

# TOWARDS LIBRARIES AS PARADISE -A Thai Experience of Library Transformation-

Vilas Wuwongse

Computer Science and Information Management  
School of Advanced Technologies  
Asian Institute of Technology  
P.O. Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand  
Email: [yw@cs.ait.ac.th](mailto:yw@cs.ait.ac.th)

## ABSTRACT

Aiming to transform its resource-based and labor-intensive economy into knowledge-based one, the Thai government attempts to create knowledge communities. Libraries serve as an important means for the establishment of such communities. There are numerous on-going projects on new libraries and innovation of existing libraries. Two of the projects are presented: one is a new establishment and the other a transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

*"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."*

Jorge Luis Borges (Argentinean poet, 1899-1986)

Following are excerpts from some of the speeches made by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in various occasions [1]:

"How are we going to prepare ourselves for life in the modern world, which today is going to be a society that depends mainly on knowledge, or what is called a *knowledge-based society*?" (3 April 2002)

"In the present world, we need people who may or may not obtain a formal educational degree, but who love to learn and to continue to develop themselves for all their lives. I wish to see the Thai society as a society that builds up the atmosphere that is conducive to learning for all the Thai people." (19 March 2003)

"At the moment, I would like to build a library that is alive and breathing. It will be a place that keeps up with the rapid changes. It will contain good and up-to-date books with continual rotation. I don't want to see a library that is dead from the day of its inception." (26 August 2001)

These ideas and desire of the Prime Minister have led to the establishment of and the transformation of old-styled libraries into modern libraries. This short paper reports on two major activities that have recently commenced in Thailand: one is a new establishment and the other a transformation.

## THAI KNOWLEDGE PARK

Aiming at the creation of a *lively library, which embraces continuous changes, with good and up-to-date books: a library that will never die*, the Thai government has established Thai Knowledge Park (TKpark) [1] as one of the seven agencies of the Office of Knowledge Management and Development (OKMD), a public organization. TKpark's main objective is to instill the good habit and love of reading and life-long learning into Thai people. Through a number of brainstorming sessions with the networks and communities of both youths and adults, TKpark has realized that the good habit and love of reading and learning can be inspired by lively, amusing activities of multi-art and culture, each of which should appropriately tailored to the interest of its target groups. TKpark opened the first prototype of its new-styled libraries at a conveniently located department store in Bangkok in January 2005. Its architecture and design are contemporary and in line with the modern lifestyle of the youth of today [1]. Currently the prototype consists of 5 sections: Living Library, Open Square, Mini Theater, Virtual Reality Room and Music Room.

*Living Library* is a library with books, information and a wide range of multi-media materials. There is a special corner for small children called Kid's Room where such activities as reading-together, story-telling and puppet shows are carried out. Books and magazines appropriate for adults who work nearby and who can come to visit the library during weekdays are also available. In addition, the park also allows children and youth to participate or work in various parts of the library. For example, they could be allowed to serve as assistant librarians; act as directors of events at the Open Square; design, produce and sell handicrafts or products at the library's souvenir shop; or manage and work at the coffee shop inside the library. By taking part in these activities, children and youth could gain practical and entrepreneurial experiences, know more about themselves, become mature, as well as develop their characteristics and potentials.

*Open Square* allows people to creatively exchange knowledge and experiences through a large variety of activities as well as to make experiments and express themselves, in order to discover their own talents, personal interests and needs. Lectures and demonstrations by instructors from universities, colleges, research institutes as well as private organizations are regularly conducted both during the weekdays and weekends. If these activities, lectures and demonstrations are broadcast live through the Internet, TKpark could become a knowledge community radio/television broadcast channel. Moreover, if they are also archived, the park could turn itself into a digital library of community knowledge.

*Mini Theater* shows valuable and award-winning Thai films. For example, from July 2005 it has launched a series of "100 Thai Films That Thai People Should See." This theater is a means to attract people, particularly the young ones, to come to the park as well as to send signals to the public that the park is a fun place to visit. Moreover, by focusing on Thai films, Thai culture, customs, traditions, history, religion and ways of life can be preserved and conveyed down to the younger generation.

*Virtual Reality Room* is equipped with state-of-the-art virtual reality (VR) facilities: high-power servers, a high-speed network, high-quality displays as well as HMD (Head Mounted Display), VR gloves, head tracking devices and other related gadgets. In addition to the provision of edutainment, this VR room also helps promote an aspect of the park as modern and high-tech. The investment for this room is relatively high; hence it might not be available in other similar libraries to be built in the future in other places. In addition, most of the contents shown currently are imported; more local contents need to be produced.

*Music Room* provides music-on-demand services with a collection of Thai pop music. In addition to the terminals in the music corner, all PCs in the park are equipped with headphones and can serve as terminals for the on-demand services. Musical bands are from time to time invited to perform live at the park.

Responses to this attempt of TKpark from the public have been good. There are a large number of members and a satisfactory number of visitors to the park both on weekdays and weekends. Figure 1 is a front page of TKpark's website and Figure 2 shows some of the activities at the park.



Fig.1 A Front Page of TKaprk's Website

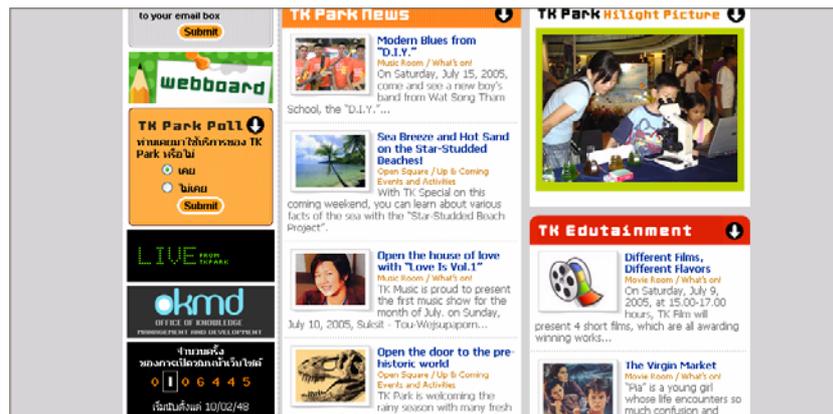


Fig. 2 Some Activities at TKpark

### NON-FORMAL EDUCATION COMMISSION

The Office of Non-Formal Education Commission (ONFEC) [2] is under the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education. Its main responsibilities cover 3 areas: organization of non-formal education, rendering support and cooperation to the formal schooling system and organization and promotion of informal education. The first responsibility is the provision of basic, general non-formal as well as vocational education to the people, particularly the disadvantaged who are not in the school system, in order to make them literate and to raise their standard of living. The second responsibility supports the learning and teaching activities for the people who attend formal schools by provision of long-distance educational technologies as well as exhibitions of science and technology to enable them to gain more knowledge and to achieve their learning goals effectively. The last responsibility deals with lifelong education which aims at providing people with up-to-date knowledge and information necessary for earning their living, improving their quality of life, and adapting themselves to the rapidly changing society. The lifelong education is carried out by means of various sources: public libraries, village reading centers, community learning centers, science centers, as well as educational radio and television programs.

At present, there are 850 public libraries under the supervision of ONFEC all over the country [3]. They can be classified into 3 sizes: large-sized public libraries consisting of provincial public library and Rajamangalapisek Library; middle-sized public libraries or Chalermrajgumaree Public Libraries which were established to serve Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirinthorn's resolution and ideas to promote people's education; and small-sized public libraries comprising district and sub-district public libraries which extend the network of provincial public libraries to district areas [3]. These public libraries provide library and information resources, instill reading habits into rural people, as well as disseminate cultural information and heritage. In addition to the government budget, land, money and material donations from the community also help support the construction of most district libraries. However, these public libraries have not functioned as expected. Many of them look gloomy and are unattractive. They seem to welcome only serious people. Moreover, they are mostly located at part of governmental offices or isolated buildings on government-owned or public-donated lands. Unlike markets, these places are not where people normally come to interact or to have common activities.

ONFEC therefore plans to transform these libraries into living ones and turn them into centers for: information and knowledge; community learning; community activities; community learning networks; and lifelong learning. Public libraries play an important role in an attempt to materialize knowledge communities. They serve as learning centers and provide people with knowledge sources. They are a place where people of all ages can always come and study subjects of their interests. It is very important to improve public libraries in terms of their efficiency, liveliness as well as their ability and flexibility to respond to the learning needs of the population. With that improvement, groups of rural people could be transformed into knowledge communities.

If it is not convenient for the people to come to the libraries, why not move the libraries to the people? With this idea in mind, ONFEC has devised three types of mobile libraries: mobile public, mobile floating and mobile volunteer libraries. The definitions and descriptions of these three types of mobile libraries given by the Thai Ministry of Education follow [4]. A mobile public library provides educational activities with ready-made learning package of videotapes, computers, as well as various exhibits. The services are concentrated on specific groups, such as people in congested areas, the disadvantaged, and impoverished people missing formal education

and lacking in sources of knowledge and educational services. A mobile floating library provides an expansion of reading and learning to people living along the river and canals in order to create the awareness of clean waterways and conservation of natural environment. Volunteer teachers carrying bags of books visiting people living along the river so as to help those people who may not be able to come to the library boat by themselves get easy access to reading. A mobile volunteer library focuses on target groups who live in remote areas and have difficulties in accessing the library. Volunteers will bring bags of books to the community. These volunteers will collect the statistics of service reviewers and will change the materials and books monthly.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This short article has described two attempts of the Thai government toward the creation of a new breed of libraries: one is a new establishment and the other a transformation. Both share the same goal, i.e., they want a library to be a living place, to be a paradise. By paradise, it means that a library should be a place where human development is allowed to happen; where people are allowed to have the inner freedom to relieve themselves of purposeful actions; where people can take refuge, to withdraw—if only for a while—from the stress to manage their daily human capital wisely; where people can drop—if only for a while—all the learned to un-learn; where people can be relieved—if only for a while—from the noises of the market; and where the purposeless, useless and quiet people can go [5]. It remains to be seen whether the Thai government can achieve its goal: to create libraries as public paradise.

## **REFERENCES**

[1] <http://www.tkpark.or.th>

[2] <http://www.nfe.go.th>

[3] Lersuriyakul, K. "Public libraries in Thailand," [http://tla.tiac.or.th/ifla/Ifla99\_9.htm] (last access 2005.7.24)

[4] <http://www.moe.go.th/English/Mla/chapter4.htm>

[5] Koren, M. "A library — a silent sign in city development," The 2<sup>nd</sup> Shanghai International Library Forum, p. 442-452, 2004.