) weak work ethic, 4) lack of national sacrifice, 5) lack of Thai nationalism, 6) preferring individual gain to group benefit, 7) spending beyond income, 8) consumerism, 9) acting big or tough, 10) living beyond one's economic status (eat well, live well *kin dii, ju dii* [sic]), 11) fatalism and belief in magic, and 12) abandoning rural ways of life. These undesirable characteristics were to be replaced by the five desirable values: 1) self-reliance, diligence, and responsibility, 2) frugal spending and saving, 3) discipline and abiding by the law, 4) religious ethics, and 5) following the slogan: nation, religion, monarchy (Ponsapich 1990, 9). This campaign perpetuates Phibun's assumption that state decrees can shape the attitudes and practices of its citizens. (Van Esterik 2000, 107)

As for short-term goals, one question is clearest in depicting how the state uses the exam to discipline nascent citizens to avoid potential problems for the state when they are full-fledged citizens. Some questions on the exam are obviously products of the government's concern over political issues. Old exams become training materials for nascent citizens, so it is evident that the

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<sup>13</sup> This glosses over what Thak writes about in an in-depth way in *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (2007). Prime ministers Phibun and Sarit were not the first to utilize dress and manner reform as a mechanism of political reform. See Maurizio Peleggi's *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (2002).

exam questions show an attempt to train social and political problems out of the population. One clear case of such direct training can be seen in question number 19 on the 2010 grade 6 question.

19. *What practice is not in keeping with the democratic process?*
1. *To protest by going on strike*
  2. *To use the right to vote*
  3. *To accept the voice of the majority*
  4. *To make a statement of opinion about politics*

It is democratic to vote, to accept the voice of the majority, and to make a statement about politics. It is not *democratic* to strike. Thai people, and especially Thai bureaucrats, pride themselves on being a democracy, so things that the government considers non-democratic are demonized. The government does not want citizens to strike because it negatively affects the economy in general, and specifically by hindering tourism. Strikes are also disruptive to education and, according to the newspaper *The Nation*, when train workers went on strike in 2009, students were not able to get back to school after their October break (“Suspended train” 2009). Although it might be purely a coincidence that the O-Net provided a question singling out striking as undemocratic in 2010, it is interesting to note that in 2009 rail workers went on strike multiple times (in both June and October) over the reorganization of the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). This question seems to target a specific class of people who would strike—laborers primarily in the manufacturing and service industries.

State mechanisms attempt to make citizens disciplined and docile. The state does not always aim to appreciate diversity or create equality, but emphasizes conformity. Lawmakers and reformers have a target citizen in mind when engaging in state making, and attempting to mold citizens into the ideal when possible, and administratively marginalizing them if it is not. In my case study of testing, nationalism is narrowly defined. Students who recognize and

acknowledge the accepted responses according to national laws and normative cultural codes score higher on the test than those who either not well versed in the national rhetoric or those who resist. Some citizens rank higher on the exam, and thus also rank higher on the scale of citizenship: they are the people who will be able to get government jobs, and jobs in the professions—they will not remain relegated as *chao ban*, glossed here as ordinary villagers. Those who score higher are “better” citizens, meaning that they can and do respond in a normative way.

In order to generalize this particular brand of socially divided nationalism for a broader audience, Foucault’s work on governmentality and knowledge/power is applicable, but it is too generic to illuminate the mechanisms of particular histories and political turmoil. Foucault writes that the state acts through a “normalization process or gaze” (Foucault, 1977). Policing through a “gaze” is less confrontational and can be especially useful in instances in which military intervention is not a viable option. This “normalization process” polices society in nearly invisible ways and encourages self-policing as well. Even the most basic process of sitting for the exam trains citizens to fill in the multiple-choice answer sheet without straying outside of the lines. They are methodically socialized to accept that part of being a citizen is following directions given by authority figures, including the authority of the written test.

The discourse on mapping and creating geographical hierarchies that Thongchai Winichakul explores is applicable to my study because the map and its proper use are tested on the exam. The map is a mechanism of nationalism, which has persisted and continues to both unite and create a hierarchy of citizens based on perceptions of national geographical space. By providing a visual cue, the O-Net mapping questions depict both a united nation, but one that

differentiates based on region. However, this is not a legal division, but rather an imagined one.<sup>14</sup> On the sixth grade social studies test, the map of Thailand is divided into regions, and students are tested on their knowledge of how the country is divided. The map delineates areas of national control. Citizens are trained to understand that the land and people inside the lines are primordially Thai, while those outside the lines are excluded. Those people in the center, nearest to the heart of Thailand's political and economic control, are at the top of this mapping hierarchy. In Thailand's case, those at the peripheries tend to be ethnic and religious minorities and poorer than those citizens near the center.<sup>15</sup>

The exam is like the map: it is a political tool wielded to naturalize political phenomena propagated by the state. Some geographic delineations are privileged over others in distinctive ways. The O-Net asks students to decipher maps of Bangkok and regionally-divided country maps. These maps reinforce the capital as the most important point of reference and normalize regional geographic divisions on countrywide maps. Through this use of maps, the city of Bangkok is privileged as the important space. In contrast, maps of villages and provincial cities are not distributed and used widely and they are not portrayed on the O-Net. Bangkok is the city in which citizens are depicted working and living, while places such as Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya are represented as Bangkok residents' travel destinations.<sup>16</sup> Rural students are not the citizens that exam makers imagine when crafting the questions, but rather the questions revolve around the urban students of Bangkok.

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<sup>14</sup>These imagined regions are historical legacies, much like the American south, northeast, and west are non-legal divisions of imagined belonging.

<sup>15</sup> Thongchai's analysis in "The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects, 1885-1910" (2000), relating to mapping technology, is helpful to use as both a parallel to the exam and as part of the exam.

<sup>16</sup> See questions 1-5 on the Pratom 6 social studies section in the 2010 exam.

Benedict Anderson's assessment of print capitalism's effect on nationalism provides a useful guide to illustrate the O-Net's capacity to create an imagined community. In today's Thailand the O-Net is a parallel mechanism that allows students to "visualize in a general way thousands and thousands like themselves" (Anderson 1991, 77). While formal education itself creates a general national imaginary, the national exam concretizes and narrows it. I argue that the national exam, which is administered all over the country on the same day, at the same time, according to the same protocol, using the same paper, and are scored using the same units of measurement create an "imagined community" of the nation.

Although the O-Net does not provide the physical daily reminder of "empty time" for all citizens that print media did (and still does to some extent), it reinforces this concept in multiple ways. Everyone studies for the exam at the same time. Students in one school have cram sessions and know from friends in neighboring schools that they too are cramming. Students can extrapolate to imagine their contemporaries all across the nation cramming for the O-Net until the test day. On the day itself, students across the country sitting in their exam rooms "have complete confidence" (without seeing their peers or "even knowing the names of more than a handful") that every student of their age in the country is taking the O-Net simultaneously. As Anderson would say, all of the students in Thailand are the "sociological organism[s] moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time." Everyone aware of the exam—including, but not limited to, administrators, teachers, students and students' family members—knows that the exam is taken at the "same clocked, calendrical time... by actors who may be largely unaware of one another" but are connected (1991, 26). This reinforces the imagined community for the students.

The national exam requires students to perform a national activity in a different way than the mechanism of print media to which Benedict Anderson refers. Students are not simply “omniscient readers” of newspapers, but rather active participants in a simultaneous nation-wide timed and standardized activity, mechanically filling in predetermined circles. The O-Net’s shared time concretizes the concept of the nation in ways that the newspaper cannot. In *Imagined Communities*, “A” is telephoning “C” while “B” goes shopping (1991, 26). For the O-Net, students “A, B, and C” are seated in seats “1, 2, and 3” in different classrooms in different provinces and they all have from 12:30-1:30 to answer 24 art questions and 30 vocational questions. With 54 questions to answer in 60 minutes, “A, B, and C” can imagine that everyone in the country starts reading at the same second and keeps roughly the same pace. The O-Net is not conducted privately in the students’ minds, as the case would be when reading a newspaper. Rather, taking the exam is a communal ceremony physically performed with a classroom of peers who are organized into rows in a standard U shape design. They are aware that the ceremony is replicated throughout the country. The shared exam experience enables students to imagine their national unity. The O-Net as a nation-building technology effectively convinces students that they are part of the national whole, all going through this tedious and anxiety-ridden experience. Thus, when the students criticize the O-Net they do so on behalf of the imagined whole, and not for the sake of a specific subgroup.

National exams are a tool of the state that trains students to think in state-sanctioned ways. Their application is a pervasive state technology that defines the terms of citizenship for nascent citizens. Foucault’s explanation of the relationship between knowledge and power in neoliberal “governmentality” is important to consider in terms of the overarching concept of the exam system. Yet, I heed Peter Jackson’s warning not to use Foucault ad-hoc (2003). Thus, like

Jackson, I solely utilize Foucault's conception of neoliberal governmentality. In my careful use of Foucault, I find it useful to think of how "relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) of which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role" (1990,142). This feeds into my more contextualized work of the roles in which Thai citizens are being conditioned to play for the supposed benefit of the country.

The groups that are privileged on the exam are those that are middle-class, urban (especially Bangkok urbanites), ethnically Thai, Buddhist, support the political status quo, and encompass the perfect balance of "traditional" and "modern" mentalities. The O-Net is written with that "normal" citizen in mind, the one who embodies cultural hegemony. The O-Net privileges citizens who can demonstrate "knowledge, moral uprightness, proper behavior, and sense of public duty," which are the same elements that Luang Wichit Wathakan specified were the "qualities of civilization" (Morris 2000, 218, referencing Barmé 1993, 51). These qualities of civilization divide citizens based on geographic location, urban/ rural status, class, ethnicity, religion, and political leanings, which all co-exist and overlap.

The so-called normal citizen is simultaneously privileged and created by the national exam. The balance between tradition and modern is a tenuous one that deserves a careful approach since the meanings of "traditional" and "modern" (*khwampenthai* and *khwamthansamai*) change based on context. I will demonstrate this by careful use of Foucault's broad mechanisms of power, and specifically in the more grounded analyses of authors who study the rural/urban split, classism, and the geographic, religious, and ethnic margins. This is in hopes of engaging the complex root of what kinds of citizens the O-Net is privileging and developing.

## ***Regional Divisions***

The mapping questions on the exam do several different kinds of work. The regional divisions operate in support of Bangkok as the hegemon. These kinds of questions, such as question thirty on the Grade 6 social studies exam, test students' knowledge of features of the map:

*What statement is not right about the assembly of the map?*

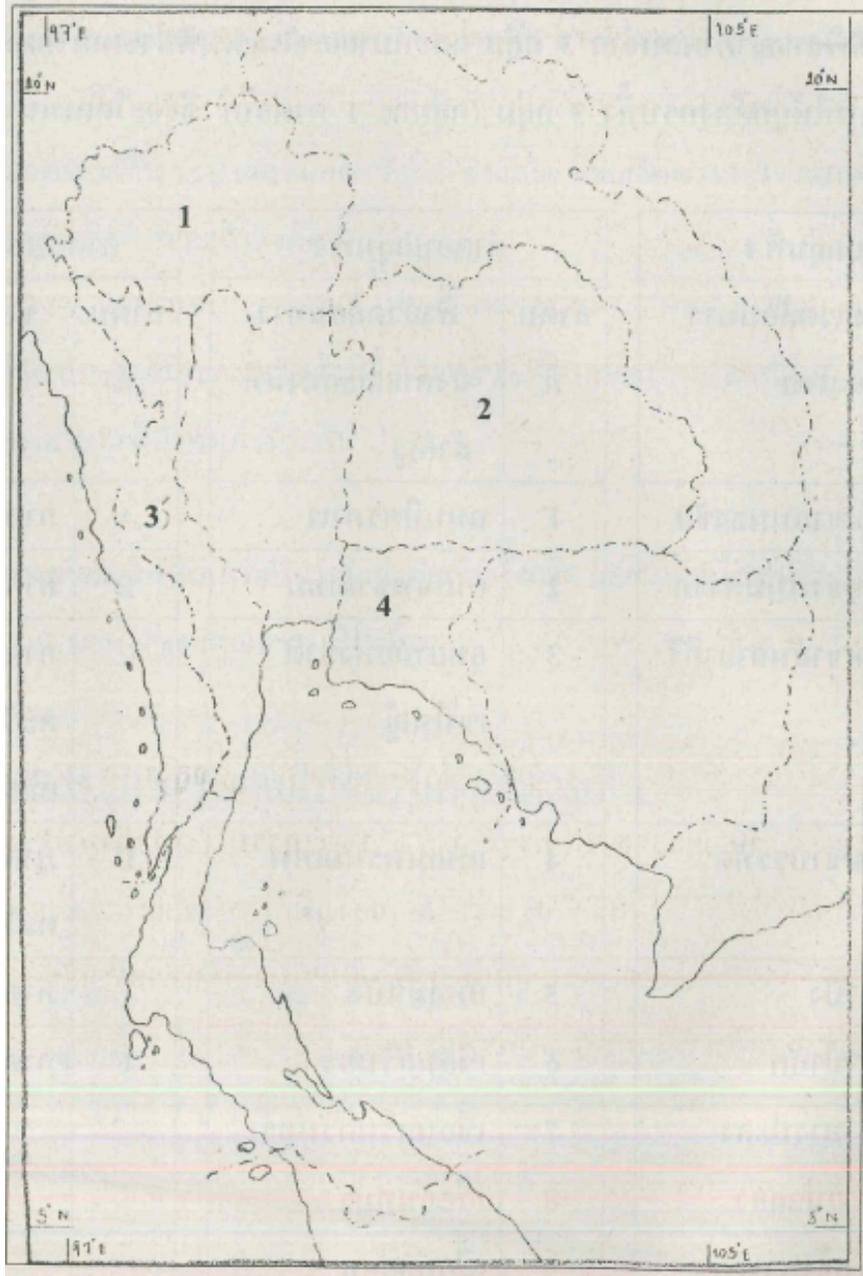
- 1. Geographical coordinates [latitude and longitude] help show places on the earth accurately.*
- 2. The scale helps know the scope and size of the real area.*
- 3. The compass rose and name of the map are components of the map.*
- 4. Colored symbols are symbols indicate the area of different countries but cannot be used to show topography.*

The regional cultural festivals, as shown in question thirty-two, below, reinforces the differences between regions, while simultaneously appropriating them as part of the nation-state, since this question appears on the national exam.

*What information about culture and tradition is not associated with the region?*

- 1. North— "Buad Luk Kaew" Festival [an ordination festival]*
- 2. Central—Lit Steamship Festival*
- 3. Northeast—Rocket festival*
- 4. South—Vegetarian festival*

The answer to the question is number 2: the Lit Steamship Festival is a northeastern festival, not a central festival. It is interesting to note here that tourist festivals are represented as being located in the non-central areas, where tourists can go to see it, whereas work and life is represented as being conducted in Bangkok. Other map-based questions test students on their map skills in combination with knowledge of natural and man-made geographical elements and local products.



*Figure 1* Regionally divided map of Thailand

Grade 6 social studies 2010 (2553), questions 6-10

Answer group 1		Answer group 2		Answer group 3	
Number	Physical Environment	Number	Social Environment and Important places	Number	Name of the region
1	Victory flag road mountain range	1	Friendship road	A	Northern region
2	Panom Dong rak mountain range	2	Phetsaget road	B	Central region
3	Sanganlakiri mountain range	3	U-than National Mountain	C	Northeast region
4	Bantad mountain range	4	Phrom Thep Cape	D	Eastern region
5	Ping River	5	Laemchabang Cape	E	Western region
6	Ba sad river	6	Sirinthon Dam	F	Southern region
7	Bang Pagong River	7	Srinakarin Dam		
8	Mae Klong river	8	Chantaburi mats		
9	Chaopraya River	9	Mauhohm shirt		

6. If students are going on a trip to region 1 on the map what kind of physical mountain range environment will the students encounter, what kind of local product is of the area, and what area is it?

7. Region 2 has what mountain range that borders a neighboring country? Going on a trip to this region which highway connects to other provinces in this region?

8. Which river in region 3 has a good irrigation system in an all-purpose dam? Which multi-purpose dam is it in this river basin? And what is this region?

9. "It is a small region but has highly progressed economically. It is the region that developed tourism and industrialization. It is a land that is good for agriculture of all kinds: rice, fruit, and vegetables." This information shows the important characteristics of area 4. What river is the most important agricultural river of this region? Where is the most important commercial port of the country? What is this region called?

10. What river links the northern region and the western region and the central region? What tourist attraction covers all 3 regions: the northeast region, the central region, the eastern region, and it was named a World Heritage site. And these 3 regions what region has the highest population and the widest area?

This set of questions above further ties the concept of the nation-state as a delineated natural spatial concept to commercial enterprises, much like the national One Tambon One Product (OTOP) initiative ties local commerce to national pride because the products represent specific locales, people, and products within the nation. Cities that contribute to a singular linear national history are depicted in the exam frequently. These include Bangkok, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya. Question thirty-five makes Sukhothai a central part of Thai history.

*The flourishing Sukhothai kingdom is most important in what way to cause it to be unique (ekkalak) to Thailand?*

- 1. Freedom in conducting business*
- 2. The invention of the Thai alphabet*
- 3. Ringing the distress bells*
- 4. Governing in a paternal way*

The answer to the above question is number two, the invention of the Thai alphabet. While Ayutthaya and Sukhothai are represented as important because of their roles in Siamese history and heritage of the nation, Bangkok is instead positioned as the place where people live and work. Below, question thirteen has several core elements, (gender roles and the woman's burden, Buddhism, globalization) but first it makes Bangkok central, but not utopian.

*Which sentence contains no proper nouns?*

- 1. The traffic in Bangkok is typically jammed when it rains hard.*
- 2. Talking is something one should do carefully, especially women.*
- 3. The ritual of pouring water to pay respect is one Thai tradition that is important on Songkran Day.*
- 4. The Opening Ceremony for the 29th Olympic Games made an impression on spectators in every corner of the world.*

Cities that have multiple or tendentious narratives within the normative national history, such as Chiang Mai and Patani, do not appear on the exam.

## ***Religion***

The exam privileges the Thai Theravada Buddhist religion while marginalizing other religions, such as Islam, Christianity, animism, and the wide category of *khwam chua*. *Khwam chua* can be translated as either general beliefs or superstition, depending on the translator's opinion of the value, or lack thereof, of these beliefs. While Buddhist religion and religious principals are at the core of the exam, modern rationality is also considered important.

Religion is represented differently on the O-Net than it is taught in schools: the exam tests world religions, but in the classroom religion is taught more as a practice than as a theory. Thailand does not have the political debate that America does over prayer in schools, representative of the larger debate over the division between church and state. In Thai Catholic schools, students learn to say the Hail Mary. In Muslim schools students learn to pray five times a day. In Buddhist schools they learn to say a Buddhist prayer in the morning. Monks visit Buddhist schools to lecture and pray with students and Imams do the same at Muslim schools. Religious instruction is more practical than theoretical, so in the classroom students do not generally learn about world religions, but rather learn about the practice of their individual religion.

On the Grade 6 social studies exam from 2010 (2553), religion is tested as though world religion were a subject taught in all schools in Thailand. Aside from Buddhism, knowledge about Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all tested. One question tests students' knowledge about Buddhism, one tests Judaism, two test Islam, and one tests Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Each question below requires the student to choose one component from each of three answer groups in this confusing chart. Each three-part question is worth two points, which will be granted only if all three parts

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<sup>17</sup> During my two-year stay in Thailand I found that Thais do not commonly know the meaning of the word Judaism.

are correct. I have included the name of the religion tested and the answers to the questions in brackets after the question for the benefit of the reader.

*Numbers 1-5 Consider each answer from these three groups, then answer the question correctly for all three groups (one answer per group). Only then will points be awarded.<sup>18</sup>*

<i>Answer group 1</i>		<i>Answer group 2</i>		<i>Answer group 3</i>	
<i>No.</i>	<i>Teaching standard</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Tradition/ foundational practice</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Name of the monk</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>10 commandments</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Muslim worship</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>The Buddha</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>meditation</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>6 Foundational beliefs</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>The prophet Mohammad</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>to pray to ask for good things</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>Forgiveness and sacrifice</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Allah</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>the Qur'an</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Endurance and belief in God</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>love</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>Practice purifying the heart</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>Moses</i>

- 1. Besides teaching novice monks not to do bad things and to do good things, Uncle Monk also teaches them to train their minds through what method? For what purpose? According to whose teaching? [Buddhism 2, 5, A]*
- 2. Jewish society's peacefulness came from what principals? What do they teach? Who was the leader? [Judaism 1, 4, E]*
- 3. Prayer done five times a day represents what practice? What name does it have? And what god is it associated with? [Islam 3, 1, C]*
- 4. What is the last scripture of God called? What foundations is it included in? And who is the religious leader who brought the scripture? [Islam 4, 2, B]*
- 5. What foundationally important teachings does Christianity have? How are they expressed? Who is the model of this belief? [Christianity 5, 3, D]<sup>19</sup>*

This set of five questions sets Buddhism first, above the other religions. The Buddhism question is the only one that provides extra information, namely that “Uncle Monk” teaches novices to do good things. There are two questions about Islam, but they do not associate Islam with love, as in the case of Christianity, or peacefulness, as Judaism is defined, or as in the good acts and

<sup>18</sup> After the question there is an example of how to fill in the bubbles so that the answers to each part relate. (Though they provide wrong answers to the questions, so this could confuse students who have been taught to copy the examples directly.) For each question above there are three internal questions, if all three internal questions are answered correctly, points will be awarded. It is conceivable that a student could answer as many as 10 parts correctly and still receive 0 points for this part of the exam.

<sup>19</sup> These answers are provided on the website “02 Dual,” 2010.

purification of Buddhism. Islam is simply associated with prayer “to ask for good things.”

Although this is positive, it could also be interpreted as greedy, if one were asking for good things for oneself.

Overall, the exam promotes religion, suggesting that religion provides the principles of how to live and provides a mental sanctuary, making it important for “humans” (appendix question 11). Buddhism is provided as the reference point for other religions, which reifies its importance (appendix question 12). Buddhism is privileged in its ceremonial role, such as in “Pay Respect to the Teacher Day.” Muslims are not allowed to worship idols, so they cannot prostrate themselves at the feet of any figure, whether a teacher or an icon. The following question comes from the Grade 6 social studies exam from 2010. The question appears again in the following chapter in its relationship to gender, but here it demonstrates the Buddhist cultural assumption of the O-Net.

*Which of these preserves Thai culture and tradition?*

1. Narak [girl] went on a trip to Khao Din Zoo with her family
2. Damjai [girl] named the baby panda “Thai-Thai”
3. Fasai [girl] took a garland to krap her teacher on Pay Respect to the Teacher Day (Wai Khru Day)<sup>20</sup>
4. Namu [boy] and his friends played hide-and-go-seek in the temple near their houses

For Buddhist students, this question should be very obvious: number three, paying respect to teachers through prostrating oneself is “Thai culture and tradition.” However, for Muslim students this is not a possible answer unless they disassociate their own practices from “Thai” practices. In some Islamic schools that participate in *Wai Khru Day*, students *wai* their teachers,

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<sup>20</sup> *Krap*, pronounced *grap*, can be translated as prostrating oneself. In modern times in Buddhist schools student representatives prostrate themselves in front of their teachers, symbolically requesting instruction, reflecting a “historical” concept of requesting a monk to be one’s instructor. In the modern era, however, school begins before Teacher’s Day, so it is symbolic instead of a “real” request. In some Muslim-majority schools in Trang, *Wai Kru* is celebrated, but students do not prostrate themselves on the floor: instead students sit on chairs and “wai” their teachers. Unlike the act of prostrating oneself, the “wai” is not prohibited by Muslim custom in Trang.

hands pressed together showing respect, while both teachers and students are seated on chairs. This makes the activity distinct from worship or prayer, which is conducted on the floor.

### ***Ethnicity and Language***

The O-Net does not specify the ethnicity of the people depicted on the exam and the questions do not directly reference specific ethnic groups per se. However, ethnic minorities are often rural dwellers from religious and linguistic minorities. Standard Thai spoken language is tested on the exam, and students whose dialects are not similar to the standard might have difficulty answering the question correctly. This is an extension of Phibun's campaign to "make Thai people truly Thai" by unifying them through a common language. "This meant applying pressure and providing facilitation for Chinese and other non-Thai to speak and act in ways which confirmed their membership of the national community" (Pasuk and Baker 1995,133). The O-Net requires both Thai and non-Thai to perform their nationalism through the act of prioritizing standard Thai language. In this question, it is not knowledge of the meaning of the words that is tested, but rather their spoken sound. Although many Thai dialects use the same words as central Thai, the tones differ greatly, so testing the tones is in fact a test of the students' spoken dialect. Although students are supposed to learn standard Thai language in the classroom, many students speak in another dialect or language (including but not limited to Hmong, Karen, Khmer Surin, Khorat, Lao, Malay) at home and at school, especially when they are not in Thai language class. Students who speak and hear language everyday that is closer to the standard Thai language could be privileged by the following question. In this question I have left the Thai in its original because the tones are being tested and transliteration obscures the tones.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> #1. Someone so lazy that s/he has an elongated spine. [So lazy that he is not hunched over from work.]  
#2. Someone who ruins the social atmosphere. [Wet blanket.]

12. Which of these uses all 5 tones?

1. ชี้ ก๊วยจสันหลังยาว
2. ชักใบให้เรือเสียด
3. ใต้ที่ชี้แพะไล่
4. น้ำเชี่ยวอย่าขวางเรือ

Only one sentence above demonstrates all five tones in central standard dialect—number 4, but the other three answers use four tones, so if students mistake even one tone while reading, they would get the answer wrong. Not all dialects use the standard system of tones utilized here. For example, in Khorat dialect, the word “rice” (*khao*) is pronounced the same as the standard dialect’s pronunciation of “knee.” As evidenced in this question, students’ pronunciation, largely affected by their regional dialect (or provincial or village dialect), might have an affect their scores.

### ***Urban-Rural Divide***

Thailand’s population is often discussed in terms of the division between rural and urban. A gap of cultural and social distance separates the two. Class is a factor as well. This is not to imply that everyone who lives in the cities is rich and everyone who lives in the village is poor, but simply that wealth is concentrated in the cities. Exam questions demonstrate that the urban national is the ideal national figure, privileging students who live in cities over students in the countryside. On the 2010 Grade 6 vocational test, dry cleaning symbols are tested, but knowledge of dry cleaning clothes has a specific urban middle-class leaning.<sup>22</sup> Very few

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#3. Someone who sabotages another to get the upper hand. [Add fuel to the fire.]

#4. Don't cross in turbulent water. [Don't try to impede someone who has power.]

<sup>22</sup> Question 2 on the Grade 6 2010 exam. Another good example of such an urban middle-class leaning is number 1 on the same exam which tests which tools are in the kitchen. It then shows pictures with corresponding labels of 1. Pillow, 2. Blanket, 3. Newspapers, 4. Sofa (*kaoyi rap khaek*) 5. Pots, 6. Handtowel, 7. Throw pillow (*mon ing*), 8. Stove. The possible answers are “1. 1, 2, and 6; 2. 3, 5, and 8; 3. 3, 4, and 7; 4. 5, 6, and 8. The answer is fairly clear: number 8, stove only appears in answer 4, along with a handtowel and pots. However, in rural houses rooms

questions seem to be catered to rural students and even these, upon further inspection, do not privilege rural students because students are not taught a singular rural logic. Urbanity here is middle-class urbanity, concentrated on Bangkok. Most maps on the O-Net are of Bangkok streets, which, presumably, students living in Bangkok would be most familiar with (appendix questions 4-7).

In one question, rural lifestyles are supposedly represented. On the 2010 (2553) Grade 12 vocational section, a question about washing clothes appears to cater to rural populations. The question asks students to determine the correct five-step process for washing clothes by hand. The question does several different kinds of work. It demonstrates the way that NIETS represents rural culture by making a standard out of the hand-washing methods that is a daily reality for some villagers, but not for wealthy people or people washing clothes as a profession. The vocation of washing clothes typically requires a washing machine, whether in the village or in the city. Although this question appears catered to a village tradition, there is no singular technique of clothes washing. Here is the question from the vocational section of the 2010 Grade 12 O-Net.

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are not as differentiated as they are in urban homes. Students might get confused because what is called a kitchen in their homes might be different from what is “supposed” to be in the room referred to as a kitchen.

<i>Clothes washing</i>	<i>Clothes rinsing</i>	<i>Clothes hanging (to dry)</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Wash clothes in plain water 1 time</i></li> <li>2. <i>Put clothes into soapy water for about 5-10 minutes</i></li> <li>3. <i>Put clothes into soapy water for about 1-2 hours</i></li> <li>4. <i>Put clothes into soapy water overnight</i></li> <li>5. <i>Wash the very dirty areas first and then wash the other areas</i></li> <li>6. <i>Wash the clothes all over, the same in every part.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <i>Rinse in clean water 1 time</i></li> <li>8. <i>Rinse in clean water 2 times</i></li> <li>9. <i>Rinse in clean water 3 times</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. <i>Wring clothes until they are just damp and then hang them</i></li> <li>11. <i>Wring clothes to make them dry and then shake them out before hanging</i></li> <li>12. <i>Wring clothes to make them dry and turn them inside out before hanging</i></li> </ol>

*In washing clothes by hand, which is the most correct?*

1. *1-3-6-7-12*
2. *1-2-5-8-11*
3. *1-4-6-9-12*
4. *1-2-5-8-10*

The NIETS answer is number 4. In this question NIETS dictates that throughout the country there is a singular proper method to wash clothes by hand. The question is didactic because every option includes number 1, pre-rinsing clothes in plain water, which is not commonly practiced. This question does not privilege rural students because a couple of the incorrect answers are deceptively tempting to some rural students. Those incorrect answers include turning the clothes inside out before hanging them, a common choice among villagers who hang their clothes in sunny areas: this practice fades the unprotected cloth. Also, the framing of the question removes nuance from clothes washing, which dictates a different treatment based on the material of the garment. This is a case of NIETS undermining divergent practice regardless of context.

Most questions that differentiate between urban and rural focus on urban logics. One physical education question asks about gymnastics, a sport practiced almost exclusively in Bangkok. It is very detailed in its articulation, asking students to distinguish the differences of performance rules for male and female gymnasts.

*In gymnastics competitions how do male and female floor exercises differ?*

- 1. Males use less time than females and they have music playing*
- 2. Males use less time than females and they do not have music playing*
- 3. Females use less time than males and they have music playing*
- 4. Females use less time than males and they do not have music playing*<sup>23</sup>

Another physical education question that urban students protested was about tennis. Although the protesting urban student had a tennis court at her school, the question asked about the theory of hitting the volley, while students were better versed in the practice of the sport.

Students invited to discuss the O-Net on the famous Thai talk-show host Woody's television program did not question the appropriateness of this question for its discrimination against students without a tennis court in rural or poor areas.<sup>24</sup> This harkens back to my initial premise that the way that nationalism is normalized in Benedict Anderson's print media is articulated, albeit in a different way, through the O-Net. Through the format, timing, and content of the test questions of the O-Net, students are encouraged to think of it as an equalizing mechanism. All of the students take the exam at the same time on the same day. They all prepare for it in their schools, cramming and reading old tests under the irritated instruction of their teachers who know that there is a lot at stake for the school based on their students' test scores.

Not all questions force students to choose the central (urban) narrative over local (rural) articulations, but rather collapse the two, which makes local knowledge support national

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<sup>23</sup> Question 18 on the 2010 (2553) Grade 12 (M.6) O-Net.

<sup>24</sup> Woody, in his dramatic tone, discusses how a student might feel when taking the exam from a *doi*, or hill, inferring that the student is from a minority group. Without a tennis court, this student would be unable to answer questions about tennis. Dr. Utumporn, the director of NIETS at that time (2010), responded that such information would be in the textbook.

knowledge. Where certain discrepancies might arise that could provoke a dilemma for students choosing between divergent logic and state-sponsored logic, the questions are crafted to avoid direct conflict collapse these categories, making alternative identifications work in support of the state. For example, color, which is a signifier in animist beliefs, is appropriated by NIETS very carefully. Wearing certain clothing colors on certain days is auspicious, but in recent years it has become a national phenomenon with political and social implications. Pink, according to this belief system, should be worn on Fridays. However, in recent years pink has been worn on Tuesdays as it is the color of the day and was especially popularized in support of King Bhumipol's health, ever since he was released from the hospital wearing a pink blazer. NIETS does not ask students to choose between Friday and Tuesday to wear the color pink, making local knowledge sets work in the service of national ones.

In fact, the O-Net avoids making color questions about clothing, instead referring primarily to tablecloth colors in order to avoid the conflict between superstition and national symbols.<sup>25</sup> NIETS also avoids the potential conflict between choosing between mother and nation. On the Mother's Day question, a girl who wants to have a party for her mother has to choose a tablecloth color. The mother was born on Friday, so the color of *her* day is light blue. The girl's mother was born on the same day as the Queen, on whose birthday Mother's Day is celebrated, so there is no conflict between colors: the color of the tablecloth should be light blue. Students do not have to choose between their country and their family, so the form of the question unites the concepts of the national and personal.

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<sup>25</sup> Although there are many questions about the meaning of color on the O-Net, I have not found any referring to clothing colors. Belief in "superstitious" local animist religions, or *khwam chua khong chao ban*, accepts that certain dates, colors, and actions are auspicious. Those people who are knowledgeable about clothing colors of the day will mention that it is *khwam chua*, or something that some people believe will bring good or bad omen (and still others either do not believe it or do not believe deeply, but avoid tempting fate). It is similar to the belief that wearing new clothes on Saturday or getting a haircut on Wednesday can bring bad luck. Superstition is referred to as such because it is a derivative discourse with a status lower than religion. It is local knowledge that has people have maintained in spite of religious purification.

## *Class*

Class bias in the O-Net can be seen through the urban leaning, but it also stands alone, so these two categories should not be allowed to collapse. My treatment of class is brief because the class leaning is evident in the questions and does not require in-depth analysis. The questions themselves are easier for middle-class and elite students to answer. Representations on the exam are of middle class behavior, and middle-class have access to additional tutoring to learn to strategically answer O-Net questions, while lower class students would have a difficult time answering some questions that reference unfamiliar facilities or equipment. Therefore many technology, science, and physical education questions have a class leaning because poorer schools lack the resources to teach the content experientially, as well as through standard textbook preparation. Questions involving technical applications using computers, laboratories, and tennis courts privilege middle-class students at well-funded schools in urban areas. One question on the Grade 6 2010 vocational test asks students to identify which part of the computer is a picture of a mouse from an image with arrows pointing to the monitor, keyboard, system unit, and mouse—a very simple question for any student familiar with computers, but less intuitive for those who have not used computers or have primarily learned about computers from their textbooks.<sup>26</sup>

Other questions do not test class per se, but they do normalize certain classed behavior. One question in reference to men's roles in the family, asks students how much time Thane should allow to get to the airport in time for the family's flight for their vacation to Chiang

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<sup>26</sup> This is question 25. Other such questions include number 26, which asks students what the Internet is: 1. A system of researching information on the web. 2. Sending messages to friends to communicate. 3. A system of playing online games worldwide. 4. A network that connects networks globally. Because all of these answers are correct, and there is no incorrect answer offered, students who have not had the opportunity to use the Internet themselves and know of it only second-hand might understand that it is only a tool for research, online gaming, or email, and not know what "network" refers to. Another such question, number 29 on the same exam. "A student uses the Paint program to make a Father's day card. What symbol will the student click on to write a message with the mouse?" Followed by four options of symbols including a pencil tool, ellipse tool, eyedropper tool, and an eraser tool.

Mai.<sup>27</sup> Many Thais have never gone to Chiang Mai on vacation, let alone taken a flight there. This question normalizes the use of airplanes for domestic leisure travel and presumes a point of view of a Bangkok-based student, or at least a student not based in Chiang Mai.

In spite of all of the categorical biases inherent in the O-Net that I demonstrated here, which might otherwise divide the people, this NIETS tool unifies the diverse Thai student population. The simultaneity of the exam, the uniformity of the desk layout in the classroom, and the inclusion of all Thai students on the test day combined together convince students that the O-Net is a nation-wide burden, not a specific burden to a particular geographic location, class, ethnicity, linguistic group, or religion. As I will discuss in chapter five, when students criticize the questions, they say the questions should better reflect the information that they learned in their classrooms and that the answers should be clearer. Few people, and no nationally interviewed students, argue for the abolition of the exam. In interviews and online videos through which students contest the exam students demonstrate anxiety on behalf of all of their peers nation-wide who will be taking the exam. NIETS creates an imagined community through the shared suffering of test takers filling in multiple-choice bubbles.

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<sup>27</sup> This question also appears in chapter 3 in reference to the gender structure depicted within it.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ENCOUNTERING GENDER IN THE O-NET

Textual analysis of the content of the Ordinary National Educational Test, or O-Net, reveals it to be a highly gendered document. The exam depicts both real-life and fictitious characters, normalizing their personal identifiers, such as their ethnicity, age, class, religion; and these are articulated through a gendered lens. In both correct and incorrect answers, the O-Net questions define gender identification and gender roles, essentializing them. Although establishing ordinary gender roles is not an explicit National Institute Educational Testing Service (NIETS) goal, to score well students must analyze the way in which NIETS frames knowledge and then answer the questions in accordance with the gender norms that NIETS propagates. NIETS' implicit goals include reaffirming existing social hierarchies and instilling respect for authority figures, especially paternal ones. Teachers then use the exam as a test preparation tool and, perhaps inadvertently, teach the gender rhetoric that is entrenched in test questions. I argue in this chapter that the O-Net is not a mechanism for accurately assessing a student's intellectual capacity, but rather it is a state tool to both measure cultural indoctrination and to further it.

To support this argument I closely read and analyze the gender-biased questions that were highly contested on the news and in student interviews. Those questions were located primarily on the Grade 12 health exam in 2010. However, they are not representative of all of the O-Net questions, so, while in Thailand, I collected 2010 Grade 6 and Grade 12 O-Net exams, the bookends of more and less sexualized representations of gender. I use the entirety of the 2010 Grade 6 social studies exam to address the sections on representations of men and representations of women. After a close reading of the 2010 Grade 6 social studies exam, I found

it expressed of many of the less-sexualized constructions of gender, while Grade 12 is more sexualized.

Even though the Thai language can sometimes obscure gender identification through a lack of gendered pronouns, most of the questions on the O-Net that describe people demonstrate a reductive binary of male and female gender representation.<sup>28</sup> In just a few words or sentences the test-writers portray the exam characters with gender-specific identities and behaviors. Although not all questions on the O-Net are gender-specific, when they do specify gender, the questions provide an insight into state-endorsed gender norms, even if they are the products of test-makers' inadvertent decisions.

Gendered representations on the O-Net can be read as a product of a legacy of a changing official nationalist narrative from the Chakri reformations of the turn of the twentieth century to the present day. Over this period of time, rulers developed a kind of nationalism that is specific to Thailand. Tannenbaum (1999) convincingly argues that hierarchical characteristics, including patriarchy, are not simply a Buddhist legacy. Rulers appropriated Theravada Buddhism to support their political goals, which included creating a disciplined, law-abiding population that respects authority. Part of this process was to create a patriarchal hierarchy that could be conveniently linked to Buddhism and made to appear religious and primordial, and thus above contention.

The gender stratification reflected on the O-Net is then not based on some essential character of Buddhism, but on the historical legacy of state articulations of Buddhism. Both women and men are subject to narrow representations based on this legacy. The dual pressures of the fixed categories of tradition and modernity limit representations of men and women.

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<sup>28</sup> Thai language is not particularly gendered except in dialogue or in referring to oneself. The third person (he and she) is usually denoted *khao*, a non-gendered term. In “the Nit question,” a student who got pregnant, Nit is referred to with the term *thoe*, which commonly is translated as “she.”

Buddhist gender norms inform the heteronormative gender stereotypes that NIETS utilizes; these gendered categories of men and women are further ossified in the O-Net, even though they are not the only gendered articulations in everyday Thai life. The O-Net reifies gender norms by testing students on their knowledge of gendered national culture, which, for example, dictates the proper color of a tablecloth used on Mother's Day.

To score well, students must analyze NIETS itself and provide answers that reflect the rigid understanding of modern and traditional gendered identities and behaviors that NIETS requires. Point-seeking students must choose what NIETS considers correct answers, performing their conformity. The correct answers do certain kinds of political work, reifying stereotypes about men and women's proper roles to create a unitary set of Thai cultural norms, even though multiple competing and flexible understandings of Thai culture exist.

Gendered behavior and interactions between genders are treated in these questions as if Thai culture were homogeneous and primordial. I argue that those students who are well-steeped in those centralized cultural norms have a better chance of performing well on the exam. Students who are not entrenched in Bangkok-centered rhetoric, as it appears in the curriculum, perform poorly regardless of their other capabilities. Students who can demonstrate knowledge of state-sanctioned gender roles are rewarded with points.

It is difficult to determine whether students provide superficial knowledge of gender norms in their answers or if they have been completely indoctrinated to believe them. For example, will students answer questions about abortion based on their knowledge that the state deems it illegal and immoral, but then in practice advise a pregnant friend to have an abortion? One education researcher, Gita Wilder, argues that schooling does influence practice. In Wilder's literature review, commissioned by the Educational Testing Service, she argues that in the

context of the United States, the curriculum influences students' everyday understandings of gender. Wilder found that in twenty-three studies "sex-role stereotyping was reduced among students whose curriculum portrayed both sexes in nonstereotypical roles" (Willingham, et al. 1997, 34).

Although I argue that the O-Net supports and furthers gender norms, this is not the case in every question. Some questions on the O-Net are gender neutral or appear to overcome gender stereotypes. Questions about sewing and clothes washing are gender neutral. Neither men nor women are depicted doing the sewing or clothes washing. The question is often asked as factual information, not from a standpoint of gendered models. For example, one question on the Grade 6 (P.6) test asks, "Which of the following is the easiest stitch to remove?" On the twelfth grade test (M.6) the question appears, "Which is the best method of washing clothes by hand?" These do not specify gender. Both boys and girls take the O-Net, so including these kinds of questions presumes that both boys and girls need to know how (at least theoretically) to do this work.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Unspecified Gender or Gender Ambiguity***

Reading the O-Net as a gendered text, with specific and distinct representations of women and men, reveals certain trends. However, as I have shown, not every question is gendered, and some are *deliberately* female-inclusive or male-inclusive. I do not use the term "gender-inclusive" because this is not the case. In practice, the Thai conception of gender is quite

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<sup>29</sup> During two historical reform periods, sewing and washing clothes were understood to be women's work. Other kinds of constraints on women's behavior in the form of dress, language, and manners remained a legacy of King Chulalongkorn's appropriation of colonial culture that was later rebranded by Major-General Wichit Wathakan under Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibulsongkhram as part constructing an authentic and original Thai culture. Some gender-based reforms took hold in society more than others. For example, a man leaving for work did not wait for his wife to kiss him goodbye at the door, as Wichit proscribed, but he did walk out the door wearing trousers as normal Thai male attire, not as a mimicry of Western style. Generally, ordinary Thai women believe that they should behave "properly" to be good Thai citizens, although their definitions of proper behavior are not homogeneous.

nuanced and gender and sexuality share common terms and common conceptual spaces: the English language terms are not fully adequate, but I will use them here for simplicity given that conspicuous alternative genders (*kathoey*, *tom*, *dee*, etc.) in Thailand are not mentioned on the exam. However, the possibility of a third gender is not negated in the questions because of the occasional gender ambiguity in Thai nicknames. For instance, in the exam question that mentions a student named “Bee,” there is no indication of whether Bee is a boy, girl, *tom*, or *kathoey*, so a student reading the exam could imagine Bee’s persona taking on any of these genders.

The only instance that I have encountered of non-heteronormative gender or sexuality (*phet*)<sup>30</sup> on the O-Net is in the 2012 Grade 12 (M.6) exam question that refers to cross-dressing as an abnormal condition. This is a translated transcription from famous anchorman Sorayut Suthasanajinda's Channel 3 news program.

*Someone with the condition of lakkaphet [sexual deviation] will demonstrate it in which behavior?*

- 1. Collecting the underwear of the opposite sex.*
- This I truly don't know.*
- 2. Wearing clothes to imitate the opposite sex.*
- 3. Loving someone of the same sex.*
- 4. Showing one's genitals [publicly].*
- 5. Secretly watching a friend of the opposite sex in the bathroom.*

*I think that generally everyday people (chao ban) will see this question and get wide-eyed. Lakkaphet is anything that is abnormal in reference to phet, so every answer is correct. Why isn't there a #6? All of the above...If I took this test I would fail. I would add #6 and say that it's all of the above (thaitvnewstube 2012).*

The Royal dictionary definition for *lakkaphet* refers to answer 2: wearing clothes in the style of the opposite sex. However, Sorayut indicates that the usage of the word can describe any of these “abnormal” behaviors. *Lakkaphet*, then, is used on the test as a disparaging term for

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<sup>30</sup> See Peter Jackson’s in-depth explanation of the English equivalence of *phet*, which has both gendered and sexualized connotations (2000).

cross-dressing and encourages students to think negatively about people who cross-dress. Yet, in Thailand, dressing as the opposite sex does not have the same negative connotations as in other countries and contexts. There is a third gender in Thailand (*kathoeyes and toms*-- transgender, transsexual, drag queens and drag kings) that is recognized. From my own experience in Thai classrooms, I have found that in a typical Thai classroom at least one or two students will identify as an alternative gender. Undoubtedly, students who took the Grade 12 O-Net in February 2012 included cross-dressing students themselves and students sitting in the same classroom with a cross-dressing student.<sup>31</sup> Answering a question that uses a disparaging Thai word on alternative genders would both reproduce fixed gendered categories and potentially exacerbate discrimination among youth.

The common usage of *lakkaphet* is not completely clear and the historical meaning of the word is not completely agreed upon. According to Matthew Reeder's (2011) close reading of the royal chronicle of Rama I, no evidence could be found that *lakkaphet* meant cross-dresser in the early nineteenth century, when a man referred to as Ai Ma entered the Grand Palace. Reeder extrapolates from Ai Ma's forcible touching of a "woman selling sweets along a pathway" and the rape of a palace consort that *lakkaphet* might have meant "sexual deviant" at that time (Reeder 2011). Thus, the word *lakkaphet* has a complex history of meaning that makes it even more contentious a question on the O-Net than was previously mentioned in chapter three. A student with a more nuanced understanding might be distracted by answers that diverge from the modern dictionary definition and any one of the answers (which have not been formally divulged) such as collecting underwear of the opposite sex, wearing clothes of the opposite sex, loving someone of the same sex, showing one's genitals, or peeping on someone of the opposite

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<sup>31</sup> Although not allowed to cross-dress at school, students find ways to assert their gender identities in subtle stylistic ways while conforming to the dress code.

sex in the bathroom, could all be construed as correct answers given one's historical and contextual understanding of "deviant sexual inclination."

The Thai language allows a writer or speaker to avoid attributing a gender to the pronoun. It would be nearly impossible to do this in English, given that the pronouns "he" and "she" usually surface in context-based questions. In some of the examples I have translated, I infer a character's gender based on the name used, so these might be more weakly gendered than those that use titles such as "boy student" (*dek chai*) or "young lady" (*nang sao*). So, with the caveat that some questions are ambiguous about gender, I will continue by analyzing the exam in terms of the representations of men and women in their roles as depicted in work, play, the Buddhist sphere, in family dynamics, and in sexual relations.

### ***Class and the Extended Family***

In cases where the family is represented on the O-Net, the nuclear family is considered to be the natural unit. The exam uses urban, middle class, nuclear family structures as the essential structure of normal family life. For example, in the 2010 (2553) health section of the Grade 6 O-Net exam question three asks,

*Which holiday activity will make the family have good health and be happiest?*

- 1. Dad and mom go play golf and the kids stay home and play [computer] games.*
- 2. Dad and mom take the kids to stay with grandpa and grandma [on the mother's side of the family] while they work overtime.*
- 3. Dad and mom take the kids to extracurricular classes while they go to the mall.*
- 4. Go to the park to exercise and then go home to make a meal together.*

The correct answer is number four. Exercise and family togetherness are positive, healthy behaviors. This contrasts with the incorrect answers containing state-defined negative values, such as children playing too many computer games, families prioritizing consumerism by going shopping at the mall, and parents who work overtime. In practice, however, many poorer Thai

parents in practice choose #2, to take their children to stay with their grandparents while they go to work in factories and farming fields. This is a reality for rural and lower class people, and, although not as pleasant as going to the park, in fact may have the positive effect of strengthening the bonds between grandparents and grandchildren.

A social commentator who calls himself “Phi Cö” (henceforth “Phi Jaw”) on [ihere.tv](http://ihere.tv) online agrees that this question makes very blatant the NIETS-defined “correct” answer. Phi Jaw says, “but each family is different.” While in practice families are not homogeneous structures, answer number three’s phrasing reveals an attraction and adherence to middle-class ideals. The O-Net does not encourage plural constructs of family life. Rather, it constructs the meaning of “family values,” to connote a vision of children who live with their parents, whereas in practice, many Thai families form non-nuclear arrangements. Rural children, especially in the northeast and north, might live with their aunts and uncles or grandparents so that their biological parents can work in other areas such as in factories in the city, or government offices or farms in the countryside. Many adults do this in order to be able to send money back to the village to support their parents and children. Thais in low-income and rural areas do not construe such non-nuclear living arrangements as immoral, but practical: the parent is working to support the family and the child is cared for, loved, and educated.

This situation is not sufficiently modern according to NIETS’s definition, and therefore is not the “correct” answer. The O-Net privileges the nuclear family and presents the nuclear structure as normative, but in so doing, also disparages the extended family’s role. Even if some students can identify the NIETS logic that going to the park and making a meal together is the middle-class answer that would be best for the family’s health and happiness, it also relates to them that staying with their grandparents while their parents are working is not good for the

family's health and happiness. In some regions, such as the northeast, this common working arrangement might be the best (or only) option for some adults to support their family, and enables them to provide food and shelter for their parents and children.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Class and the Urban/Rural Split***

As demonstrated in the nuclear family question above, NIETS privileges an urban middle-class understanding of the family unit. This same classed understanding also applies to the individual, as evidenced on the 2012 health section of the Grade 12 O-Net. Students were asked,

*If you are in a relationship [pen faen kan] what is the correct behavior in accordance with Thai tradition?*

- 1. Go shopping with your arms around each other.*
- 2. Ask him/her to have a meal and go out to a movie.*
- 3. Lie down propping [your head] on his/her lap while in public.*
- 4. Ask each other to go stay overnight by the sea.*
- 5. Feed each other in a restaurant.*

The answer to this question is #2, to have a meal and go out to a movie. This answer depicts the unitary, ossified kind of Thai tradition supported by the government since the 1930s that disparages touching between the sexes, even in the case of a sports win. As Sorayut mentions on his show, some students analyzed this question in a different way than NIETS intended. They thought that a couple's behavior in a darkened movie theater is hidden from view and can encourage inappropriate touching, thus conflicting with Thai tradition (thaitvnewstube 2012).

This might be an especially difficult question for a student that has never been to a movie theater. Most towns and villages beyond the larger provincial capitals do not have movie

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<sup>32</sup> Extended family involvement in students' lives has been shown to be healthy in a study linking the rates of suicide in the north, where extended family involvement is lowest, as compared to the relatively lower rates of suicide in the northeast, where suicide is the lowest in the country (Manote, 2006).

theaters, and the question specifies that the couple go out to a movie. This privileges an understanding of relationships that centers around middle-class urban activities. Even if the couple were city-dwellers, going out for a meal and a movie is still an expense that not everyone can afford, as it would cost approximately what a day laborer makes in two or three full days of work. And if the couple lived in the countryside, it would be difficult to get to the city to see a movie, just to demonstrate a couple's correct behavior, as defined by NIETS.

### ***Representations of Men in the O-Net***

The Grade 6 social studies exam from 2010 (2553) is a representative exam that has not been contested as being abnormal or particularly subjective, and it is for this reason that I center my study of gender on it. This Grade 6 exam has a total of forty questions. Out of those forty questions, seven (17.5% of the exam) have a gender component. The other thirty-three questions are gender ambiguous or gender neutral. Out of forty questions four questions have women in them (10%) and there are a total of nine female characters on the exam. This contrasts with five questions that contain men (12.5%) and there are a total of fourteen men.<sup>33</sup> However, there are more one-dimensional male characters on the exam than female. Men are also notably absent in situations where they would ordinarily be present, such as in the market, at social events, and in traditional ceremonies.

On this 2010 exam, the fourteen men are comprised of four history researchers, four naughty boys, four potential voters, one complacent boy, and one boy who makes merit.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>33</sup> The quantitative support in this paper is a nod to Benedict Anderson's *Why Counting Counts* (2008). That there are 2.5% more men than women in the Grade 6 exam is not part of my argument. The numbers are a method to convey to the reader that I am not cherry picking my examples, but rather am attempting to provide representations from throughout the work.

<sup>34</sup> The complacent boy can either be read as uncaring (and thus naughty) or following a Buddhist attitude of accepting one's fate. This could be argued either way, but ultimately the boy is not interested in actively solving the problem.

nine female characters, by contrast, consist of three preservers of culture/tradition, two advisors of good behavior, two sellers in the market, one caretaker of children, and one money-saver. Of the two sellers in the market, one is a mother and the other is a grandmother.<sup>35</sup> These two women are multi-dimensional because their role as caretakers justifies their presence in the market. By contrast, the men are flat characters. They are not depicted by their role in their families *and* their jobs, but by one or the other. The men represented in the O-Net are assigned a scholar-monk/moral deviant dichotomy. Other authors, such as Charles Keyes (1989), have found similar monk/macho binaries (see also Tannenbaum 1999, 245).

The man-as-monk idea is drawn from A. Thomas Kirsch's work. I have foregrounded "scholar" to draw focus to the men's academic pursuits that allow men to remain in this pious category. Thai men, according to Kirsch (1996), are expected to be better suited for the pursuits of Buddhist monks, such as showing kindness, generosity, and compassion. I would add to that list "scholarly pursuits," since monks are historically teachers and scholars. A man can gain merit by being generous with his money and time, which conflicts with profit-seeking in the market. Society thus expects women to take on these "worldly" pursuits. A woman gains merit from being a good wife and mother. The profit she earns in the market is used to provide for her family. Her profit-seeking behavior is thus justified, but is a devalued form of labor in comparison to men's scholar-monk activities.

Broadly, the O-Net profiles men as monk/scholars or impious men. As such, they are one-dimensional stereotypes. Men are also represented in the O-Net as 1) heads of family, 2) pursuers of higher education/professions, 3) active (voting) citizens, 4) positive actors for the collective, 5) lawbreakers/morally dubious characters, 6) naturally sexually unrestrained (or

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<sup>35</sup> It is possible that "grandmother" in this question is a title for an older woman and that she does not necessarily have children or grandchildren.

“hosts” for uncontrolled male sexuality that emerges after dark and in bars), 7) notably absent as family members, or 8) passive.<sup>36</sup> Rarely do exceptions to these categories appear on the exam.<sup>37</sup>

1) *Men are heads of family.* When men are represented as members of a family, they are represented as the head of the family. Although I primarily focus on social studies and health and physical education questions, gendered articulations appear on other sections of the exams. On the 2011 (2554) Grade 6 social studies exam, a boy named Met wants his father to take him to Ayutthaya, without mentioning his mother or siblings. On the Grade 6 Math exam from 2010 (2553), Question 24 depicts a father, Thanee, who is taking his family on vacation to Chiang Mai. The question asks students to determine how long the family should allot to travel to the airport on vacation given that Thanee wants to arrive one and a half hours early. This question does *not* depict a dialogue between the two parents discussing their travel plans. Instead, the question reflects middle-class (taking an airplane, not a bus), patriarchal norms (Thanee chooses for the family), despite being in the math section, which is for the most part gender neutral.

2) *Men are pursuers of higher education/professions.* Men on the O-Net are represented as pursuing higher education and specialized knowledge. On the Grade 6 social studies exam from 2010 (2553), Question 33 is a question about four different students’ methods of doing research on King Rama V’s education reforms. All four students have male names, demonstrating a male proclivity for scholarship. Met, a male student, goes to Ayutthaya on a field trip with his class (see section 1). Met is intrigued by the old city: he collects brochures and buys photos of important places. He intends to return with his father. When Met returns he plans to go to the museum and study the details of the [Buddhist] temple Wat Phra Sri Sanphet. This

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<sup>36</sup> Patience as in *mi khwam otthon* or *choei*, a kind of active restraint or control in connection to beneficial Buddhist qualities (Kirsch 1996, 22).

<sup>37</sup> Exceptions include the 2010 Grade 6 (P.6) English exam numbers 18-21, in which Fred is swimming in a canal and finds a box of clothing. This does not fit into the categories that I have set forth, but Fred is not portrayed as Thai, despite his swimming in a canal.

example illustrates the connection between maleness and specialized/higher education.

Throughout the O-Net exam men are depicted as being interested in history, while women are not depicted in relation to scholarly pursuits.<sup>38</sup> In practice, however, women pursue higher education in Thailand more than men, as evidenced in the graph below, which I made from the of 2010 data from the Ministry of Education. The graph indicates that women were the majority in every category of higher education, even in doctoral programs.

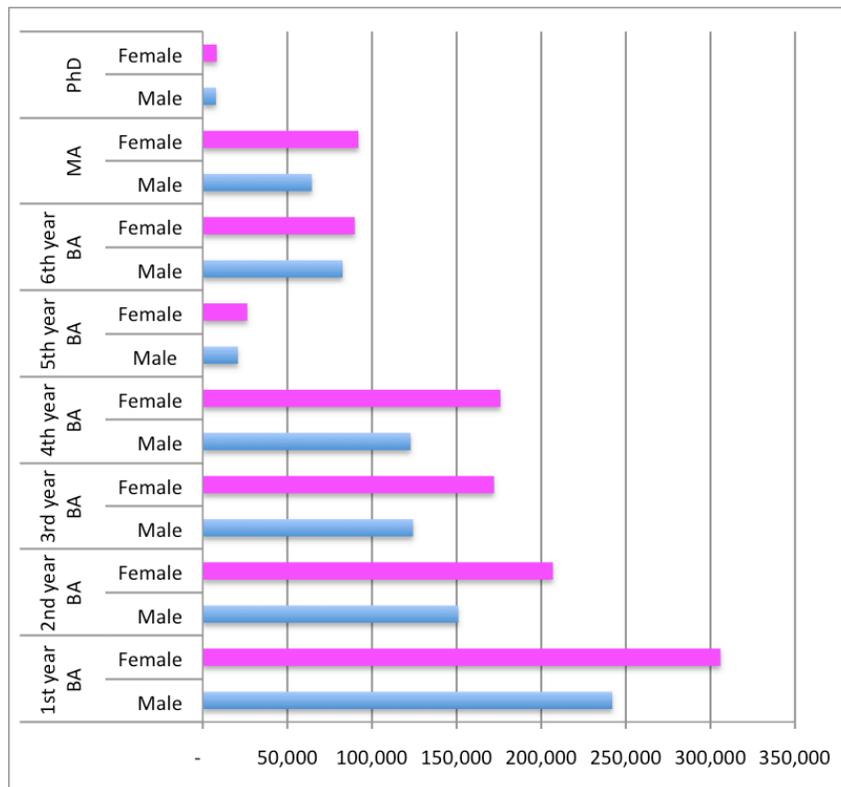


Figure 2 Graph of students enrolled in higher education in 2010 by gender

3) *Men are active, voting citizens.* As Loos (2006) writes, people began to understand the male (and in Loos' case specifically the husband) in the twentieth century as “*the prototypical legal subject endowed with rights and obligations*” (141, original emphasis). Men's obligations

<sup>38</sup> I continue to search for an exception to this finding. As of yet, the only example that comes close to women pursuing higher knowledge is a little girl who likes to read *Sleeping Beauty* and another girl who struggles to get her homework finished on time.

as citizens were then prioritized above responsibilities as husbands or fathers. This is reflected on the O-Net. On the Grade 6 social studies exam Question 14 asks, “What population here has the right to vote?”<sup>39</sup> The offered selection from which students must choose the eligible voter are all men of different ages and identities. The gendered aspect here could support an idea that men are higher on the citizenship hierarchy than women. This might be surprising because women have had the right to vote in Thailand since 1932. Even though the date 1932 is quite early for universal suffrage in comparison to other countries, men are more frequently presumed to be the prototypical citizen, as I extend to incorporate the evidence on the O-Net (Loos 2006, 174).

4) and 5) *Men are disproportionately represented as morally dubious (rule breakers) or criminal characters.* However, when they are represented as “good” people, they are usually working not for individual (or family) success but for the good of the community. Take, for example, this question on the social studies 2010 (2553) exam, in which only the first boy, Pö, is pious and demonstrates monk-like charity, while the rest are moral or behavioral deviants.

21. *Which is the appropriate liberty?*

1. *Pö [boy] and his friends run for charity on Children’s Day.*
2. *Men [boy] and his friends climb over the street median to get to school on time.*
3. *Pom [boy] and his friends race their motorcycles to the corner on the weekend.*
4. *Ma [boy] and his friends get together to bet on a football game for extra income.*

This question is a good illustration of the monk/deviant binary. Pö is the only “good” boy on the list and his actions are for a charity, not for individual success or advancement. The other boys are breaking the law by crossing the road illegally, gambling, or racing.

6) *Men are depicted as sexually uncontrolled.* Tannenbaum argues that the literature showing contradictory representations of men has not been reconciled. Men have either

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<sup>39</sup>1. Jo [male]: Half Thai- half German who is 18 years old 2. Joe [male]: A university student from China in Thailand 3. Yo [male]: Is 50 years old with a nervous condition 4. Oh [male]: Is 15 years old and has an identity card. Answer is #1.

uncontrolled sexual desires or are monk-like in their abstinence (1999, 248). Loos cites examples of adultery and rape in the early 20th century that apparently demonstrated male sexual virility (2005, 7). Lyttleton mentions that “unrestrained male libidinousness” has taken on the status of a “national character trait” (1994, 265). Unrestrained male sexuality is evident in several questions on the Grade 12 (M.6) exam.<sup>40</sup> In response to Tannenbaum, in this situation where men are understood to be sexually unrestrained, Buddhism becomes even more necessary for the moral fabric of the country as a way to teach restraint. If this argument is pushed to its extreme, representations of men as sexually uncontrollable justify state support of Buddhism to help solve this problem. If, on the other hand, men were represented as capable of making thoughtful choices and engaging in mutually-desired sexual relations with women, Buddhism will be less necessary to dictate proper behavior.

The most egregious of these questions is what throughout my paper will be called “the Nit question.” This series of three questions based on fictional character “Nit,” the Matayom 5 (11th grade) girl who got pregnant, made headlines after the exam results came out in 2010 because of its subjective and sensitive nature. The unnamed boy who impregnates Nit is not expected to be responsible for his actions. In remaining unnamed—he is referred to as “male friend” (*phuen chai*)—his actions become symbolic of maleness in general. He is one of many boys who naturally like Nit because she is beautiful. As a beautiful girl, Nit bears the burden of having to behave appropriately to avoid sexual relations. Reading between the lines, Nit should not have been out at night and was “asking” to be impregnated.<sup>41</sup> When Nit, in her depression, asks for the boy’s help, he offers only abortion as the solution. When Nit follows his advice, she

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<sup>40</sup> Questions from the Grade 12 exam have become popularized in the news, not because of how they represent men and women, but because of answers to questions which are challenged as too subjective.

<sup>41</sup> The question does not allow for nuance. As commentator Phi Jaw says, “they have sex and she gets pregnant. What is this? Wi-fi? [Automatic?]” NIETS represents it in this way so that students directly associate sex with pregnancy. The exam question does not mention condoms or other contraceptives.

dies. Thus the boy is not responsible for his sexual (uncontrollable) actions and acts as an advisor whose advice is illegal, immoral, and deadly.<sup>42</sup>

7) *Men are notably absent in some questions.* One such instance is in the short paragraph for question 13 on the Social studies 2010 (2553) exam.<sup>43</sup> The paragraph-long question explains that Bua's mother has to sell flowers in the market very early in the morning. Bua is responsible for her siblings while her mother is away. Because of this she arrives to school late and cannot turn her homework in on time. Male family figures, grandparents, and neighbors are not mentioned in the question. The issue might be rectified if another responsible party could take care of the siblings such as a father or grandparent, yet their (un)availability is not mentioned. Bua and her mother must take responsibility for the family's well-being without help. So both the father and the extended family's role in caring for children are marginalized.

8) *Men are passive about personal issues.* On the O-Net men are depicted as accepting fate in the way that Buddhism teaches. From Bua's question (2010 Question 13) above, Bua's friends advise her on how to solve her problem of turning in her homework late. The only clearly male figure in the question, Ming, advises Bua to accept the fact that she would not get the work in on time. Ming's complacency can be understood as following the Buddhist monk's quality of *tham jai*, or accepting the situation.

As seen in these eight male scripts, men on the O-Net are monks/scholars or impious men, lacking dimension and nuance. Within this dichotomy, men are depicted on the exam as leading

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<sup>42</sup> As defined by Dr. Utumporn, the former director of NIETS, in a news interview with anchorman Woody.

<sup>43</sup> Full translation of Question 13: Bua's mother has to take flowers to the market to sell very early in the morning. When she wakes up in the morning Bua has to stay and take care of her younger siblings until her mother returns, often making her late for school and she doesn't turn her homework in on time. Many of her friends try to help find a way to help her. Whose advice should Bua choose to follow? 1. Ja [girl] advises her to do her homework the night before and send it in early. 2. Nam [girl] Persuades her to ask for special treatment from the teacher. 3. Ming [boy] consoles her that not getting the homework in on time is all right. 4. Bee [girl or boy] waits for her until the evening when her friends can help check her work. The correct answer is #1, to do the homework the night before and send it in early.

their family, pursuing higher education, voting, making merit, and acting improperly both sexually and non-sexually. Even, or especially, in their absence, representations of men lack complexity.

### ***Representations of Women in the O-Net***

In the previous section I referred to representations of women on the O-Net as they related to men's representations. Here, I turn the reader's attention to representations of women specifically. The O-Net depicts women as defined by politically charged hierarchies resting on the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, making women simultaneously responsible for earthly issues and valued primarily for their physical beauty. For example, the following question appeared as question number eight on the Grade 12 health exam in 2006.

*Which of these is not Thai culture relating to gender roles?*

- 1. Taking care of the home is the responsibility of the husband and wife.*
- 2. A married man must remain faithful to his wife.*
- 3. Women must act with decorum and protect themselves from advances.*
- 4. The husband is the leader (two front legs of the elephant) and the wife is the follower (two back legs of the elephant).*

The answer is number one because "Thai culture" defines the woman as the sole caretaker of the home. In practice, however, men take part in household duties. The other answers, by default, are NIETS' correct answers relating to Thai gender roles, and all of them express a fixed construction of traditional patriarchal values. The gender hierarchy shown in this question is tied to Thai-ness and propagates a gender disparity. The family who NIETS defines as truly Thai, then, is one in which the wife is responsible for the home, a married man is faithful,

In theory, the spread of state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism's gendered hierarchy changed non-elite populations in Thailand from having relatively egalitarian gendered structures to valuing maleness. Men can escape being reborn, while women with good merit can only be

reborn as men and hope to escape rebirth in the following life. Buddhism defines gender roles in a specific way: men seek to make merit through Buddhist norms of generosity and compassion while women make merit through caring for their families and monks (Andaya 2002, Kirsch 1996). Thus women are expected to focus on more worldly or economic concerns while men focus on otherworldly ones.

Women are also stereotyped as the upholders of tradition. On the O-Net they are represented as “good” girls; they are not naughty like the boys. Girls are only represented as being “bad” when they are sexually active. On the Grade 12 (M.6) exams, women’s sexual discretion is tested, but on the Grade 6 (P.6) social studies exam, the exam does not test sexuality—women are represented as having the primary role of: 33.3% preservers of culture/tradition, 22.2% advisors of good behavior, 22.2% two sellers in the market, 11.1% caretaker of children, and 11.1% money savers.<sup>44</sup>

One treatment of women on the exam is articulated through the prioritization of women’s beauty. Women are valued because of their beauty, not because of their other attributes (Persaud 2005, 210). This is clear in the case of beautiful Nit. Not only do tourist brochures “treat Thai women as part of the aesthetic resources of the country” as Van Esterik notes (2000, 159), the O-Net does so as well. As an extension of this valorization of beauty, women are the irresistible sexual objects of men’s desire in the O-Net. This is compounded with the Theravada Buddhist construct that women must take responsibility for “worldly” domains, of which sex is a part. Women who go out at night are understood as naturally putting themselves in the position of being objectified, and any outcome of this (ex. rape, pregnancy) is the sole fault of women. The O-Net constructs it as natural.

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<sup>44</sup> The 2010 social studies O-Net has a total of 40 questions, ten of which require three correct answer choices to receive points, and thirty of which require one answer.

Aside from representations as sexual objects, Thai women can also be understood as being greedy, exemplified by expressions that exemplify profit-seeking behavior. In Western representations of Thai women, it is shown that they are “calculating,” and “‘know their interests better’ than a Thai man” (Kirsch 1996, 22-23). Here Kirsch comes close to articulating women’s representation as traders, but does not articulate the importance of women’s role in the family to justify their calculating behavior. Women who are represented as traders are not represented in the O-Net as helpless against worldly interests, but because their primary responsibility is to their families. Working for the family constitutes responsible behavior, even if it is in undesirable or less desirable ways.<sup>45</sup> Women’s calculating behavior is thus justified in cases where women work outside of the home because it supports the family. Women’s Buddhist merit is tied to being a wife and mother, so this is justified in a way that it would not be for a man.

What is *not* on the exam also divulges NIETS logic. Not all of the 1930s logic of “hypernationalism” (Barmé 1993) that was propagated by Luang Wichit Wathakan under Field Marshals Phibun and Sarit is included in the exam. Women on the exam are neither servants nor queens, neither powerless nor powerful. The exam does not include, for example, questions depicting women doing housework, being stay-at-home mothers, or serving men.

Although during the 1930s women were encouraged to act in line with Western femininity, few instances of blatant sexism or gender biases can be found on the O-Net (Reynolds 1999).<sup>46</sup> The gender stereotypes in the Thai context are represented differently than those in the United States. Namely, Thai women are charged with the burden of maintaining the family financially, physically, and emotionally. Women are depicted on the exam as capable and employed outside of the home. In the Thai context this dichotomy is a form of gender bias

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<sup>45</sup> In other literature the work of a prostitute might fit in this category, but there are no representations of prostitutes on the O-Net.

<sup>46</sup> These 1930s reforms include wearing long hair instead of short, skirts instead of unisex *chong kraben*.

because men are not responsible for anything secular; women carry the burden alone. Men, on the other hand, are judged on their spirituality.

Women are not depicted as powerful queens on the O-Net, which, Craig Reynolds writes, was part of the nationalist narrative of the 1930s. As evidence of women's inclusion in official nationalist histories, Reynolds cites Luang Wichit Wathakan's play *The Blood of Suphan* in which the heroine defends her village against the Burmese army (2002). Also, the statue of Thao Suranari was erected at this time. This nationalist narrative including queens and heroines is not found in the O-Net social studies questions that I have examined. There are, however, questions referring to kings.<sup>47</sup>

### ***The Nit Question***

Critics of the O-Net recognize the problematic representation of women on the exam, even if they do not articulate their critiques in academic terms. The Nit question, a question on the health section of the Grade 12 (M.6) exam, was the most contested question on the O-Net in 2010. Both students and television stars were astonished by this question, remarking mainly on its subjective nature. Television stars such as anchorman Sorayut Suthasanajinda on Channel 3, Woody Milintachinda, host of *The Woody Show* and *Woody Talk*, John Winyoo, known as Phi Jaw on Iheretv, and Jomquan on *Komchadluek*, all covered the set of questions about Nit. Here is the preliminary paragraph and first question from this health portion of the 2010 O-Net for students in Grade 12:

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<sup>47</sup> One such question that mentions kings, number 38 on the 2010 Grade 6 social studies test, asks students to identify under which ruler was the Thai golden age of literature born—Rama I, II, III or IV. (The answer is #2, Rama II.) Question 39 then asks “Improving the country so that it keeps up with modernity in the reign of King Chulalongkorn had what goal? 1. To cope with colonialism coming in from the West; 2. To allow Thailand to be accepted as the most powerful of the Indochina powers; 3. To balance China's power and India's power; 4. To decrease the [class] gap between people in society. (The answer is #1, to cope with the West.)

*Nit is a beautiful girl in Matayom 5 [U.S. 11th grade]. Many of the boys in her class like her. She doesn't usually say no when asked to go out at night. In the end she had sexual relations with a boy and got pregnant. Depressed, Nit asked advice from the boy about what to do; he recommended that she abort. In the end she aborted, but she lost her life by bleeding to death.*

*36. What is the reason that many boys like Nit?*

- 1. She is beautiful.*
- 2. She is friendly.*
- 3. She likes to go out at night.*
- 4. She doesn't say no to boys.*

According to NIETS, students must analyze the text to determine the answer. This is on a health test, so it promotes abstinence. The text above the question has didactic properties; it shows that students who become pregnant and choose abortion die. Therefore, the female student is again depicted as the responsible party—responsible for the sexual encounter with the boy, responsible for the pregnancy, and responsible for her own death.

The paragraph of text explicitly denotes that Nit is beautiful, but does not say that she is friendly. Therefore number two, “She is friendly” could tentatively be eliminated. The next step requires students to analyze NIETS’s psychology because both answers three and four are mentioned in the paragraph. Yet, NIETS would not want to support the idea that boys like girls because they like to go out at night or because girls do not say no to boys. Why not? Not convincing. The only answer that appears in the text that NIETS would allow is that boys like beautiful girls. NIETS is correct that students must conduct analysis, but it is not the text that the students must analyze. Rather, students must analyze NIETS itself and the kind of values that NIETS intends to instill.

The anchorman from Iheretv, Phi Jaw, analyzed this question aloud to viewers, conveying his extreme distress that NIETS would propagate the valorization of external beauty.

In reporting to viewers Phi Jaw took the position of a young girl taking the exam, rhetorically asking the television audience if “she” were not beautiful would boys not like her? Would she never get a husband? Phi Jaw poses the question, “Isn’t a nice personality a factor, too?” He continues by noting that “If she is beautiful and has other bad traits why do boys like her? And if she has a good personality and is not beautiful should boys not want her?” Phi Jaw questions the O-Net’s prioritization of women’s physical beauty as a value that trumps all other characteristics. Phi Jaw does not address the didactic potential of this question’s instilling masculine norms on young boys; it normalizes female physical beauty as the core value that boys should look for in a girl.

The former director of NIETS, Dr. Utumporn, defended this question by noting that the answer is in the text and that students should use their powers of analysis to find it.<sup>48</sup> She does not engage with the gender bias inherent in the question. Nit’s physical appearance warrants description, but the boys’ appearance is not deemed important. The girl’s beauty, as the answer to the question, is therefore central. This question appears on an exam that potentially could permit or deny a student entrance into university, so NIETS is privileging this male and female gender construct as an important point of health knowledge. The O-Net has a limited number of health questions and this question survived the deliberating process. It promotes the idea that men’s attraction to women is based primarily on appearance; it does not decry this as a sad fact. The idea that women’s physical beauty is valued above all else to make a woman desirable to men is thus reified.

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<sup>48</sup> The current director of NIETS is Dr. Samphan Phanphrut who replaced Dr. Utumporn on December 1, 2010. He has not received the same rate of media attention as Dr. Utumporn, perhaps because the 2010 test received more media attention than the 2011 test.

The second of the four questions that references Nit passed under the radar of the media because it is not as shocking. However, it does it reveal specific trends. It insists that Nit, the pregnant girl, cannot rely on the boy who impregnated her and that Nit is the responsible party.

*When [this] problem arises, whom should Nit have asked for advice?*

- 1. The boy*
- 2. Close friend(s)*
- 3. Homeroom teacher*
- 4. Parent(s)/Guardian(s)*

The answer here is #4, parents/guardians, regardless of the students' relationship with their parent(s)/guardian(s) (*phu pokkhröng*). In order for students to be able to answer this question correctly, people's titles must remain abstract. Students should not think of the exam on a personal level. If, for example, their greatest ally is their homeroom teacher, by choosing #3 they will get the question wrong. Regardless of whether or not the knowledge required to answer this question is in the curriculum, the question still persists of why a question that asks students to theorize about the expected roles of one's elders is included on the test. This treatment of Thai culture as unitary feeds the concretization of Thai tradition, which dictates that one should defer to familial elders in decision-making, regardless of the context. Another such example of this appears in the health section of the exam in nearly the same format, but in this case the question asks whom a student should ask for advice in the case of sexual molestation.

The answer to the sexual molestation question is to seek the help of the parent(s)/guardian(s), but in this case it is not clear who perpetrated the sexual act. The question assumes that the parent(s)/guardian(s) cannot be the sexual molesters and asks students to choose based on theoretical molestation. The language here, as evidenced in the titles used, is an important indicator that the questions are based on abstract positions of authority and involvement in the student's life. Parent(s)/guardian(s) are not referred to as "mother and father,"

which would be their less official forms of address. Nor are these characters named. Instead, the official title of *phu pokkhröng* is used in these cases, which is a formal title of address. This usage constructs “tradition” and “culture” into fixed categories that were imagined to be primordial and homogeneous, not implemented based on context.

These two questions that promote the parent(s)/guardian(s) standardize people’s identities, making hierarchical structures and the status quo valid regardless of context. In this case, the parent/guardian is in the position of personal advisor, and regardless of his or her individual ability to advise, this is the choice that NIETS deems correct. This also reifies that there is something essential to Thai culture regarding the proper figure from whom to seek advice. The national construct of what is proper is thus prioritized above other, possibly competing, social arrangements such as religion, ethnicity, class, or geography, which might instruct students to seek advice from someone outside of their nuclear family.

The O-Net reflects and reiterates gender stereotypes and normative behavior. It primarily articulates fixed gender hierarchies of Theravada Buddhism and the gendered representations solidified by the Thai state during the colonial era during the turn of the century and rearticulated during the 1930s. However, the O-Net’s depiction of women is even narrower than those religious and historical articulations. In the O-Net, women are not portrayed as domestic figures, queens, or mythic heroines but as *the* responsible actor. The changing nationalist narrative of Buddhism provides the context for the O-Net’s treatment of men as primarily scholar-monks or deviants and its depiction of women as secular actors who are objectified for their beauty. The O-Net represents social structures that prioritize a specific combination of gendered hierarchical ideals.

## CHAPTER 4

### READING THE RESULTS

“Statistical thinking will one day be as necessary for efficient citizenship as the ability to read and write.” –H.G. Wells

Test scores tell a story. If Thai students got an average of 46.51 percent on the O-Net in 2011 but 33.49 percent in 2012, education must be deteriorating; students must not care as much as before. This is the story that newspapers sell.<sup>49</sup> When the scores dip between years, media sources attempt to make sense of them. What do these average percentages express? In an attempt to answer this question, I address the following actors that utilize the test scores. Government organizations, such as ONESQA, utilize the O-Net scores to justify their increased involvement in school operations by painting a picture of Thailand as a country that is generally behind other Asian countries. ONESQA treats the test results as scientific measurements to pinpoint educational problems, but, as demonstrated in previous chapters, the exam contains specific biases. The results are organized into graphs and maps that obscure the exams’ privileged categories. NIETS assumes simply that the national education system is either improving or disintegrating, without considering the changing nature of the variables. Finally, the results are used to claim that there is gender equality in education, however the number of variables complicates such an assertion.

Comparing student scores between years implies a rational, linear notion of national education, as shown on the y-axis, without considering the variables. The scores cannot measure generic Thai capacity, as NIETS claims they do. They only measure how well students can take

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<sup>49</sup> The newspaper *The Nation* reported that in 2011 the national average for the Grade 12 social studies section of the O-Net was 46.51 percent, but in 2012 it fell to 33.39 percent. (Poor ONet scores could reflect, 2012)

this year's test.<sup>50</sup> The students who took the test in 2011 and 2012 are not the same people, and the exam is not the same exam. The O-Net format, the questions, and the students are not the same from year to year, so the NIETS graphs and tables that imply continuity between years are deceiving. The exam asks students different questions with an inconsistent number of corresponding multiple-choice answers. To illustrate, in 2011 the Grade 12 exam's questions provided only four answer choices—A, B, C and D—but in 2012 exam choice E was added to eighty percent of the exam.<sup>51</sup> In 2012 students had a twenty-percent chance of guessing right instead of a twenty-five percent chance, so between years students have a different probability of getting questions right, thereby producing statistically incomparable units. Teachers and students also report inconsistent question difficulty between years, yet ONESQA asks schools to compare its results between years and to improve from year to year. In spite of these inconsistent variables, each of the five government analysis papers that I utilized as sources assumes that the O-Net scores are scientific measurements.

The results reported by NIETS are used in many government documents and newspaper articles, and I utilize five of such papers to demonstrate how the exam results are used to make claims about Thai education. These five sources are sources from various programs and organizations that use test scores to make claims about score meaning and who is to blame for the low scores.<sup>52</sup> These papers categorize data in ways that obscure the ways O-Net privileges

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<sup>50</sup> Outside factors are also relevant, since the exam is not given in a black box. Certain students might score higher because of environmental or emotional reasons that occur generally or specifically on the day of testing that helps or impedes concentration.

<sup>51</sup> Personal email communication with the College Board Communications Coordinator Katherine Levin.

<sup>52</sup> These are the five sources that I use: 1) The core of my analysis rests on "Crisis of Thai Education as evidenced through the O-Net, I-Net, V-Net, N-Net, GAT and PAT." <sup>52</sup> NIETS wrote this "Crisis" paper in 2010 (2553) to demonstrate the educational capacity rankings of Thailand on both international and intra-national scales. NIETS takes credit as author and does not credit specific individuals.

2) I use the "Manual for Round Three External Quality Evaluation (2554-2558 B.E.) [2011-2015 A.D.] for Basic Level Schools. (Amended November 2554 [2011])." This is a 116-page document printed by ONESQA in January 2012.

certain social classes, regions, genders, and religions. I will attempt to bring such biases into focus using those same documents that originally obscure them.

ONESQA and other organizations use the O-Net scores to justify their involvement in the school operations of schools with average scores that are low. After the O-Net is given each year, NIETS tabulates the O-Net scores and reports them back to each jurisdiction. Thai and international government bodies, such as Thailand Development Research Institute, the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, and the United Nations Development Project, then use the scores to make claims about the O-Net data in various publications and endeavors. The organization that depends on O-Net scores the most, however, is ONESQA, which evaluates schools. ONESQA uses graphs and figures in its analysis that normalize certain divisions of the population and reinforce the exam as a rational tool by placing blame on populations that would be expected to score poorly. The graphs then, reflecting these biases, appear accurate.

### ***Making a Case with Numbers***

This mathematical approach to relating data about education, complete with statistics on O-Net results, is aimed at providing credible data for the Ministry of Education's systematic usage in evaluating schools in order to make improvements in the overall quality of education

(*Rai ngan phon* 2010, 3). In the district-wide booklets, the name of each district school appears

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3) My analysis also incorporates the print version of a speech given by an ONESQA representative, distributed to schools throughout the country, which demonstrates ONESQA attempts to ease the schools' fears of inequity in the evaluation process.

4) *Rai ngan pon kan pramun khunaphap kansuksa kan pun than*, or *Report on the Basic Education Quality Evaluation*, produced by Buriram number 38 Area 3 ESAO under OBEC, covers information about the 2009 school year. The volume will be referred to as "Report on ONESQA" in this chapter. It covers a lot of information, related mostly in numeric form in its 386 pages.

5) Only one section of the United Nations Development Programme's "Dimensions of Male and Female: The Differences and Similarities" or *Mid ying-chai: Khwam Tektang bonkhwam muen* 2008 is concerned with O-Net results. The document was produced by the National Statistics Office and Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development, supported by the United Nations Development Program and posted online in Thai by Inis Communication, Bangkok.

in a chart with the number of students, the total points, the average raw score from that school, the average score in terms of percentage, and the standard deviation. Then the points are broken down into three quality categories: “needs improvement,” “satisfactory,” and “good.”

NIETS does not prioritize consistency between years because its gaze is on the international testing atmosphere, which is always changing. Every year NIETS changes the exam format, the number of total points, and the subjects tested or subject groupings, meaning that, for example, one year NIETS tests Thai and math in the same hour and a half, and the next year they are tested separately or in combination with other subjects.<sup>53</sup> Art and vocational tests were first added to the twelfth grade exam in 2008. In 2008 and 2009, Grade 6 (P. 6) was only tested in Thai, math, and science. In 2010 the other five subjects were added. Grade 9 (M.3) did not take the O-Net in 2008, and even when testing began health and physical education, art, or vocational subjects were not added until 2010.

In the analysis papers, NIETS focuses on the total number of points, not on the students’ weak points. No report is provided to breakdown scores on the subject by skill set, or that school X scored high in grammar questions on the English section, perhaps because it would draw more attention to the questions themselves and the NIETS test design strategy. The reports instead focus on certain categories of students, schools, provinces, and regions, using the O-Net scores to make certain claims about those categories.

NIETS and ONESQA state that the exam results can demonstrate capacity, or *khwam samat*, without delineating to what the term “capacity” refers. Under scrutiny, the exam

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<sup>53</sup> The Grade 6 exam had three hundred points on it from 2008-2009, which became eight hundred points in 2010. In 2006 and 2007 there were a total of five hundred points on the twelfth grade exam, which changed to eight hundred for the twelfth grade exam in 2008. In 2008 and 2009 each subject was tested separately on the Grade 6 exam, but in 2010 subject were paired together in the same test booklet, Thai with math, social studies with science, art with vocation, English with health and P.E. So if students took too long on the Thai portion they would not have time to work on the math section. In 2011 the tests were regrouped into two exams: social studies with English and math, and Thai with science, health and P.E., art, and vocation. In 2012 the subjects were segregated again.

questions divulge their incapacity to test general student capacity. Aside from the content of the questions, which I address in chapters two and three, the exam preparation materials, and even the exams themselves, often have technical errors (for example, see chapter five “Does a bell reverberate?”). Yet because of the global hegemony of testing rhetoric, even a controversial exam is widely believed to be better than no exam. Then, over the years, the exam can then be refined to become a more accurate measurement tool and be kept up to date.

### *A Point of Comparison: Thailand is not Alone*

Thailand is not an exceptional case, as it is one among many countries conducting standards-based evaluations that rely on exam scores. In the United States, each state is responsible for its own standardized exam in accordance with the nation-wide No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative of 2001. For example, Colorado’s original exam was called the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).<sup>54</sup> State and federal laws require publication of these reports and schools that fail the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) objective for two years in a row are identified as “in need of improvement” and must write a school improvement plan. The stakes are high for American schools because they could lose federal funds.<sup>55</sup>

The Thai system of school evaluations clearly parallels the United States’ history of evaluations. The United States AYP objectives created under NCLB (2001) are similar to ONESQA evaluations designated in 2002 in Thailand in article 49, amending the Education Act of 1999 (2542) (ONESQA report 2012). Four categories were used for the CSAP: “advanced,”

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<sup>54</sup> Although any state would work as an illustration, I have a relatively better understanding of the Colorado system because Colorado it is my home state. I attended primary and secondary school there and I know many Colorado teachers. As of August 2011, the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program, or TSAP, has taken the CSAP’s place in accordance with the new educational standards, but teachers are still making the adjustment. (Colorado Department of Education website, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> “Schools and districts identified for improvement face federal sanctions if they receive Title I funds.” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website, 2012).

“proficient,” “partially proficient,” and “unsatisfactory” (Colorado Department of Education website 2012).” On the other hand, in Thailand ONESQA uses five categories: “urgently needs improvement,” “needs improvement,” “satisfactory,” “good,” and “very good.” If a school does not pass the evaluation in Colorado, it must create a two-year plan within *three months* of evaluation to remedy this (ESEA 2012). The case in Thailand is parallel; schools that do not pass the evaluation must also create a two-year development plan, but submit it to their local jurisdiction within *thirty days* (ONESQA speech, 2011).

Colorado’s assessment appears to be very similar to Thailand’s ONESQA, but there is one major discrepancy. In Thailand’s ONESQA no group is disaggregated. In the case of Colorado, to make the adequate yearly progress measure (AYP), the school must make AYP in all disaggregated groups with 30 or more students, including Native American, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities (District Accountability Handbook 2011,18). In Thailand, however, students are not disaggregated and schools must meet ONESQA’s progress indicator as a whole. The O-Net’s goal is not to reduce the gap between Thai citizens; the stated goal is to reduce the gap between international test scores and Thai test scores.

### ***O-Net Results in the International Testing Context***

The NIETS “Crisis of Thai Education” paper does not simply jump into O-Net test results (NIETS 2010). First, the stage is set in the context of international testing; only in this context can the reader understand the justification within which NIETS rationalizes the O-Net. It is a tool to make Thailand competitive as a nation. In the preface, NIETS spells out its logic in three paragraphs. The first of these poses that

*In comparing the rankings of Thai educational capabilities with other countries, it is evident that Thailand was ranked low and is apt to stay among the lower rankings. Why is this the case? Who is the responsible party? And how can it be fixed?*

The first sentence positions Thailand as a country behind others as the focus of the testing issue. NIETS then poses questions of causality that are not directly answered or clarified in the document. The reader must infer the answers from the data set forth. NIETS and most readers assume that if Thailand is not moving ahead it might fall even farther behind, but this is not mentioned again or supported with evidence. This claim does not need to be supported by outside authors or citations because it is part of the hegemonic rhetoric.

The second paragraph of the preface continues by turning the focus to the NIETS role of using O-Net scores to inform citizens about the *capacity* of Thai students without specifying what they should have the capacity to do.

*This document is a summary of results from the O-Net, I-Net and V-Net from October 2, 2006–September 30, 2010 during which time Professor Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann was the director of National Institute for Educational Testing Service (Public Organization). Aside from that, this document was written with the purpose of urging Thai citizens to realize the level of Thai student ability; if Thailand wants students who are capable, then how can the problem be solved and by whom?*

This implies that Thai citizens in general are not aware of the state of Thai education, and so NIETS collates the data to inform Thais of the state of the student capacity. NIETS uses the word *capable* in reference to students as a catchall term that treats citizens as an undifferentiated category and eludes critique because of its lack of specificity.

Lastly, the preface zooms in on the heart of the matter: that O-Net scores can speak to the state of the nation.

*This document urges Thais' cooperation in taking responsibility and to paying attention to making schools strong so that the communities will be strong. Then Thailand will be strong. Let us work together so that our [primary and elementary] students, [college and university] students to have knowledge, morality, and ethics. That way our Thailand will*

*have a chance to be ranked among the top of the rankings and our country will become a more advanced country.*

This final paragraph emphasizes that all Thais are responsible for the status of the education sector. This statement alleviates responsibility from NIETS test design and education branches in general and it reinforces the idea from the first paragraph that national pride is on the line in the rankings.

After the preface, the body of the “Crisis” paper paints a picture of Thailand as a country that is generally behind other Asian countries. These pages use statistics gathered from 2007-2009 (2550-2552) to set the background of national testing with Thailand’s position in the international testing realm, although NIETS only has authority over national exams.<sup>56</sup> However, the international context provides justification for national testing. Thai students need to improve their standardized exam scores, so they need to be better equipped to take standardized exams. Thailand, as evidenced in the first eleven pages of the “Crisis” paper, is behind other countries in international test scores, and Thailand’s face as a nation is at stake in these rankings.<sup>57</sup> The background for the O-Net is set on the country’s “lower than” (*tam kwa*) status based on various international assessments, namely IMD, PISA, World Bank, and TIMSS. The scores on all of these assessments are listed from best to worst by country, and the people who take the tests are identified solely by their country and only as representatives of Thailand’s capacity. If “Thailand” is testing badly in the international circuit, then this implies that *the nation* needs to remedy this in order to test better.

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<sup>56</sup> The implication that a fundamental piece of IMD rankings is student testing is erroneous. The IMD has many criteria to create (business) competitiveness rankings, and educational scores (PISA) are only one part of the “infrastructure” criteria. Other categories include the country’s economic performance, government efficiency, and business efficiency.

<sup>57</sup> Government officials want Thailand to not only save face, but to also gain face in relationship to other countries. In September 2006, Dr. Utumporn dreamed to make NIETS eventually become the best test center in Asia. She hoped that the future of NIETS would be in organizing tests for countries such as “Burma, Vietnam, and Laos.”

In the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) “scoreboard” in 2009 (2552) and 2010 (2553) Thailand was ranked twenty-sixth out of fifty-eight participating countries worldwide (NIETS 2010). NIETS compares the scores not in terms of ASEAN, but in terms of Asia as a whole, and only highlights data about the countries that outrank Thailand, not data about the countries that scored lower than it. Although Thailand is twenty-sixth and Japan is twenty-seventh and Indonesia is thirty-fifth, this is not part of the “lower than” construction of “what countries we need to beat,” and thus not a focus. “As a whole [Thailand] scored lower than five Asian countries: Singapore (in first place), Hong Kong (second place), Taiwan (eighth place) Malaysia (tenth place) and Korea (twenty-third place)” (NIETS 2010, 1). In this way NIETS constructs an implicit argument so as to Thailand is behind other Asian countries and, if the idea is allowed to expand to the logical conclusion, should not be. This background national rankings chart must mean something, but NIETS leaves the analysis to the reader who must extrapolate from the chart and the way that the data is presented.

This competitive construction assumes that education is a fixed and finite object of which some nations have more and some nations have less. It does not allow for different educational priorities and different kinds of knowledge.<sup>58</sup> When both PISA Program for International Student Assessment and the World Bank “World Competitiveness Yearbook” rank nations based on how a select group of citizens test, they are essentially treating the nation as a homogeneous entity in which all students receive the same level of education because there is only one representative educational score. The scores that a small sample of students obtain are used as indicators of the

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<sup>58</sup> Countries such as Norway is currently being praised for their education systems which encourage students to write instead of answering multiple choice questions. However, I hesitate in joining in this congratulations simply because the method of measurement for Norway’s success is, once again, the form of the multiple choice exam. If an international exam were given testing how well students could write a personal essay, a persuasive essay, or directions for food preparation, another country that emphasizes writing skills might excel even more than students in Norway. (Notice again how the language slips into a nationalist rhetoric, as if the countries themselves were taking these exams and the scores represent the entire nation.)

*standing of the nation*. These global competitions change frequently to appear more accurate or representative of real trends.

NIETS provides two more international examples to persuade readers of Thailand's low standing in the competitive international testing sphere. Bar graphs illustrate the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and participating countries in both the PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (NIETS 2010, 4-6). PISA tests student reading, mathematics and scientific literacy. Scores are divided into six rankings: lower than one, one, two, three, four, and five. In 2006 the majority of Thai students received a ranking of two in reading, or an average of 417 points, which is lower than the OECD average of 484 points (NIETS 2010, 2). Thailand scored higher in reading than Argentina, Indonesia, and Brazil, but this can only be inferred from the graph; it does not appear in the text. The portion that appears in text supports the argument in the preface, that Thailand is educationally falling behind, which supports an alarmist national rhetoric. TIMSS from 2007 also depicts Thailand as having scored lower than the international average of 500 points, scoring 441 points in math and 471 points in science. The specific countries that Thailand scores behind are also highlighted in the text: Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei (cited as if it were a country) all scored higher than Thailand.

Comparing countries by framing them as ahead or behind one another constructs a certain notion of nationalism in which education can be quantified and become a point of national pride. The "World Competiveness Yearbook" 2010 that the World Bank created (NIETS 2010, 7-9) reinforces this idea that education is a competition between nations and esteem rests not with mutual advancement and cooperation, but with outranking other nations.

Because the purpose of the “Crisis” paper is to call attention to the state of the education sector, it reflects a dismal scenario. They show that Thailand is failing in the rankings in regard to domestic and international standards. Yet Thailand educates most of its citizens and the literacy rates are very high in comparison to other developing countries. According to UNICEF, from 2005-2010 Thailand’s literacy rate, defined as the percentage of people over the age of 15 who can read and write, was 94%. This is a very high number in light of the fact that it was not until 1960 that seven years of education became compulsory, so many adults in their sixties and seventies only had a few years of primary education. Thailand is almost never compared to other developing countries, however. Officials usually compare Thailand to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Asian countries, or the Western Europe and the United States.

***Ranking within the Nation***

While the international scope provides the context for the O-Net results, the core of the “Crisis” paper addresses national exams. ONESQA uses the O-Net scores to evaluate each of the country’s government funded schools, including private schools, which are largely government funded. ONESQA uses twelve indicators to evaluate whether schools have reached the benchmarks set forth. The O-Net points, listed under indicator number five as “students’ academic achievement results,” contribute twenty of the total one hundred points possible.<sup>59</sup>

Indicator number five specifies that

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<sup>59</sup> From page 21 of the ONESQA Manual.

<u>The group of indicators for basic education</u>	Points
1. Students have good physical and emotional health	10
2. Students have good ethics, morals, and values	10
3. Students seek knowledge and learn continuously	10
4. Students can think, can do	10
5. Students’ academic achievement results	20

*A good level of student academic achievement* means that, of the students that took the NIETS test [the O-Net], the [school's] O-Net scores are higher than the educational group average for Grade 6, 9, and 12. (NIETS Manual, 39, original emphasis)

NIETS attempts to find winners and losers on the national level. Even with this intention, however, a clear winner and loser are not always evident. For example, NIETS compared schools that rank in the top ten and the bottom ten for three consecutive years from 2008-2010 and found that in Grade 6 (P. 6), *no schools* were strong or weak for three years running (NIETS 2010, 12). In comparing Grade 9 (M.3) school scores from two years (2009-2010), there were no losers, but there were four winners. All four top schools were high school prep schools.

### ***Class and the Urban/Rural divide***

The illustrations in the NIETS “Crisis” paper, in the form of graphs and maps support specific categorical divisions that NIETS selects. The chosen categories demonstrate that high points are expected among students in well-known schools, privileged provinces, specific ministerial divisions, large schools, private schools, and in the central region. Therefore, the

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6. Effectiveness of the teacher to conduct student-centered lessons	10
7. Efficiency of managing education and development of the school	5
8. Development of internal quality assurance through the school and the school's jurisdiction.	5
Total weight	<u>80</u>
<u>The group of identity indicators</u>	
9. Philosophical development Mission/vision and the goals of building the school	5
10. Development of the focus and highlights reflected as a symbol of the school	5
Total weight [of identity indicators]	<u>10</u>
<u>Group of extra indicators</u>	
11. The results of special projects operations to add to the role of education	5
12. The results of additional development of schools to improve the standards, maintain the educational standard and develop excellence consistent with educational reform of educational administration.	5
Total weight [of extra indicators]	<u>10</u>
<u>Total weight of all 12 indicators</u>	<u>100</u>

differences in O-Net scores are arranged as issues of administrative differences between bureaucratic bodies.

The way that each of the eight tested subjects (Thai, English, math, etc.) are lined up against each other on page 22 of the “Crisis” paper (pictured below) implies that each subject is an equivalent of the other. It also implies that the scores on the previous year’s test are comparable to the current year’s scores. Yet NIETS changes all of the questions from year to year and each year a new group of students is tested. These two variables, the questions and the students, are not fixed, but are treated as if they were interchangeable.

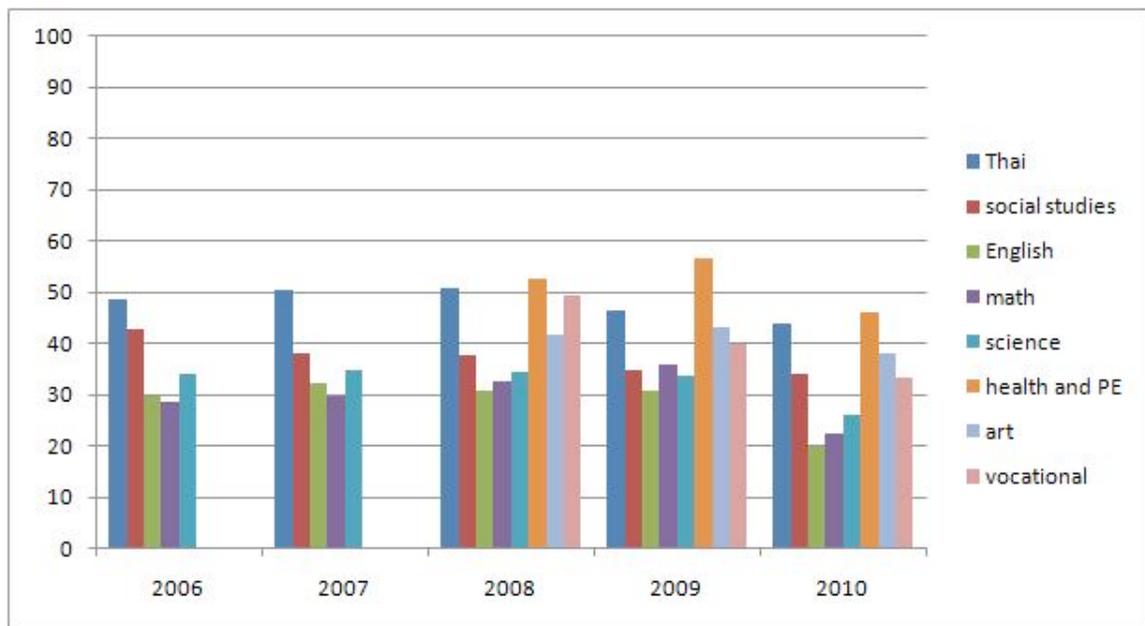


Figure 3 National average O-Net scores by year and subject

For example, if a teacher in Ubon province had a class of Grade 6 students who scored well in 2011, beating both the national average and the scores of his students from 2010, this is considered positive and it reflects well on him and on his school. But if in 2012 his school does not improve this already high score by four percent it will have not succeeded in the national goal and it will not pass the ONESQA indicator for the O-Net scores. His students in 2012 are all new to him and are not associated with the previous year’s student scores, but this is not factored

in. The individual schools that scored well were associated with a top university—there were two in Bangkok, one in Trang city, and one in the city of Hat Yai. Although presented as an administrative success case that can be replicated in the “Crisis” paper, it divulges a middle-class/urban bias.

The O-Net is widely believed to privilege urban, middle-class students, but the scores are not reported using urbanity or class as a frame. Most rural teachers that I spoke with in both the north, Chiang Mai, and the northeast, Buriram, said that rural students cannot score as high as their urban counterparts. Private schools are commonly believed to enroll brighter, wealthier students with more access to resources. Most people assume that those students will score high on the O-Net. However, the data depicted in the “Crisis” paper shows that while private school students score higher, the discrepancy is not as extreme as what Thai teachers and administrators might expect. This minimal difference between private and public schools’ scores, by subject, is illustrated in the graph below, which is from NIETS’ “Crisis” paper.

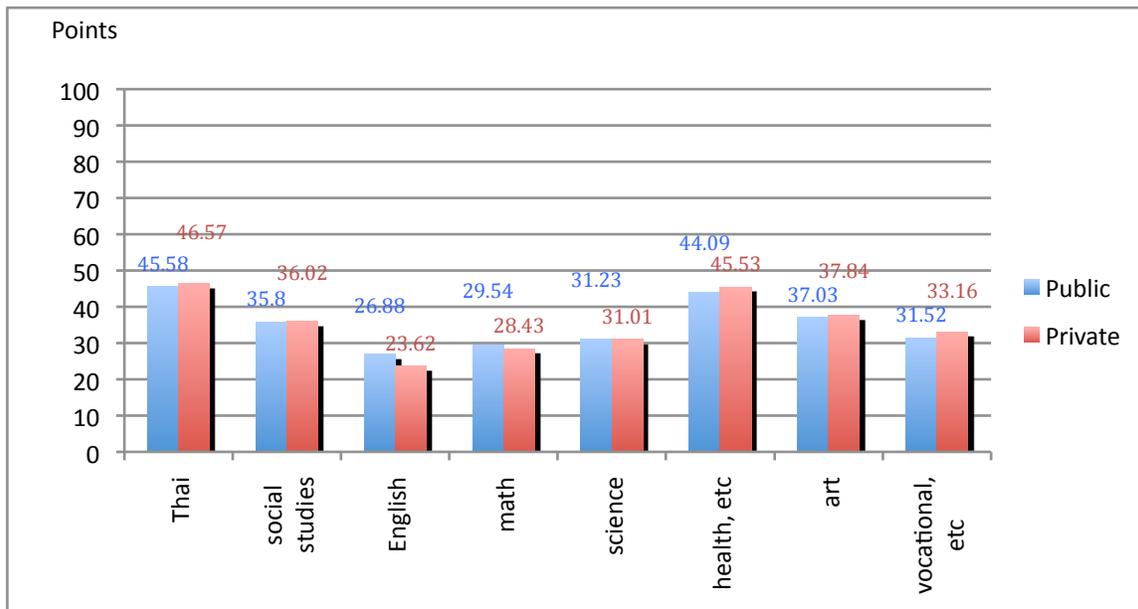


Figure 4 O-Net scores for Grade 12 in 2010 [2009 school year] of private and public schools

The O-Net scores are then depicted by province on a map of the country. The map is color-coded: green depicts the top-scoring provinces, yellow for the middle-range provinces, and red for the bottom-scoring provinces. To achieve green status, provinces have to score in the top ten for a certain number of consecutive years. For example, Bangkok, Nakhon Panom, Nonthaburi, Nakhon Prathom, and Phayao were the five provinces that had Grade 6 student scores the top ten for three consecutive years.

On the other hand, Tak, Mae Hong Son (west), Surin (northeast), Yala, Patani, and Narathiwat (south) are all in red, having scored consistently in the bottom ten for three years. All of these provinces are considered border provinces, are relatively poor, and have competing forms of local knowledge and identification. Tak and Mae Hong Son, for example, are positioned on the border with Burma. They have high numbers of hill tribe populations such as the Yao, Karen, Akha, Lahu, Hmong, Lisu, and Burmese migrants. These identifiers are often connected with competing belief systems, both religious and cultural. Minority groups in the north are often Christian, but may also believe in animism. Therefore, it may be because of this religious and cultural reason that they do not score well, in light of O-Net testing of Buddhist cultural indoctrination with specific focus on respecting hierarchies and respecting authority. Other possible reasons for these areas' poor scores include their use of a different mother-tongue at home than at school. Surin province is another one of the low scoring red provinces that is located in the northeast region, the poorest region in Thailand. Surin is known for heavy use of the Khmer Surin, or Cambodian dialect. People in the southernmost provinces—Yala, Patani, and Narathiwat—often speak in Malay.

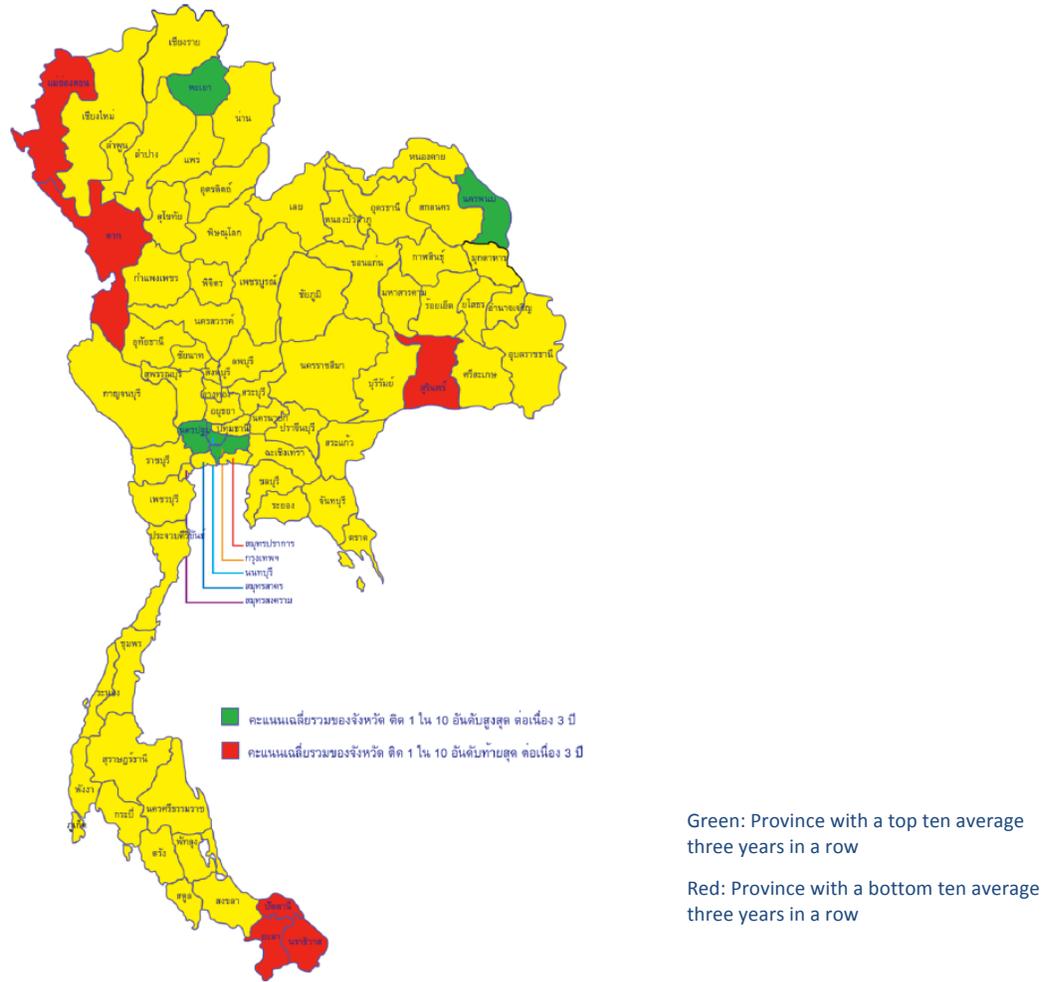


Figure 5 Provinces regularly strong or weak: Grade 6 O-Net scores from 2008-2010 by province

All citizens—even the land itself—are implicated by the map color. The map requires provincial success cases and failures. Even if the entire country did almost exactly the same on the O-Net, give or take one percent, this map could still be created.<sup>60</sup> Through the colored map, NIETS makes the test scores represent the entire province and everything within that province, regardless of its connection to educational scores. This method ties every inhabitant inside the province to the negative or positive status found in the scores.

<sup>60</sup> If the average were, theoretically, 84.5%, provinces that received an average of 84% would be the failures, and those that achieved an average of 85% would be the success cases. This is the logic of creating winners and losers that ties test scores spatially to the province.

The map above and the eight other full-page maps in the “Crisis” document perform specific political work (14-16, 26-28, 39-41). Each map communicates very little data about O-Net scores through provincial categorization into three colors, but as both a unifying and dividing mechanism it is powerful. In the map above, fifty-seven provinces in yellow are united as *average* Thailand, while the green areas are especially high scoring and the red areas especially low scoring. The choice of yellow as the color that unites the nation here is convenient since it is symbolic of the King. The “Crisis” paper was published in November 2010, just after the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) upheaval had calmed. The color that PAD utilized for its campaign was red, the same color associated with bad scores on the map. Although this may be coincidental and the colors might have been chosen to reflect the colors of a stoplight (green meaning go and red meaning stop), NIETS could have chosen more politically neutral colors, but chose not to. Other graphics, by contrast, are decidedly more neutral. The IMD graph is in blue and orange, the PISA and TIMSS graphs are in dark blue, burgundy, light green, purple, turquoise, orange and lavender.

The visual connection between a province’s educational success and its status within the nation is cemented in the reader’s mind without requiring average score numbers or graphs to explain how these decisions were made. The map is floating without any bordering countries connecting it to the larger world. If the students, schools, districts, or service sectors were mapped in green, yellow, and red, the map would paint a different picture—it would be a kaleidoscope of color dotted all over the map. But by generalizing the provincial average for the color of the entire province, the map makes sense of the scores in a national way. Those provinces in red are of national educational and, as I argue, political concern. Those provinces in

red are targeted as problematic areas, as compared to the good green areas and the average yellow ones. They are targeted for education reform, which has implicit standardizing goals.

The red areas are also areas that resist state indoctrination, not only in standardized education, but also politically. One clear example is the red clump on the above map at the southern tip of Thailand, which has been an area of political nonconformity and insurgency, especially since 2004. The map of the O-Net scores, and its red/green determination, oversimplifies the complexity of the historical political issue. The government deems some areas of the “geo-body” as problematic for central governance (Thongchai 1994).<sup>61</sup> Through the mapping process, as Thongchai describes, the margins of nationhood were delineated, including the hierarchical position of the students in terms of their geographical position. The insurgency and reaction to the insurgency in the form of bombings and shootings have prevented students from attending school regularly. “According to the 2003 census, 37.5 percent of the population in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani between the ages of six and twenty-four were not in school” (Abuza 2009, 32).

For those students who are able to attend school regularly, the school systems in these three southernmost provinces have competing forms of knowledge, often focusing on teaching Arabic, Jawi, the Qur’an, the teachings of Muhammad, Islamic history and geography, and Muslim law. In the southern provinces teachers teach this Muslim curriculum and Thailand’s common eight O-Net subjects—Thai, English, social studies, math, science, art, health and physical education, and vocation and technology. Teaching both curricula is a lot to juggle for

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<sup>61</sup> Thongchai uses the term “geo-body” to highlight modern Thailand’s geographic territory and the values and practices among people inhabiting that land. Mapping, according to Thongchai, both claimed the rights to land and developed nationhood. The modern mapping tool was seemingly apolitical and thus able to make claims about land and the people within said land. The O-Net, too, is treated as though it were an objective measuring mechanism. The policy documents use the map to make seemingly objective claims about territories, but they do so in ways that support specific political motivations.

teachers, especially since teaching the eight subjects is already a struggle for many teachers in other regions.

As described in chapter two, the O-Net assumes that all students are Buddhist. Because the O-Net presumes that students have Buddhist-based knowledge, NIETS developed the I-NET, an Islamic version, to standardize what was taught in regards to Islam. As outlined on its website, NIETS determined three goals for the I-Net: 1) to test knowledge and student thinking according to Islam Education Act of 2003 (2546); 2) for the exam results to improve the quality of teaching and learning of the school; 3) to use the test results for other purposes.<sup>62</sup> Most standardized exams in other countries are allegedly not intended to inform the curriculum or to change the teachers' material or methods. In these I-Net goals, however, NIETS specifically states that the exam is intended to improve the quality of the teaching, and for any other purposes that NIETS finds appropriate.

Although there are students who take the I-Net in seventeen provinces, the number of Islamic students is concentrated in the south.<sup>63</sup> Information about the I-Net and corresponding graphs and maps are included in the “Crisis” paper, including the map shown below that depicts an isolated mass of land, unconnected to the rest of Thailand to the north and Malaysia to the south (NIETS 2010, 39-41). The heading is “I-Net points for beginning level students in 2009 classified by province.” The explanation states that the national average was 40.62, so provinces shown in green are higher than the average (Patani and Yala) and provinces in red are lower than the national average (Satun, Songkhla, and Narithiwat).

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<sup>62</sup> วัตถุประสงค์ของการสอบ I-NET คืออะไร 1. เพื่อทดสอบความรู้และความคิดของนักเรียนตามหลักสูตรอิสลามศึกษา พุทธศักราช 2546

2. เพื่อนำผลการสอบไปใช้ในการปรับปรุงคุณภาพการเรียนการสอนของโรงเรียน

3. เพื่อนำผลการทดสอบไปใช้ในวัตถุประสงค์อื่น

<sup>63</sup> Provinces where the I-Net is administered include: 1. Yala 2. Patani 3. Narithiwat 4. Satun 5. Songkhla 6. Nakhon Sithammarat 7. Krabi 8. Phuket 9. Trang 10. Chumpon 11. Phangnga 12. Surathani 13. Ranong 14. Phatthalung 15. Prachuapkhirikhan 16. Nonthaburi 17. Bangkok (NIETS 2010: 35).



Figure 6 Diagram of 40 I-Net points in 2010 by province

Unlike the similar diagram for the O-Net, this I-Net diagram shows that the southernmost three provinces (in green) score high in Islamic subjects. However, the diagram fails to depict the diversity among Islamic groups in the south. It is not evident above which areas teach only Islamic education courses and which areas include and basic education courses (the 8 subjects: math, science, Thai, etc.). This is important to note because low scores might simply evidence alternative priorities, and not poor education. Some schools in the provinces shown in red prioritize breadth of both over depth, managing both religious and basic education. However, these color-coded maps are not capable of and do not encourage a nuanced analysis.

## ***ONESQA Evaluation***<sup>64</sup>

Although the National Institute Educational Testing Service (NIETS), the creator of the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-Net), does not mandate consequences for poor test results, they do assemble and distribute the results widely. The scores are reported to ONESQA. Two consequences are consistent between provinces: the exam scores influence schools' reputations and heavily affect their evaluations. If a school does not pass the ONESQA evaluation, this can have negative consequences. Their failure is made public, which shames the school. This shame has fiscal repercussions in terms of outside donations from local sponsors. Parents can move their children to other schools, and the administrators and teachers must do extra work to make a plan for improvements and follow through with them in accordance with the Ministry of Education jurisdictional branch in their area. The local jurisdiction must pay for the repeat evaluation, which does not ingratiate the school with local officials.

Many personnel who have a stake in the ONESQA evaluation, such as principals and teachers, think that the O-Net scores are *the* pivotal objective part of the evaluation. They believe that if their O-Net scores are not high enough, even though it is only one of twelve indicators, they will not pass the evaluation. The NIETS manual defines the twelve indicators for basic education (21). Indicator number five is based on the school's O-Net scores and it counts for twenty of the eighty total points. The O-Net, in educators' understanding, is the only measurable objective and the only part of the evaluation that is quantitative and not qualitative. Therefore many administrators and teachers spend time and energy attempting to improve scores on this indicator rather than the other indicators.

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<sup>64</sup> ONESQA has to follow in accordance to the Education Act of 2542 (1999) amendments in 2545 (2002) article 49. This law designates that external quality evaluations for all schools at least 1 time every 5 years, counting from the last evaluation. In accordance to this law they must submit evaluations through the related offices and publically counting from the last evaluation. In this law, article 50 specifies that the school cooperate in preparing paperwork that has data about the school.

This description of the indicators which ONESQA uses to assess each school not only heavily weights the O-Net scores, at twenty total points, it gives four times more weight to O-Net scores than both the efficiency of school administration and the school's use of internal evaluation, which are only allotted five points each. Indicator number five is only based on O-Net results, so they are pivotal for the external quality evaluation. Indicator number five, student academic achievement, is explained on page 39 of the ONESQA manual:

*Student academic achievement* refers to good achievement levels and that there is development in every subject in Grade 6, 9, and 12 (P.6, M.3, M.6)

*A good level of student academic achievement* means that of the students that took the NIETS test (O-Net) the percentage is more than the educational group average for Grade 6, 9, and 12. *ONESQA will be in charge of the program to do that calculation.*

*Development of learning* means the school has a percentage of students that have national test results in every subject in the level of good and better when compared with the average from the last year. (Original emphasis)

Schools must score better than their jurisdiction's average and they must improve their score every year. However, for this to be the case, half of the schools in Thailand will fail this indicator. This is worth emphasizing. *Indicator number five demands that schools must score higher than the average in the educational group, so all schools that fall below it will fail that indicator regardless of their scores.* The indicator is structured to ensure that some schools will fail it. In the past six years the national average has never reached above sixty percent in any subject. For purposes of illustration, let us imagine that in 2013 every student in Thailand were to score over eighty percent on every category of the O-Net. Even in this wildly optimistic scenario, all the schools that score under the national average (perhaps 86.43 percent) would fail indicator number five. Indicator number five is structured to create winners and losers.

### *Local use of O-Net scores*

On the local level, Education Service Area Offices (ESAOs) under the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) develop lists to compare schools to one another, and those schools that are urban with more resources score higher. Of those on the local list, the highest scoring school in Trang was Princess Chulabhorn's College in Trang's provincial capital, and the lowest score was from Hat Samran Wittayakhom School, a rural school located 50 kilometers from the provincial capital.<sup>65</sup> Trang is not alone in this rural-urban split. In Krabi, Ammartpanichnukul school is in the provincial capital and it received the most points on the O-Net, scoring above the national average in every subject in 2011 (2554). In contrast, at Khlong Yang Prachanuson School the scores were lowest in the province. This rural school is on the island of Kho Lanta. At least in this instance of Krabi and Trang, both the highest and lowest scores follow a rural/urban pattern: the rural schools do not score as high on the O-Net as urban schools score. NIETS does not provide data based on rural/urban patterns in the "Crisis" paper, so this pattern is not foregrounded and thus obscured.

The O-Net scores penetrate all levels of education rhetoric, not just government analysis papers. The media is heavily influenced by the O-Net scores' clear, black and white proof of educational failure. For example, one headline from *The Nation* in June 2000 read:

"Administration to be Urgently Set Right: Statistics Show Thai Youth Labour is Under-Educated." The language is in terms of *being*, not in terms of specific capabilities. Another such example is the newspaper article "Onet failures may have to repeat year." The students who get

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<sup>65</sup> The results are tabulated on a national level for ONESQA use, but education offices also make them into ranking lists and distribute them to the schools. Aside from the five major papers that I cite on page 4, I acquired one locally-distributed list (only two pages long) from Trang-Krabi's Secondary Educational Service Area Office (SESAO). It lists 44 schools' Thai, social studies, English, math, and science O-Net scores in 2011. This document is entitled, "Phonkan todosob raddapchat khanphunthan (O-Net) chan mathayomsuksa pi ti 6 kha sathiti radap rong rian yek tam matrathan kan rian ru pi kan suk sa 2553 [2010] SESAO 13 jangwat Trang-Krabi."

low scores are thus labeled failures. Such reform to get students to take the O-Net even more seriously by failing them has not passed legislation. This is not isolated to English sources, but is also the case in Thai periodicals as well, such as the article “NIETS Upholds That O-Net Points Indicate Stupidity and Smartness” (“STS” 2012).

***What the scores do not say about Gender***

The United Nations Development Programme is the only organization that I have found that makes claims about gender differentiation among O-Net scores, or the lack thereof. The majority high-stakes assessment literature published in English analyzes how tests favor majorities over minorities through the structure of certain types of questions, which authors are concerned might be biased against women. Yet, according to UNDP analysis, the design of the O-Net is almost equally difficult for boys and girls. Girls' scores are not significantly lower than boys' scores in any subject. Below is a chart created by UNDP demonstrating gender equality (Dimension of Male and Female 2008).

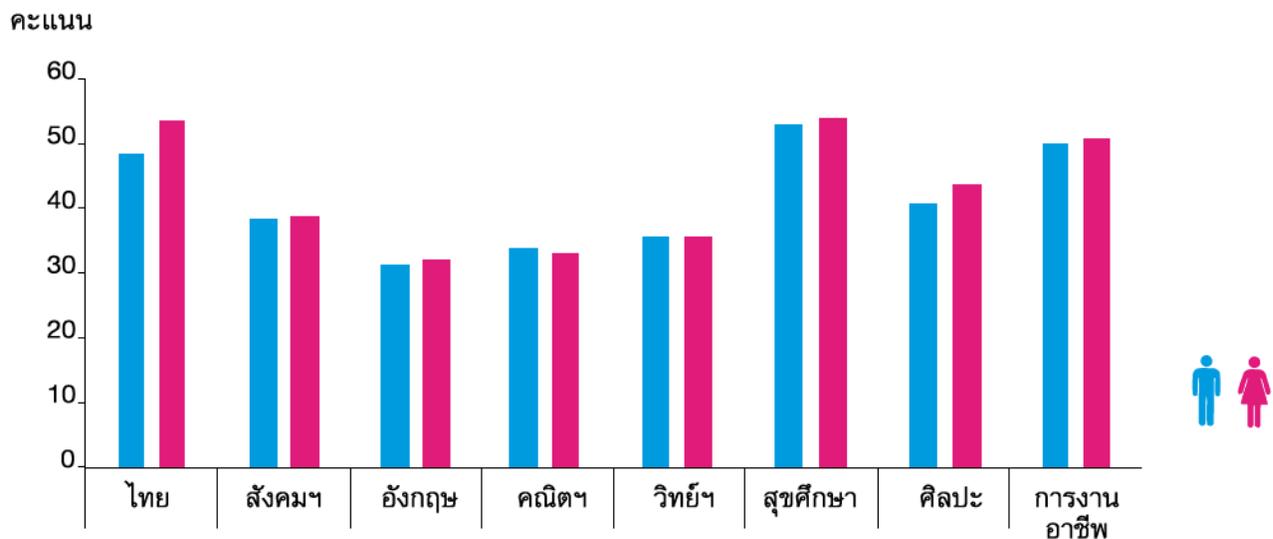


Figure 7 Average O-Net points for Grade 12 on the 2009 exam classified by subject and gender

UNDP analysts used this graph to show that girls' scores were not lagging behind boys' scores, so they did not note the most interesting part of this graph—that boys were the low scorers, scoring lower than girls in every subject but math. This is odd because boys are expected to score higher on these kinds of tests: the multiple-choice format is biased against girls. Girls are supposedly more communicative and better at essay questions (Willingham et al. 1997). So, while superficially this graph indicates gender equality in numerical terms, it may not represent the internal dynamics of gendered scoring. On a test like this, boys should be outscoring girls because of the gender-bias inherent in the format. So nearly equal scores, rather than showing gender equality in education, might demonstrate a lack in boys' scores, scores that should be much higher than girls' scores.

O-Net results are examined and utilized to make specific claims about high scoring and low scoring populations. The results of the O-Net cement hierarchies of Thai citizens by using the numbers to produce data that seem objective. NIETS creates tables and charts based on numerical scores to make claims about specific populations. These statistics are difficult to contest. Once in charts the numbers signify student *ability*, and they become distanced from what kind of ability they measure. In the article “Poor O-Net Scores ‘could reflect [sic]’ in *The Nation*, an education official attempted to blame students for the decrease in average scores, “some of the students who sat the O-Net probably did not pay much attention to the test as they did not need the scores for university admissions purposes (2012).” He blames the low scores on students' lack of interest, not on the host of other potential factors obscured by the hard evidence presented in convincing graph format in the analysis papers.

O-Net scores, although inconclusive on their own terms, are utilized to craft and support specific claims about schools', provinces', and regions' responsibility to score well on the exam,

as evidenced in the color-coded maps. The O-Net is supposed to be a training mechanism to improve Thai students' scores on international tests, but the efficacy of this is questionable: neither the subject matter nor the question style is consistent between these exams. Instead of illuminating critical disparities between sectors of society, the graphs produced in government documents conceal them. If exchanged for graphs depicting O-Net scores dividing students by their religion, ethnic group, family income, or city size, or mother tongue, the data would tell a different story and the tests would be designed differently in consequent years. The government's explicit goal, however, is not to highlight disparities between Thais, but rather to draw attention to their common plight in ranking low internationally and urging cooperation to minimize the disparities between education in Thailand and the rest of the world. At the same time, the analysis papers draw attention away from critical disparities within Thailand.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONTESTATION AND CREATIVITY

“There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power” (Foucault 1980, 142).

It would be easy to conclude from my previous chapters that Thailand’s Ordinary National Educational Test is successful in training students to follow its three unstated goals. First, it trains them to think along state lines rather than local or divergent articulations. Second, it trains them to understand what is included in and excluded from the norm. Third, it teaches students who are outside of those norms to understand that they are objectively unqualified to pursue higher education and asymmetrically integrated into Thai citizenship. However, students do not always follow NIETS goals without question. They express their opinions about the O-Net to one another and to their teachers and parents through many forms of media, such as television interviews and online videos. Here I explore student feelings towards the O-Net by examining such media. I address who is involved in O-Net contestation and the creative outlets they find as a means of expressing frustration and disillusionment. It bears noting that the students who contest the O-Net are not only those who score poorly. Even those students who score well are frustrated with the subjective nature of exam material.

As evidenced from their videos, students who answer correctly recognize that they are being prompted to give state-sanctioned answers, whether or not they agree with them. The questions on the O-Net are so narrowly conceived that students feel compelled to search for outlets to contest the test and its questions. The multiple-choice format of the O-Net does not encourage students to debate, communicate, or learn to be persuasive. Even though it does not

support nuance and debate, ironically the O-Net has been the source of much student debate and contention since its inception in 2006.

I use the term contestation very broadly. In its mildest form, contestation refers simply to students talking and commiserating with one another before and after the test. Some students post comments on social networking sites, blogs, and popular video storage sites demonstrating their fear, distrust, frustration, and anger about the exam questions and their makers. Students with more time and inclination splice videos together and create parody subtitles on online videos, some of which have been viewed over half a million times. In 2010, when frustration about the exam reached new heights, several television anchors interviewed representative students about their opinions of the exam.<sup>66</sup> Students expressed their dismay on the air, stating that the questions did not reflect what they had learned in their classrooms.

Aside from general objections, students also sometimes demand that NIETS retract particularly offensive exam questions, or that points be awarded for alternative answers. Dr. Utumporn, the former director of NIETS, reported that parents often call in to the NIETS office to register formal and informal complaints on behalf of their children. In 2010, Amnuay Soonthornchote, president of the *Value for Building Thailand Club*, led a group of students who accused NIETS of allowing blatantly incorrect questions. They threatened to take NIETS to court. One example of a question they wanted retracted is from the “PAT 3” engineering exam about whether or not a bell reverberates: 4,169 students answered that the bell did reverberate, but the NIETS answer was that it does not. NIETS gave the 4,169 students the point for the question to avoid being sued (“Students going to court” 2010).

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<sup>66</sup> Sorayut, Woody, and John Winyoo provide what some consider entertainment news. Sorayut’s program is very widely watched and is influential in the media, but he does not interview students on his program. In Woody and John Winyoo’s pieces, the newscasters fan students’ emotions. More conservative reporters chose both high-scoring and low-scoring students to express their opinions to create a balance.

### *Class/Urbanity and Contestation*

Contestation in the media is class-specific. The students who post online videos contesting the O-Net are primarily from the Thai middle class who is primarily from Bangkok.<sup>67</sup> The lack of media representation from disparate classes and geographic regions does not imply that rural and poor people support the O-Net, but middle class urbanites are better represented in the online protests because of access. Bangkok currently has more Internet users than the rest of Thailand combined, but access in rural areas is changing rapidly.<sup>68</sup> So while Bangkok residents are not the only ones protesting online, they are doing so more than those residents in the provinces. Students in the countryside contest the O-Net on a local level, but they are less visible. The students who give interviews and make videos must have the resources to do so. In televised news interviews from 2010, students who publically protested the O-Net were not impoverished, disadvantaged or from rural areas; they were from some of Bangkok's top schools.

Although disadvantaged students might have the most reason to protest the O-Net, in light of the urban, middle-class bias of the questions, they are not the primary protesters. Those who have been interviewed in past years have already secured their places at prestigious universities. One girl from Bangkok, who has a tennis court at her school, explained in an interview with Woody that the students at her school learned tennis in practice, but when faced with the kind of theoretical tennis question that appeared on the 2010 O-Net, she did not know the answer.<sup>69</sup> One of the issues with the tennis question was that students thought it was based on

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<sup>67</sup> Although Bangkok is home to the urban poor as well, many people in the countryside do not imagine this population when they discuss the disparities between urban and rural populations.

<sup>68</sup> Internet data is both difficult to verify and becomes quickly dated. Internet World Stats reports that 33% of males and 30% of females in Thailand are Internet users. However, a large proportion of teenagers (aged 15-19) use the Internet (76% of the age group).

<sup>69</sup> This is the 2-part tennis question that the Bangkok girl was unsure about.  
*Read the following passage and answer the questions:*

the revised curriculum, which teachers had not used when teaching them.<sup>70</sup> In the interview, Woody asked Dr. Utumporn what would happen in the case of a student whose school was on top of a *doi*, or hill, whose school does not have access to a tennis court. Dr. Utumporn simply responded that students study about it in their textbooks.<sup>71</sup> Aside from student interviews, the tennis question also appears in the online video “O-Net Hell,” which critiques the question based on the commonly-cited problem that the tennis questions were not related to the text provided, asking students to devise why the tennis player would be stressed (Zegarim 2010). (Students wanted to go interview the famous Phi Nok after the questions came out, but Dr. Utumporn said that any expert in sports would know from where her worry sprung.) The song analyzes the

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*Nok is a national junior tennis player, she's 17-year-old and comes from Chiangmai. She's very successful in her sport and won a championship trophy in women's single and in doubles in tennis Wimbledon, United Kingdom. This success of hers is the result of her hard work with a famous American coach, Chuck Chris. Nok put in all her heart into tennis and a series of training program had shaped her into a very good tennis player and a good sportsperson.*

*Question 1:*

*Nok will be most stressed as a result of what factor?*

- a) An unfair decision [by the referee]*
- b) Someone else's evaluation of her capacity*
- c) Her coach is too tough on her*
- d) The importance of the competition*

*Question 2:*

*Which is the most appropriate position for Nok to hit a volley?*

- a) When the ball is highest in the air*
- b) Net-level*
- c) Below net-level*
- d) When the ball is in front of her*

<sup>70</sup> One of the biggest student and teacher complaints in 2010 (2553) was that the students had not learned the new curriculum on which the O-Net was based. The 2010 (2553) O-Net was based on the 2008 (2551) curriculum and students had only had two years of schooling under the revised curriculum. Students protested that the new curriculum was being phased in gradually at their schools, and they had not been taught with the new curriculum all the way through school. Dr. Utumporn stood up for the O-Net, saying that the 2001 and 2008 curricula were essentially the same. After much protest on the part of parents, students and teachers, the error was corrected the next year.<sup>70</sup> One of the changes in the new 2008 curriculum puts more emphasis on the theory of playing sports than the actual practice. Since the error was corrected, the O-Net has been based on the 2001 (2544) curriculum. In 2013, the O-Net once again be based on the 2008 curriculum, although not all schools have been using the new curriculum.

<sup>71</sup> One can watch the argument play out on Youtube videos that are also connected to Facebook's “Anti Prof. Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann” page.

subjective nature of the question, but not the social divides that the question reifies based on region, class, and urbanity, saying simply, “Oy, what kind of exam is this? Oy, *krien*.”

Students successfully urged anchorman Woody through emails, Facebook, and Twitter, to conduct an extended interview with Dr. Utumporn to question her on the fairness of the exam (chatuporntube 2010). Protests on these same forms of social media, including on the NIETS Facebook page, might have influenced Dr. Utumporn to agree to the interview. As Woody relates to viewers, after thousands of requests, he conducted the interview for the sake of all the test takers: past, present, and future. Dr. Utumporn defended problematic questions in one of three ways. She said that the questions were pulled from the curriculum, experts wrote the questions, or, when these failed to convince the protestors, argued that the answer was in the text and that students must analyze the text. Students responded that they had never learned these topics when they were studying the curriculum and that the questions are still subjective even if experts wrote them. Even after students analyzed the questions they discovered that multiple answers could be deemed right based on personal opinion. Dr. Utumporn countered that the students were not really listening and just wanted to determine how to achieve a higher score. They continuously protested that they did not learn what NIETS reported was on the curriculum. In 2012, students continue to protest the national exams, and they increasingly do so through the format of social media.

The forum of social media on the Internet allows O-Net commentary to be posted virtually anonymously on news articles and op-ed pieces, Facebook statuses, and through multi-media avenues such as the online video sharing website, YouTube. Most of the videos are critiques of the subjective questions, mainly found on the social studies and health and physical education exams. Although occasionally commentary also appears in the newspaper or on

televised news, the Internet has, by 2012, become a forum for thousands of eyewitness student reporters. Even the newspaper reporters are getting their information from open forums such as YouTube, Dek-D.com, and from other bloggers.

In their videos, some students express worry that they will not be able to get into university, due to low scores. In televised interviews, students were asked if they had gotten admitted to university yet and all said that they were already admitted. Their scores on the O-Net did not matter because they had applied directly to the schools and taken the individual university's exam, making their O-Net scores a moot issue. These students, with very little at stake, feel camaraderie with fellow test takers, lamenting the imposition of the O-Net in their lives and distrusting the poorly constructed questions to fairly evaluate their "imagined community." This was not the case for students applying to be doctors in 2010, since doctors had to acquire a sixty percent or above on the O-Net to be accepted to university in addition to their direct entrance score (manus094 2010, "3 wan"). The adherence to the scores is rigid, and students scoring even *four tenths of a point* below the test minimum are not accepted to their chosen university, regardless of possible testing errors, as evidenced in the March 31, 2012 Matchon Online article. In 2013, more changes will be made so that the exam is weighed differently for students applying to different fields. The O-Net means *something* to everyone, but this is not currently consistent across fields or years. Because the changes between years were said to be minor, the president of Council of University Presidents of Thailand stated he would announce changes only one year in advance.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> As reported in The Nation, "The adjustment to each group varied. For example, some health science fields, including veterinary medicine, allied health science, public health science, medical technology and sports science would look at the weight for the cumulative grade point average (GPAX: 20 per cent), Ordinary National Educational Test (Onet scores: 30 per cent), General Aptitude Test (GAT scores: 20 per cent) and Professional Aptitude Test in science (PAT2 scores: 30 per cent). Although pharmacology was in this group, it would look at having the same weight for GPAX and Onet, but GAT scores 10 per cent and PAT2 scores 40 per cent. [President professor] Somkit said adjustments would help universities select more eligible and suitable students. The changes

Aside from attacking the exam itself, in their televised interviews students expressed interest in confronting the test makers, but have not been given the chance to do so. Apart from the head of NIETS, who publically defends the O-Net, other responsible parties, such as the test writers, do not divulge their names or affiliations. They are called “experts” by NIETS, but their credentials are kept confidential. This secrecy is important to the idea of contestation because it is difficult to attack the black box of a government agency and nearly the only way students can protest the inner workings of the agency is through its product, the exam, or the face of the agency, the director. Thus, the director became the target of student frustration in 2010.

Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann was the director of NIETS from 2006 until 2011; in 2012 Samphan Phanphrut took her place. Being the face of an organization that produces such controversial exams exposed Dr. Utumporn, and to a much lesser extent Dr. Samphan, to negative publicity. The anchorman Woody interviewed students and asked what they would like to say to Dr. Utumporn. The students’ comments reflected their hostility toward her for letting such a poorly made exam determine their academic futures. Although the students knew that Dr. Utumporn did not write the exam, they expressed that she was ultimately the one who could determine what was or was not included on the exam. According to Dr. Utumporn, this is not true—the director is not involved in choosing the questions. Regardless, the social media site Facebook has a page dedicated to attacking Dr. Utumporn called, “Anti Prof. Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann! (สมาคมคนต่อต้าน ศ.ดร.อุทุมพร จามรมาน)” which, as of February 27, 2012 has 22,462 “likes.” This does not mean that all other students are in favor of Dr. Utumporn, but rather that they choose not to publically “like” a hate page.

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would be minor so CUPT did not have to announce it three years in advance before they were implemented, but could do so in the 2013 academic year.”

Those who are affected by the O-Net—primarily students, teachers, administrators, tutors, and parents—criticize its questions, concepts, and administrators, but they do not question the existence of such an exam. The logic of standardized testing goes unquestioned within most spheres of conversation in Thailand. Testing is understood to be a necessary way to combat favoritism and grade inflation, thereby leveling the playing field throughout the country so that students gain entrance to university on their merit alone. Those who think that the exam is unfair express frustration that the children in the countryside cannot access the cram schools and other tools that Bangkok students can.

These concepts have become the norm. All schools in the nation are thought to need to be held accountable to a higher authority. When the O-Net is under attack, the attack is not that the concept of national testing is fundamentally flawed. Contesters are angry and they want the test to better reflect what they have learned in school. In this international testing milieu, the form of the exam is a symbol of modernity and enables comparisons between countries, as I have explained in chapters one and two. The concept of the national multiple-choice exam is not heavily critiqued; only particular questions and answers come under fire. In attacking NIETS, the contesters are able to utilize an array of knowledge that cannot be tested or accepted on the O-Net. These tools are musical talent, song writing, creativity, word play, allusions, non-standard vocabularies, and even utilizing misspelled words to convey meaning. Although their protests may not be seen by NIETS officials, they are seen by peers and the creation of these videos themselves successfully produces a derivative discourse.

### *Contested Divergent Knowledge*

Students publically protest questions they deem subjective. In the face of protests, NIETS justifies its answers by referencing the curriculum points that are related, or by referring to the test makers, who are anonymous experts in these subjects. Although it might seem that the O-Net instills and tests hegemonic concepts that have been taught in the curriculum, when students take the exam their divergent thinking often surfaces. Divergent thinking is the opposite of convergent thinking, often referred to as creativity, but my usage of divergent here is knowledge that broader, including all knowledge that is not state-sanctioned. One instance of such divergent knowledge that is suppressed is local belief systems shown in the 2012 Grade 12 science exam.<sup>73</sup>

*Villagers see a strange object. It's round, soft, and it needs water or it will shrink and become hard. But when given water it will return to its original condition. What is it?*

1. Naga egg
2. Giant Salamander egg
3. Quartz
4. Bubble tea
5. Magic crystal gel

Newsanchors such as Sorayut guess that the answer is number five, “magic crystal gel,” but mention that *chaoban*, or average people, might think that it is one of the first three answers, according to belief in the importance of these objects (thaitvnewstube 2012).<sup>74</sup>

Various central Thai state narratives are embedded in the O-Net, but where discrepancies might arise that could provoke a dilemma for students choosing between their regional logic and state-sponsored logic, the questions are crafted to avoid direct conflict. For example, color, which is a powerful signifier in animist beliefs, is appropriated by NIETS very carefully.

Wearing certain clothing colors on certain days is auspicious in certain local contexts, but in

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<sup>73</sup> This may not be the exact wording of the question, as the questions have not yet been released, so this is based on student reports of it.

<sup>74</sup> Urbanites and the middle-class are not usually referred to as *chaoban*, so there is a rural and class component to such a representation.

recent years wearing specific colors on certain days has become a national phenomenon with political and social implications. Pink, according to the local belief system in the northeast, should be worn on Fridays. However, in recent years pink has been worn on Tuesdays as it is the nationally-recognized color of the day, especially popularized in support of King Bhumipol's health since was released from the hospital wearing a pink blazer. NIETS does not ask students to choose between Friday, the local day for to wear pink, and Tuesday, the national day to wear pink, in order to avoid conflict between local and national knowledge sets.

In fact, the O-Net avoids asking color questions about clothing, instead referring primarily to tablecloth colors in order to avoid the conflict between superstition and national symbols.<sup>75</sup> NIETS also avoids the potential conflict between choosing between mother and nation. On the Mother's Day question, a girl who wants to have a party for her mother has to choose a tablecloth color. The mother was born on Friday, so the color of *her* day is light blue. The girl's mother was born on the same day as the Queen, on whose birthday Mother's Day is celebrated, so there is no conflict between colors: the color of the tablecloth should be light blue.<sup>76</sup> Students do not have to choose between their country and their family, so the form of the question unites the concepts of the national and personal.

Of the sixteen questions that were contested on the 2010 exam, only one was withdrawn. The question was, "What color is the symbol of love?" After so much protest, all students were awarded two additional points to their O-Net scores, regardless of their answer. The head of

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<sup>75</sup> Although there are many questions about the meaning of color on the O-Net, I have not found any referring to clothing colors. Belief in "superstitious" local animist religions, or *khwam chua khong chao ban*, accepts that certain dates, colors, and actions are auspicious. Those people who are knowledgeable about clothing colors of the day will mention that it is *khwam chua*, or something that some people believe will bring good or bad omen (and still others either do not believe it or do not believe deeply, but avoid tempting fate). It is similar to the belief that wearing new clothes on Saturday or getting a haircut on Wednesday can bring bad luck. Superstition is referred to as such because it is a derivative discourse with a status lower than religion. It is local knowledge that has people have maintained in spite of religious purification.

<sup>76</sup> I will discuss this question further in chapter 5.

NIETS reported that, as newscaster Sorayut paraphrased, “They thought it was originally red, so the answer was red, but in today’s world it’s not the same as before. It can be white. It can be pink.” “It can be black,” Sorayut’s female sidekick finishes.

This *implies* that at some historical point there was a clear association between color and what that color symbolized, but over time this clarity has been muddled. The “color of love” question is part of a broader phenomenon of color questions that come up regularly in the O-Net. As of 2010 (2553), students, parents, teachers/tutors, entertainment newscasters, and cable newscasters have publically challenged these color-related questions. One question from the vocational exam asks how to prepare a foreign couple’s wedding anniversary breakfast.<sup>77</sup> These are the kinds of questions that testers say have subjective answers.

Students are not striking or marching against the exam. In general, with the few exceptions of those who stay home, students go to the test site, sit in their assigned seat, and fill in the bubbles. Perhaps what Jules Henry wrote about the American school system is true, too, of

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<sup>77</sup> 28. *Foreign tourists like some kinds of Thai food. If you were to prepare breakfast for foreigners who come to travel in Thailand for their wedding anniversary how would you arrange the Thai food and table? Choose the kind of food, flowers, and color of the tablecloth.*  
*Food: 0 Seafood fried rice, 1 Sea bass rice porridge, 2 Seafood Rice porridge, 3 Steamed striped snake head fish with curry paste, 4 Pad Thai [slim rice noodles] with fresh shrimp, 5 Rad Na [thick rice noodles] with squid, 6 Pork Jok [rice porridge] with egg, 7 Oyster rice porridge, 8 Diced pork omelet on rice, 9 Crab fried rice*  
*Flower: 0 Lotus, 1 Crown flower, 2 jasmine, 3 roses, 4 orchids, 5 marigold, 6 tuberose, 7 damask rose, 8 golden shower, 9 buttercup*  
*Tablecloth color: A Orange, B Sky blue, C Green, D Red, E Black, F Pink, G Yellow, H Grey, I Navy blue, J Dark brown*

The answers are then explained by NIETS in this answer key:

*Answer Sheet Explanation to Question 28 (4,3,F)*

*4. Pad Thai with fresh shrimp is a dish that foreigners know and like to eat.*

*3. Roses are the symbol of love and the wedding day*

*F. Pink is the symbol of love and weddings*

*Tom Yam Gung is not an appropriate breakfast food so pad Thai with fresh shrimp is suggested.*

*Other kinds of food are made from pork, crab, fish, shellfish so they shouldn’t be used on an important occasion including wedding days.*

*Wrong answers: flowers: Other kinds of flowers are not the symbol of love and marriage*

*Wrong answers: tablecloth: Other colors are not the symbol of love*

the Thai system: namely, students have learned the *noise* of what the system is teaching them, which, in the case of the O-Net, is that to do well in life they must take exams, even if the exams are absurd. “Today our children, instead of loving knowledge, become embroiled in the nightmare” (1994, 243). The nightmare of which Henry refers is one that I extend to the world in which Thai students, who do not love to cram for multiple-choice exams, do so because of their fear of failure. Preparing for and taking the O-Net are events “in which drives and values are experienced in events that strike us with *overwhelming and constant force*” (Henry 1994, 240, original emphasis). Thus, the majority of students, even those who are angry and frustrated or timid and sad, take the exam.

When they emerge from the exam many students are angry. In the words of Jeff Meechai, through the vocals of artist Sasi Sassy, “Some of the course content that I learned doesn’t appear on the exam. The content that is on the exam, I didn’t learn (Zegarim 2010).” Many newscasters and educators critique the exam by claiming that the questions are not good or objective enough or that they do not reflect the curriculum. Very few mention that it is an impossible goal for all the students in the country to learn exactly the same information. The O-Net, regardless of adjustments, is an exercise in failure, as was explained in chapter four. As one university student mentions on the social networking site, Facebook, “It’s not about doing our best anymore, but it’s about doing with [sic] the standard! \$\_\$.” Students feel the effect of the state’s goal that they should be “ordinary,” as evidenced in the name, the *Ordinary* National Educational Test.

Students protest that the questions do not inspire analysis, but rather inspire guessing. The intent of NIETS is to measure knowledge, analysis, and synthesis. Former NIETS head, Dr. Utumporn stated that the exam questions are written the way they are to counteract rote

memorization in the classroom, so that students will use their powers of analysis.<sup>78</sup> Students, parents, and teachers request that questions have objective answers so that students do not have to guess randomly. NIETS reports that the test was designed with student guessing in mind. In a test that asks students to “pick the best answer,” all of the answers are good, but only one is best. Because of this, students have to know the correct answer and cannot necessarily use deductive reasoning. If the exams are too easy, and all the test takers can get a good grade, the schools will not be under pressure to improve.

The O-Net privileges students whose language environment inside and outside of school is close to the standard Bangkok dialect, and it trains students to understand Thai in a standard and polite way. Language on the O-Net is based on official royal dictionary definitions, although sometimes those dictionary definitions are at odds with common usage, regional usage, and historical usage. For example, as Peter Jackson maps out, pre-1960s gender terms were much different from common usage and went through a transformation in the 1970s and 1980s (2000, 412).

### ***Multi-media Contestation***

Protesters’ use of multiple media formats on television and the Internet has allowed them an increased audience and space to protest, using their skills in writing, composing and

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<sup>78</sup> Although many claim otherwise, rote memorization is not a primordial Thai tradition. When Buddhism became more centralized, monks were encouraged to memorize texts in Pali. Just speaking the holy texts aloud was thought to be powerful, and because of that, monks did not necessarily need to know what the words meant for the words to be useful. But this not the only way that monks were educated. As Kamala Tiyavanich illuminates in *Sons of the Buddha: The Early Lives of Three Extraordinary Thai Masters*, in Phum Rieng, where “Ajahn Buddhadasa” studied, temple boys were trained to use logic and enrich their communication skills through unorganized storytelling sessions. Temple boys debated and objected to each other’s stories, poking holes in the logic of their peers’ everyday explanations. This was their training, not in book learning, but in sharpening their “lawyer’s head”(47). In that case knowledge was communal. The children did laugh at each other while attempting to outsmart their peers. But in this case every child could participate and engage with the prospect of someday becoming a master debater.

producing music, singing, and graphic design. The forum of the Internet has allowed a certain level of anonymity, which aids in protesters' individual artistic expression. The video-sharing website known as YouTube is the forum in which those who want to express themselves have a free way to do so, if they have access to a computer with Internet connectivity. Videos uploaded to YouTube do not require expensive camera equipment and a movie budget, however. Students and other concerned community members, such as tutors, can use other people's videos to express themselves. In official music videos that have "parody fansubs," or subtitles that do not intend to reflect what the musician is saying, students can get their favorite Japanese anime characters and singers such as Korean artists SHINee and Girls' Generation (also known as SNSD) to "say" through subtitles what the students want to express about the O-Net.

The methods of expression through multi-media contestation are very diverse and not all of the O-Net videos have the same tone. Some are fiercely angry, screaming their hate (Hitler, Angry German Boy, MAD), some are sweet and soft but aggressive in the lyrics (Oh! O-Net, O-Net Hell). Some use global Internet memes and cartoons while other videos are documentary style, simply providing a slice-of-life view of students encountering the O-Net. The series of three videos follow students to their classes on the last 3 days before they take the O-Net. The students, even in computer class, are cramming for the exam instead of learning the course material. Viewers watch as one student, Dong, sits in computer class studying his O-Net manual rather than using the computer in front of him. Dong, who is applying study to be a doctor, is not angry, but says that his regular school exams are more difficult than the O-Net. Dong sees the exams as simply a gate to pass through on his way to becoming a doctor that is otherwise without value (Manus094 2012).

Even the popular Hitler video known on the web as the “Downfall” scene from the movie *Der Untergang* (2004) has been used to express student feelings about the O-Net (Kptr 2012, tonighttpossible 2010 “Hitler,” wiyasakama 2012). In the scene, advisors are informing Hitler that he did not pass the O-Net. He seethes with rage. Students, like others who have made a parody of Downfall, are using the “speak-for-the-people Hitler” that the 2008 *New York Times* article reported resulted in the mass appeal of the video. “It seems that late-life Hitler can be made to speak for almost anyone in the midst of a crisis” (“The Medium- The Hitler Meme”). Thai students do not have the same understanding of Hitler that American students do, so using the video is less controversial in Thailand.<sup>79</sup>

The O-Net requires students to understand Thai cultural norms regarding appropriate behavior in practice and in theory.<sup>80</sup> Not only must they sit in their assigned seats while testing for the exam to count, but the questions themselves also reflect the necessity for students to know appropriate behavior. Questions about jaywalking, driving laws, cross-gender touching, going out at night, finding an outlet for sexual energy, and asking for advice all reflect the official cultural norms regarding student behavior. But students and their parents who call NIETS to complain are not polite. In fact, in the newscasts students are often shown saying rude

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<sup>79</sup> On the topic of Hitler, the international community was shocked in September 2011 when a group of students from Sacred Heart School in Chiang Mai, Thailand, dressed up as Nazis for a parade, complete with Hiel Hitlers and Nazi swastika flags. In Thailand the swastika does not have a singular meaning of hate as Westerners tend to think of it, but instead some students think of it as a symbol of well-being associated with Hinduism from before Hitler appropriated it, rotating it forty-five degrees. Hitler’s militaristic style appealed to students who have a militarized schooling with daily rituals such as lining up to sing the national anthem and weekly rituals such as scouts, which is a mandatory subject. Another reason that those Thai students might not understand the level of horror that Westerners felt in seeing their parade is that the 2001 (2544) curriculum specifies that students between Grades 7 and 12 (M1-M6) must learn half Thai history and half international history in their social studies class *every year*. History is only one portion of the Social studies curriculum, which includes law, civics, geography, government, and economics. In order to cover this range of topics, international history was reduced significantly in the 2001 curriculum, which is the current standard for the O-Net.

<sup>80</sup> The meaning of being well-behaved and polite is specific to Thailand in that politeness includes not making others uncomfortable and operating according to *kalatesa*, which is a complex concept on which Penny Van Esterik has made more clear to a non-Thai readership (2000).

comments about the exam's defender of 2010, Dr. Utumporn. Dr. Utumporn admitted to anchorman Woody that parents and students have called NIETS to curse her personally.

In contrast to the O-Net expectations regarding cultural notions of appropriate behavior, student videos are rarely polite. The hierarchical structure of Thai society does not permit students to directly confront their elders. By utilizing cartoon characters and music videos students can preserve their anonymity to a certain extent and express themselves freely. They use the pronouns *ku*, meaning I, and *meung*, meaning you, which in this context demonstrates extreme rudeness.<sup>81</sup> The articles, too, are impolite, such as *ya* and *wa* and curse words such as *maeng*, which is roughly used in the same context as the English usage of “shit.” Some of the videos use polite endings such as *kha* and *khrap*, especially in videos such as “Oh! ONet,” a video that focuses on how the singer's father will feel about her bad scores. Other videos mix polite and impolite words and ending markers.

Of the videos that I have accessed, the majority hide behind *foreign characters*, real or fictitious, to attack the test creators. Since the eras of Phibun and Sarit, “Thainess,” or *khwam pen thai*, has been defined as being polite and acting according to one's place in the hierarchy (Thak 2007, Mulder 1996). Foreigners, however, exist outside of this structure, so video protestors use Japanese anime characters, Korean superstars, and crazy Germans as puppets for the students to express their anger. By avoiding use of Thai images and Thai characters, students circumvent hierarchical constraints.

In the video “Haruhi Takes the O-Net,” Japanese *Umineko* murder-mystery anime characters are able to question the past director of NIETS, Dr. Utumporn, “Are you blaming the

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<sup>81</sup> *Ku* and *mueng* can also reflect closeness between equals (friends), but only in cases when both parties have the same status and are roughly the same age. In earlier periods *ku* was the word used for *chan* and did not have a negative connotation. In the videos *ku* is often spelled *kru*, which makes it even more informal, but not necessarily more offensive.

curriculum?” and ask her to “think again” (Chanadda09 2010). The anime characters say that the O-Net is *kaak*, or rubbish, and the characters search a million websites with no success, trying to find the answer to the question of what to do if a student gets pregnant while still in school. This video’s subtitles are full of misspellings, which is not important to the intended audience of peers. Those peers are entertained by the video and feel camaraderie with the creator, as indicated in the comments tagged onto the video.<sup>82</sup>

Some commentary is not on the content of the exam, but rather demonstrates anger at NIETS for delaying reportage of the results and at the low scores that students received. The headache-inducing video “Frantic Because of the O-Net Results,” which uses break.com’s “Angry German kid” video of a child beating on his computer inspires the fansubber to write (scream) about how the O-Net results will not load on the computer. In 2010 the O-Net scores were not reported in a timely manner and students who were waiting to find out their chances at going to college did not take the delay lightly, given the stakes of the results for some students, both those who choose to apply through the central system and those who choose highly competitive majors, such as medicine.

Another contestation video, “Oh! O-Net,” attacks the usage of the exam through the sweet sounds of the Korean group Girls’ Generation. The original music in Korean is about a girl who has had a makeover and is singing to her ex-boyfriend to take her back for “one more round.” But in the hands of the parody subfans, the cooing of the beautiful Korean girls is accompanied with hard-hitting subtitles, such as, “I was accepted to university already, The O-

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<sup>82</sup> Misspelling such as this in videos and Internet memes warrants further exploration. Internet memes are not always spelled according to the dictionary or commonly-used protocol. Instead, they are seemingly accidentally misspelled in the original, but when they are reproduced this same misspelling appears, even if replicated by native speakers of that language. Their wrongness makes them memorable—like a scratch on the record of language. One famous case of this is a phrase such as “All your base are belong to us,” which is from a 1991 Japanese game translation popularized in 2000. The error in spelling was replicated in popular use across the United States for the past decade. (H2G2 website, 2007).

Net is unnecessary, but I have to test again ‘one more round... I sleep in the testing room.’” It is then followed by a critique of the questions’ intent. In reference to the now-famous tablecloth question, “Is this for me to get into university, or for me to become a table decorator?” and “If Auntie’s [Utumporn’s] peers took the test would they be able to do it? Nope! (Khunploy 2010).”

While the videos that have already been discussed borrow their soundtracks from famous artists, some video makers create their own.<sup>83</sup> “Nak,” the creator of “[MAD]ONET Y R U NO MAKE SENSE!!!! – NAK-” wrote his own lyrics and sang along with the music from the song Sakkyun Light by Sekken-ya. At the start of the video a disclaimer appears that says, “This video is for entertainment purposes. It is not intended to create any drama.” It then proceeds with the opening line, “Astonishing test that takes all day, it’s hell.”<sup>84</sup> The questions that Nak mentions are those that test students on their familiarity with the latest technologies such as 3G Internet and televisions such as CRT, LED, LCD and plasma, alluding to the O-Net’s constant struggle to *than samai*, or test modernity. He sings sarcastically that, “English on the O-Net is *so normal* taking the TOEFL is easier.”<sup>85</sup> He complicates the idea that Thailand’s use of the O-Net is to gain an international status by singing that “The country of Thailand is the only country (*na khrap phom*) that has a test with sixteen choices. THAILAND ONLY! And in the next question you have to fill in two correct answers to get the points.” He then explains all of his alternatives to taking the test, including calling in sick on the testing day and cutting sugarcane in the field. In the end credits Nak writes “thank you to Thai education for making our lives exciting.” This is

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<sup>83</sup> “Borrow” here means that they copy the music and/or film from the artist and then credit the artist in their description, “tagging” the original artist so that potential viewers can find other videos by the artist. Those who do not follow this YouTube protocol will have their videos removed because of copyright infringement.

<sup>84</sup> The original is ข้อสอบมหัศจรรย์ ที่ทำทั้งวัน นรกจับกิน

<sup>85</sup> This word, ธรรมดา, when repeated with the corresponding high pitch on the first syllable, indicates a high level of sarcasm.

an instance of a student expressing, in a YouTube video, sarcasm that does not find an outlet in the context of the O-Net itself.

O-Net contesters challenge the norms that the state attempts to disseminate through the O-Net. Nak's video is an excellent example of an artist who heavily utilizes *non-Thai* imagery to challenge norms. The images in his video come from diverse sources such as the popular American film of 2007, entitled *300*, depicting the Grecian battle of Thermopylae.



Figure 8 Image from the film *300* (Nakatokung 2011)

But the most interesting image to note, which is not nearly as shocking as *300*'s enraged fantastical creature, is the Japanese-made comic mechanic wearing blue coveralls sitting on a park bench (see image below).



Figure 9 Image from the comic *Kuso Miso technique* (Nakatokung 2011)

In the example of the Japanese mechanic, Nak very overtly challenges religious categories, but only a tiny audience is privy to the meaning, since he uses the Japanese language of cyberspace and imagery that only a few people will understand. Here I attempt to clarify Nak's meaning to the reader.

To understand the Japanese mechanic one must first understand the context in which he is presented, namely a Thai Buddhist-dominated context that has been shaped by charismatic political actors. As Niels Mulder explains, the 1978 curriculum molded by PM Thanin Kraivichian (1976-1977) refocused the teachings of Buddhism for political ends to create a “moral fibre of the nation” (1996). Mulder further explains that this includes curriculum reform, cutting

explanations of merit-making ceremonies, sacred objects, the spirits and gods, astrology, Buddha’s life stories, nirwana, the next life, the *kathin* offering of new robes to the monks, amulets, dreams, and the other so-called animistic accretions that pervade Thai everyday life, and that were part of earlier school books. In its stead came the emphasis on paying obeisance to monks, and the teaching of Buddhist wisdom in the form of principles (dhamma’s) and proverbs (Mulder 1996, 122).

This shows that understanding on one’s own terms, as was taught in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s message of self-reliance, was marginalized in Buddhist teachings, while worship of monks and memorization of fixed ideology was emphasized. This supported the needs of the increasingly hierarchical government bureaucracy, which benefited from a population that conceptually tied together good conduct and morality. In this way the lines between Buddhism and “Thainess” were blurred.

Buddhism became a religion that did not allow “room for other kinds of Thai worship” (Mulder 1996, 123). By seamlessly weaving together Buddhism and Thainess, to be a good Buddhist, one must first be a good citizen. This emphasized the aspects of socialization and religion over independent thinking. This narrow, reformed Buddhism is the core of the religious section of the O-Net and the other monolithic global religions are tested secondarily, leaving no space left for other beliefs.

This Internet sensation of Kuso Miso technique could hardly be called a religion, as Nak perhaps sarcastically implies, it is known among few Thais, but it is a sect of sorts. However, in

positioning it next to some of the monolithic religions of the world, Nak is queering the subject of religion, destabilizing religious categories by introducing literally queer notions inside the sacred realm. Nak sings that the O-Net includes, “Brahmin, Buddhist, Christian, Islam. Why don’t they include the sect Yaranaika?” (Nakatokung 2011). Yaranaika is Japanese for “Shall we do it?” In the video these lyrics are superimposed over a color cartoon of Abe the mechanic in his distinctive blue overalls. The reference here is clearly from the opening dialogue from the Japanese Internet Meme called Kuso Miso Technique, a comic created in 1987 and repopularized in 2002, in which a mechanic sitting on a park bench proposes sex to a passing young man, which immediately leads to a sexual encounter in the public bathroom. Men in military gear come to put a stop to it, but Abe, the mechanic, fends them all off with his magical penis. The fact that the whole video appears to be created for comic effect seems incidental because comedy is a method used to ease the shock of introducing serious topics, such as one that has the power to complicate the monolithic category of religion.

### ***Conclusion***

NIETS has four unstated goals for the O-Net: to teach students to conform to state ideas, to privilege royal dictionary definitions over common usage, to understand normative and non-normative articulations, and to justify students’ places in Thai society. Through the usage of YouTube videos, students have created a space in opposition to these NIETS goals, which allows them to express themselves. Although the O-Net tests students on standard dialect, which in turn encourages students to study and to value standard language, some students rebel by incorporating non-standard, non-dictionary language into their protests. One example of this is in the video “O-Net Hell,” which was created not by a student, but by a concerned tutor who

composed the original music and lyrics. A female student sings the song, giving it a certain innocence and sweetness at odds with the lyrics. Artists such as this one play with language, using words to mean different things from their original meaning. The refrain of the song says, “What kind of test is this? Oy, *krien*, la, la, la...” (Zegarim 2010). The word *krien* is used in this song as a light-hearted curse word, but it is not technically a curse word in the Thai dictionary. *Krien* is a student chat-room-only word that has taken on its own life and has now been utilized by an adult musician. According to the dictionary, *krien* means “closely cropped” or “very short,” in reference to the hair-style of young school-aged boys. According to my sources, online gamers (with closely cropped hair) began using the word to mean something illogical or nonsensical. This could have originally been because the gamers wanted to avoid having their curse words censored or simply to demonstrate their creativity. Thus the student singer Sasi Sassy sings, “What will this kind of test measure? What does this *krien* thing have to do with getting into university?” (Zegarim 2010).

Singular, narrow definitions are the core of the O-Net. If students understand concepts in singular, unified way along official lines, they will have a greater chance of answering NIETS questions correctly. However, in the artistic expressions of contestation, representations are rarely simple. Artists such as Nak utilize nuanced sarcasm, play on words, and allusions, all of which are unseen on the O-Net. He mentions a question about a volcano, and then pairs it with an allusion to the Thai band “Earth, Metal, and Fire” (Nakatokung 2011).

Although students conform to testing and do not question the state’s right to test them, the students critique the O-Net questions, they do not simply accept what NIETS tests. As I have evidenced in this chapter, although the O-Net trains students to reproduce officially sanctioned concepts, students do not necessarily adopt these as their own, but maintain a critical distance.

They express their opinion about the O-Net through use of many media facets. In these videos, students demonstrate creativity, divergent (localized) thinking, technological skill, critical thinking, and the ability to play with language. By using foreign characters as a front, they can express themselves freely because of their anonymity. Thus, these Thai students who study multiple-choice information for months before the O-Net are able to locate a space for themselves that is outside the multiple-choice bubble.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In January 2012 for a month prior to the O-Net exams, the elementary school where I taught in rural Buriram province radically altered its teaching schedule in preparation for the upcoming exam. Because the students do not have financial or logistical access to after-school O-Net tutors, the school was transformed to give them a chance to compete against students with those resources. All students in Grade 6 and Grade 9 were required to spend two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon every day of the week in addition to six hours every Saturday in exam tutoring sessions. Teachers took turns making room in their busy schedules to conduct unpaid tutoring sessions, while students outside these two grade levels were given worksheets and left largely to their own devices. The information taught in these cram sessions were from sample questions from previous' years exams and tutoring books, not following the curriculum taught for the rest of the year. Every year since 2006, schools, including this elementary school in Buriram, have been transformed, making education into a utilitarian pursuit of memorizing the NIETS-sanctioned O-Net questions and answers, replacing normal curricular endeavors.

The Thai Ministry of Education explicitly uses the O-Net to prescribe acceptable forms of knowledge and evaluate both students and schools, encouraging them to follow the standard national curriculum. While the language used in O-Net analysis papers expresses aspirations to generally improve education in Thailand, that banal language can conceal other aspirations. Implicitly, the form of the exam normalizes divisions among citizens, limiting students' access higher to education and subjecting schools to state intervention if they fail to demonstrate sufficient adherence to NIETS rhetoric. The exam questions reflect a logic that privileges the

urban (Bangkok) middle-class Buddhist student who can demonstrate a unitary understanding of tradition and the modern through application of traditional gender roles and knowledge of the latest technology.

Social divisions are normalized in the exam questions and reified through graphs and maps in the analysis of the results. Through scores, graphs, maps and charts, NIETS visually represents exam results as supposedly transparent and precise measurements of an academic institution's success or failure. In this way, NIETS creates visual ranking of provinces within the nation based on exam result averages. By using average provincial scores to create color-coded maps, intra-provincial discrepancies are obscured and provinces are differentiated by ranking in a nation-wide competition that, through its structure, makes it impossible for everyone to win. The exam results are then used to assess individual student success. Ostensibly, that success should be determined by a student's hard work and academic capacity. However, the results do not primarily reveal the state of Thai student's knowledge about objective facts--whether they are mathematical, scientific, or social—but instead create and maintain a social and geographical hierarchy among these Thai citizens.

The “constantly repeated ritual of power” manifested in “an ostentatious form of the examination,” as Foucault describes it, has successfully become a hegemonic ritual for education in Thailand (1977, 188). The exam system collects testing information as data and depersonalizes it; a student who does not understand or respond with the normative answer expected in response to the O-Net exam questions will obtain a low score that represents his or her lack of knowledge. This low score is used as if it was an objective measurement of a student's general ability, but could be the result of a lack of school resources, competing knowledge based on their religion or adherence to non-standard values, or lack of familiarity

with Bangkok. The mathematical score a student receives therefore justifies their failure to gain entry into their chosen university or field, while concealing other, often more insidious reasons.

Gender differentiations on the O-Net do not reflect the nuance of gender relations in Thai society, but concretize so-called Thai traditional gender roles. Buddhist hierarchies are used to rationalize gender representations. Representations of men follow a binary of the scholar-monk or deviant. Women, on the other hand, are represented as being *the* responsible party for earthly pursuits such as financially supporting the family, taking care of the home, or for putting themselves in the position of having inappropriate sexual encounters, but they are not represented as pursuing higher education, even though in practice women make up the majority college students on a national scale.

The O-Net's systematic biases have been obscured by the hegemonic notion that the exam produces a "common-sense world" (Bourdieu 1984, 468). The form of the exam itself sets up the requisite conditions for students to imagine their participation in the national communal ceremony, which obscures the exam's role in disciplining and dividing nascent citizens. Therefore, students do not protest the exam's existence, but rather contest the portions that do not reflect their educational experiences. Instead of making education fairer, it rationalizes the unfairness in mathematical and thus apolitical ways. Thus, students not privileged by the exam are trained in this façade of meritocracy to believe that privileged students are more deserving. While students deal with nuanced situations and have to adjust their behavior accordingly in their daily lives, the O-Net does not allow for that. The O-Net's multiple-choice questions fail to incorporate context and suggest that one standard answer exists regardless of the situation. For example, here is a recent question from the Grade 12 health section of the 2012 O-Net that received attention in news reports:

*If sexually aroused, what would one do?*

- 1. Ask a friend to play ball*
- 2. Ask one's family*
- 3. Try to fall asleep*
- 4. Go out with someone of the opposite sex*
- 5. Ask a close friend to go watch a movie*

Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann, the former director of NIETS publically responded that she would choose number two, to ask one's family. Later, the current director, Dr. Samphan Phanphrut, responded that the correct answer was number one, to ask a friend to play ball. Critics, both students and newscasters, have pointed out that girls and boys would respond differently to this question. It is not within the realm of state-sanctioned Thai tradition to offer the choice to privately masturbate, for example, among the answers, so they mention that girls would probably choose answers two or three, while boys would choose number one.

Student objections highlight the fact that the O-Net fails to account for social nuances and situational context, or *kalathesa*. If it is midnight and a student feels aroused, should he or she really ask a friend to go play ball as Dr. Samphan suggests? Or should he or she wake up a hard working family member to discuss it? Students know that they have to see each instance within the context, so when they ask "how would you know how to answer?" (*ja ru dai yang ngai?*), they explicitly question the lack of context provided in the O-Net questions, and with that frustration they make videos contesting the exam as a mechanism to test their capacity to gain entrance into the department within the university that they aspire to attend.

Students criticize specific questions for not reflecting what they learn in their classrooms. Although students do not contest the idea of taking a national standardized test, their criticisms reflect their skepticism of the authority of the exam makers and administrators, as they challenge what NIETS defines as curriculum-based knowledge. Through students' online interviews and creatively crafted YouTube videos, students demonstrate what the exam cannot test. The O-Net

does not test students' ability to articulate their points clearly, make contextual arguments, perform technically difficult work, or use language in a nuanced and flexible way. The videos, however, allow students to demonstrate these abilities and simultaneously express their opinions about the exam questions.

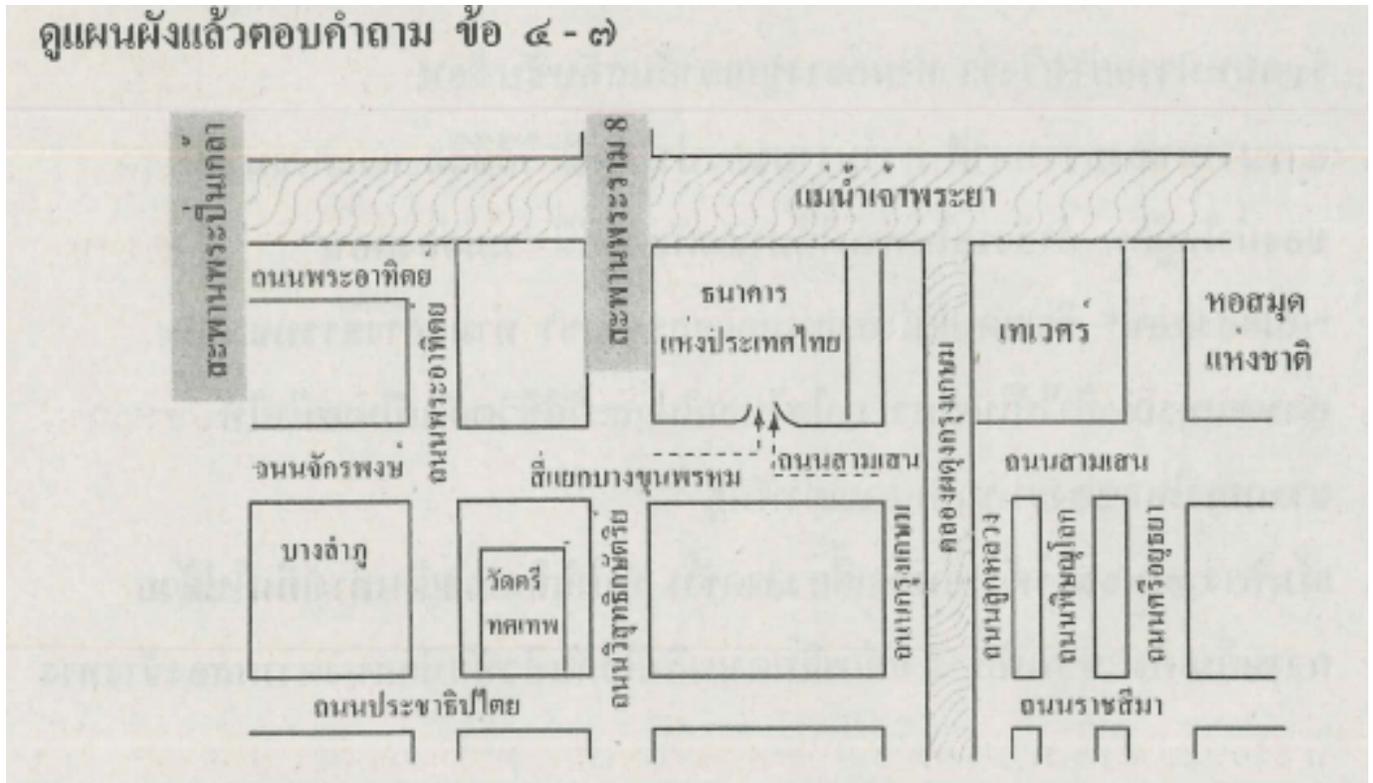
As the Ministry of Education increases the stakes of standardized national exams for teachers, students, and administrators, it is important to understand that the exam is not an equalizing mechanism that cuts through social divisions to target students with scholarly merit, but rather a mechanism that rationalizes social divides. In order to grasp what the O-Net accomplishes, one must ask what kinds of answers the test requires, which social groups of students are best positioned to give the correct answer, and how results are manipulated to demonstrate specific discrepancies and equalities while obfuscating others. In this era of standardized testing, teaching methods and materials in primary and secondary schools are radically altered to conform not to schools' individual or curricular priorities, but to tested knowledge. My case study of a school in Buriram is not an isolated incident; other schools in Buriram and in other provinces also teach to the test. Thai education and all that it touches is at stake.



APPENDIX

**Examples of Questions with Answers in Bold**

[Questions #4-7 refer to a map diagram provided depicting Bangkok]



#4. This map should be a map showing what famous place?

1. Banglamphu
2. Trithotsathep Temple
3. The National Library
4. **Thai National Bank**

#5. From the map, how many bridges are there?

1. **2 bridges**
2. 3 bridges
3. 4 bridges
4. 5 bridges

#6. A student's house is on the Thonburi side of the Phrapinklao Bridge. What route should the student use to go do a research project at the national library that is most time efficient and will save the most money?

1. By BTMA [Bangkok Mass Transit Authority] bus going over the Phra Pinklao Bridge  
Banglamphu- Bangkhunphrom intersection-Thewet-National Library
2. By taxi from home over the Phra Pinklao Bridge – Phra Athit Road- Samsen Road-National Library
3. **By boat from the Phra Pinklao port-get off at Thewet-walk to the National Library**

4. By express boat from Phra Pinklao port- get off at the bank- then take a BTMA bus in front of the bank to the National Library

#7. Looking at the map, what is the longest road?

1. Krung Kasem Road
2. Samsen Road
- 3. Phra Athit Road**
4. Prachathipatai Road

#11. Which of the following shows that religion is important for humans?

1. It is the center of the community
2. It teaches fairness for all
- 3. It is the principals of how to live and provides a mental sanctuary**
4. It teaches the importance of nature and not to harm the environment

#12. Worship in what religion is most related to Buddhist religion:

- 1. Brahmin- Hindu**
2. Christianity
3. Sikh
4. Islam



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