

THE EFFECTS OF THE 'RUB NONG' TRADITION TOWARDS THAI UNIVERSITY

FRESHMEN

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### **Abstract**

The university initiation for freshmen students has been a highlight activity for a particular academic year in Thailand for many decades. This initiation ritual itself, normally taking place for the entire first month of the study, is based on the so-called SOTUS system—standing for Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, and Spirit—which is a kind of hazing based system to help new students adapting to the university's environment socially and academically as well as binding newcomers together tightly as fast as possible. However, every year there are a number of negative reports from the initiation rituals shown in media coverage and social media—including physical violence, sexual harassment, mental abuse, suicide, fatality, and alcohol—resulting in the raise of concern among ordinary Thais and scholars towards this issue from time to time. Sadly, even until recently there is still a limited number of researches related to Thai university initiation ritual. This research tried to find out: how does the Rub Nong tradition affect freshmen students during and after the Rub Nong period? How is Thai university initiation rite different from or similar to another country in the Southeast Asian region (Indonesia) and some other Thai organizations? This study will employ both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative methods includes: questionnaires for a group of Thai freshman students. The qualitative method includes an interview from a group of Thai freshman students, policeman, office workers, and Indonesian students

**Keywords:** university initiation; freshmen; SOTUS; superior-inferior relationship; patron-client relationship

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**List of Abbreviation**

AEC	The ASEAN Economic Community
ASEAN	The Associations of Southeast Asian Nations
FTI	The Federation of Thai Industries
GPA	Grade Point Average
RID	The Royal Institute Dictionary
SOTUS	Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, and Spirit (acronym of Thai hazing system)
U.P.	University of the Philippines

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There are numerous types of university initiation's practices that aim to welcome new students around the world. In many countries, the orientation and initiation activities have been a part of their universities' activities before the start of the school for many generations of students. The orientation and initiation activities are usually the very first activities organized by the universities and student committees, in which the first-year students attend after being admitted to their new educational institution after freshly graduated from high schools. In the case of Thailand, the 'welcoming-and-orientation period' is called '*Rub Nong*'. However, there are several differences compared to the orientation period organized by universities in other countries. The official orientation itself is normally organized in a form of a seminar by the faculty and the university's staff themselves. However, the rest of the welcoming and initiation activities are exclusively or mostly organized by the upper-class students, especially by the sophomore students, with little or no supervision by the university professor or faculty staff. The Thai-styled initiation rite has been a highlighted student activity at the beginning of the first semester of each academic year throughout the country for numerous decades. Thai Rub Nong rite is considered by the general public in the country as one of the unique Thai traditional and ritual practices and 'Thainess'.

### **1.1 The Definition of *Rub Nong***

Interestingly, even though *Rub Nong* has been practiced in every Thai university for a very long period of time as they has become to be considered as being a 'Thai tradition', there is no exact definition of the term defined and written in any version of a Thai dictionary. Its definition could not even been found in the Royal Institute Dictionary (RID for short or called '*Potchananukrom Chabap Ratchabandittayasathan*' in Thai), which is the Thai language's officially prescriptive dictionary, funded and written by the Office of Royal Society (recently

changed its name from what was called 'the Royal Institute'). The term *Rub Nong* has to be defined separately word by word and then combines the two meanings together. However, Thai people still get the general idea or the big picture of how it is and what it refers to. This is because Rub Nong ceremony has become a part of their Thai culture for generations in less than a century. According to the definition provided by the Royal Institute (1999), the word "*Rub*" basically means "receiving someone or something". *Nong* is defined as "younger brother(s) and/or younger sister(s) by blood or a prefix used to call someone who is younger" (ibid.). Thus, after combining these two words together respectively, the term *Rub Nong* means "receiving a new younger brother(s) and sister(s)".

Thai universities in general have a long and even proud history of their own *Rub Nong* initiations. For Thai freshman students, *Rub Nong* rite is equal to a welcoming or orientation period in other countries. Almost every Thai students over the past several decades have experienced or attended at least one activity among all kinds of activities that have been organized during the long period of *Rub Nong* rite. *Rub Nong* has become a 'tradition' or 'cultural norm' that students often feel obligated to attend to some degree. In the end, they usually end up with attending most of the *Rub Nong* activities. The unique characteristics of Thai *Rub Nong* rite will be further illustrated in the next part of this chapter. The history of Thai *Rub Nong* initiation can be divided into two main era: Before SOTUS hazing and SOTUS Hazing Era.

## **1.2 History and the Origin of Thai University's *Rub Nong* Rite**

### ***1.2.1 Before SOTUS Hazing Era:***

The early stage of Thai *Rub Nong* activity did not involve any kind of hazing or violent actions, but rather an activity that seek peace between older and younger university students. Student initiation was first practiced by Chulalongkorn university students. According to its

official website, Chulalongkorn University, found by King Chulalongkorn or also known as Rama V in March 1917, is the very first higher learning institution in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University, 2016). In 1931, there were internal conflicts among the cheering crowd between Chulalongkorn students from the Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital and the Faculty of Science during the inter-faculty Football Competition when one of the Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital players was punched by the Science Faculty team's footballer. After the investigation, it was founded that the cheating action done by the Science Faculty player was planned beforehand. The victim's team called for the official punishment onto the violent team due to such vulgar manner for sportsmanship, but the request was turned down because the Chulalongkorn University Administrators wanted to let the incident pass. Consequently, many students in the Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital became very furious about the administrative decision and planned for a payback during the time when the new sophomore students of the Science Faculty had to cross the river by boats to start studying the second-year courses onwards at the Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital's building every new academic year (Nai Chartsangkom, 2011, pp. 15 - 16).

However, the administrators intervened by proposing that those new sophomore students had to conduct an apologizing rite to the other faculty students after reaching the opposite riverbank. During the apologizing ritual, the upper-class medical students forgave those new students and then 'received' or '*Rub*' all of them to become their new 'younger brothers' or '*Nong*' (ibid.). The term *Rub Nong* was used for the first time in that event. This apologizing was later transformed and called '*Rub Nong Karm Fark*', meaning 'receiving new younger brothers or sisters who cross the other side of the river'. Some aspects of this *Rub Nong* rite were slowly spread into other faculties. The ritual has been continuously practiced by the students of Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, which later has been transferred to Mahidol University. After freshmen finished their first-year classes, they have to move from

Salaya Campus to Siriraj Campus in order to start studying from their sophomore year there onwards. When the sophomore students arrive, the upper class students are waiting at the port and helping them climbing up from the boat by holding their hands (ibid.).

### ***1.2.2 SOTUS Era:***

Nowadays, the Thai Rub Nong initiations have greatly evolved and changed in many ways. Even though each university has its own unique style of the *Rub Nong* initiation process, there are still at least some practices that are more or less deeply rooted to the SOTUS system. Despite its fancy English name, the term was not coined by Westerners, but ironically by Thais themselves. So, what is SOTUS anyway? According to Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin (1988, p. 18), SOTUS is an acronym specifically referring to a kind of hazing system, which is based on five main purposes: Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, and Spirit. It is widely believed among Thai scholars that the Thai-styled SOTUS hazing system was originated from the United States Military Academies sometimes during the 1850s, even though this particular claim has never been confirmed and substantiated (Winichakul, 2015, p. 3).

According to the popular belief among the Thai researchers, between 1850 and 1950, the SOTUS hazing system had widely spread from the U.S. Military Academy into many colleges and universities in the United States as well as its Southeast Asian colony—the Philippines—causing numerous negative and tragic incidents within those institution such as the death of several freshmen students (Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988, p. 18). According to the report written by Zarco & Shoemaker (2012, p. 19) on incidents caused by hazing practices in University of the Philippines (U.P.), Diliman Campus, there had been 17 fatalities and increasing number of violence between 1954 and 2000. In Thailand during the middle of 1950s, many new universities sprang up like mushrooms; as a result, those academic institutions had high demand for many foreign-educated Thai scholars from the U.S., Europe,

and the Philippines (Grubbs, 2012, p. 39; Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988, p. 19). When these Thai scholars graduated from those countries, they had brought SOTUS initiation practices back to their homeland with them (Grubbs, 2012, p. 39).

A large number of the early generation of Thai foreign-educated scholars were graduated from U.P., Los Banos Campus ; as a result, they had brought many aspects of SOTUS hazing system back to the Maejo University, Chiang Mai province (Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988, p. 19). This can possibly due to the fact that the Philippines is geographically closer to Thailand than to the U.S. or Europe. Moreover, thanks to the American colonial period, the local population could fluently communicate in English that made the Philippines become an ideal destination for Thai higher education students due to its geographical and financial advantages. When Kasetsart University was established in 1943, many graduates from Filipino universities and American universities such as Oregon State University and Cornell University were hired to teach there. During the early period after the Kasetsart University was founded, many graduates from Maejo University had furthered their higher education at Kasetsart University; thus, this led to a firm establishment of SOTUS-based *Rub Nong* initiations at Kasetsart University in 1953 and then started spreading into other Thai in universities (Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988, p. 19). This could be said that Kasetsart University is a firm foundation of the today's hazing practices found in the Thai university initiation rite across the country. Even today, Kasetsart University is still well-known for its harsh *Rub Nong* practices resulting in numerous infamous reports for the last ten years.

### **1.3 Characteristics of Thai Rub Nong Rites**

In such countries as the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, various universities usually organize one to five days of summer orientation varying between prior to the starting of the semester where a group of student leaders organize informational and

entertaining activities or events in order to introduce and welcome freshman students to their new university campus. Even though *Rub Nong* initiation rite is similar to the present day Western universities' orientation week to some extent, this particular form of university initiation for incoming freshman students in Thailand is rather distinctive and unique when compared that of other countries. The characteristics of Thai *Rub Nong* initiations are quite unique compared to welcoming activities in universities in other countries that it is rooted to the concept of SOTUS to a varying degree, depending on different universities.

For Thai students, 'Seniority' reflecting the Thai hierarchical culture that younger students must pay respect to older students and instructors; 'Order' means that younger students have to listen to upper class students as well as lecturers; Tradition emphasizes the need to maintain cultural tradition and norms; 'Unity' highlight the idea that students have to be united together as one; and lastly 'Spirit' means that students have to possess a virtuous and good heart and be ready to help others (Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988, p. 18). The SOTUS system has been deeply rooted in some *Rub Nong* activities although some universities claimed from time to time that their *Rub Nong* activities have been no longer related with SOTUS. Nowadays, the core and major aims of *Rub Nong* are to help new students adapt to their new university's tradition and culture, to bind and unify them together tightly as fast as possible, to become mentally and physically tough, to be able to sing university's and faculty's songs, and to pay respect to older/upper-class students (Kajornsinsin, 1992, pp. 90-93). Even though it is usually not compulsory to attend, freshman students are often mentally forced to join by their friends and upper-class students. Freshman students are usually called in a cuter and shorter way as '*Freshy*'.

Every single university throughout the country includes this traditional activity in its academic calendar. The entire process usually lasts between four to six weeks in which freshmen students have to attend three main types of activities—numerous welcoming

activities; cheer meeting to practice singing university and faculty's songs between three and four times a week for at least three hours a day between 6.00 pm and 11 pm; *Rub Nong's* boot camp activity in another province for at least one night and two days (Kajornsinsin, 1992, p. 87). However, the intensity of the *Rub Nong* activities varies from faculty to faculty as well as from university to university. According to Grubbs, the process of Thai *Rub Nong* activities "is almost completely left to student leaders to plan, organize, and present...[even though in most cases] there is usually administrative oversight" (2013, p. 310).

Most universities include the hazing practice of 'yelling' at freshmen or '*Wark*' in Thai during the *Rub Nong* activities; a person who initiates the yelling is called a '*Warker*' (by adding an English suffix 'er' at the end of the verb). Upper class students would try to pick any tiny mistake or behavior they considered as not proper in order to provide a seemingly justified accusation to '*wark*' until their throat dries, in which they claim that they yell to force a crowd of Freshy to become united tightly and have disciplines (Grubbs, 2012, pp. 40 - 41). *Warkers* are the ones who are in charge of *Rub Nong* activities, always maintain their stoic, serious facial expression, and yell at freshmen without using any microphones or megaphone who are at the moment ordered to sit still with their heads bowing down, looking at the floor (Nai Chatsangkom, 2011, p. 3). *Warkers* are often considered as the ones responsible in teaching, shaping, and coaching Freshy's behaviors.

Usually, there will be one evening that freshmen would be yelling at the harshest level they ever experienced during *Rub Nong* initiation process. That particular night is planned carefully, full with planned plots of how *Warkers* would yell at them. Right after the *warking* session, freshmen will be led to the nearby location to attend a *Bai Sri Su Khwan* (string-tying) ceremony. According to McDaniel (2011, p. 196), the term '*khwan*' in the Thai context refers to the morale or conscious spirit. *Bai Sri Su Khwan* is "a traditional welcome and well-wishing ceremony" (McDaniel, 2011, p. 132). Countless of small candles were lit and upper class

student would tie a white holy string on one of the new students' wrist as a holy bracelet. From that moment on, freshmen students were now officially and wholeheartedly accepted as their new *Nong* or younger brother and sisters. This shows a mix of Thai tradition with hazing practice.

## **1.4 Related Research**

### ***1.4.1 Definitions of Student Activity***

Student extracurricular activities are part of student life. *Rub Nong* is the very first student extracurricular activity that freshmen experienced since the first day of the official orientation period or since the first day of each opening academic year. Many definitions of the term 'extracurricular activities' or 'student activities' have been proposed.

Good (1945, p. 7) defined 'extracurricular activities' as "programs or events, carrying no academic credit, sponsored and organized by pupils' or students' organizations or by the educational institution, designed to entertain, instruct, and/or provide exercise of interests and abilities; subject to some measure of control by the institution". Wallace (2008) suggested the definition of 'extracurricular' as "[o]rganized activities which fall outside the formal school, college, or university curriculum...[which] include, but would not be restricted to, such things as whole-school drama productions, sports matches with other schools, hobby clubs, and theatre visits".

For the term 'student activities', Frederick (1959, p. 6) suggested that the term be defined as "those school activities voluntarily engaged in by students, which have the approval of and are sponsored by the faculty and which do not carry credit toward promotion or graduation". According to Professor Dr. Wallapa Devahastin Na Ayudhaya (1987: cited in Chankua, 2013, p. 8), student activities are activities that are sponsored or organized by an academic institution, take place outside classrooms, carry no credit, are supervised by

instructors or supervisors for the student to experience good student life and to improve students' mental, physical, or moral aspects; students join activities voluntarily without being force.

In conclusion, student extracurricular activities are activities, programs, or events that are sponsored or supported by a student's organization, faculty or academic institution. Those activities are closely supervised by instructors or academic administrators for the activities to reach their main purposes. They carry no academic credit and do not force students to attend. The main purposes of those activities are to entertain, educate, provide exercise of interests, and/or improve some kind of skills.

#### ***1.4.2 Researches Related to Rub Nong Initiation in Thai Universities:***

Even until recently, there are still a limited number of researches directly related issues on Thai university *Rub Nong* initiation. In most cases, they were written in local news articles or personal blogs. Lafferty, Wakefird & Brown (2016, p. 3) commented that most of the researches until today that focus on initiations and hazing have mostly been conducted in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. According to Grubbs (2012, p. 40), there were many news reports on dramatic or violent incidents on university initiations in Asia—including Thailand, but the academic research on the subject of Asian university initiations is very limited. Moreover, there are more the researches written in Thai than in English. However, there are not many anyway and some of them are not even publicly accessible; plus, many of those Thai researches are not quite up-to-date (Devahastin Na Ayudhaya, 1987; Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin, 1988; Kajornsinsin, 1992). The research on *Rub Nong* written by Kajornsinsin & Kajornsinsin (1988), which was funded by the Ministry of University Affairs, is the most well-known and creditable about reports on this topic. It is considered as a classic work on the study of *Rub Nong* rite written in Thai language.

In most cases, researchers tend to focus on the opinions and perceptions of students towards *Rub Nong* activities. Some example of those researches were conducted by: (Kajornsin & Kajornsin, 1988; Kajornsin, 1992; Tangnoi, 2012; Grubbs, 2013; Chankua, Skulkhu & Yongsorn, 2013; Chankua, 2013). From the study of Tangnoi (2012, p. 57) about the level of undergraduate students' satisfaction towards student activities during the first three months of academic year 2011 of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, she found that freshman students from every faculty were least satisfied with university's activities compared to sophomore, junior, and senior students because they were still struggling to get acclimatized to higher educational environment. In the study of Grubbs (2013) on student perceptions of Thai universities' *Rub Nong* activities, he conducted the first survey of *Rub Nong* initiations in the nation-wide level in 2007, which includes 18 public universities across the countries. Grubbs found that freshmen did not seem to hate *Rub Nong* rites and also did not seem to exaggeratedly support them as well (ibid., p. 321). Winichakul (2015) provided new and different views on the *Rub Nong* rite by linking it with sociological and political aspects in the Thai context.

There have been various reports on serious consequences of *Rub Nong* rites at Thai universities every single year over the past several decades, which can be found in television news, radios, newspapers, websites, and blogs. These negative reports have circled around the stories of torture and physical abuse in many forms, inflicted by upper-class students on freshmen who share the same faculty with them. Many news articles show the stories that implied that the heavy reliance on upper class students to plan and organize *Rub Nong* activities and the oversight of faculty's or university's administrators has sometimes led to some negative, tragic and unfortunate consequences (Grubbs, 2013, p. 310).

### **1.5 Statement of the Problem**

Thailand's higher education had experienced several changes in the last decade. The

two examples are: the frequent changes in the centralized admission system for higher education since 2007; and the adjustment in the university timetable for the start of both first semester moving from starting in June to August and second semester changing from starting in November to January in order to match other ASEAN<sup>1</sup> countries due to the influence of the AEC<sup>2</sup> activation in January 2016 (Fredrickson, 2015). Even though the changes have happened, there is one thing that never changes. Every year, there are a number of negative reports of the initiation rituals shown in media coverage and social media—ranging from physical violence, sexual harassment, verbal harassment, mental abuse, suicide, fatality, and alcohol, and other health issues.

Every time when the news spread out, it raises a concern among ordinary Thais, administrators, and scholars towards these negative issues and several debates between the supporting and the opposing sides publicly broke out from time to time. There have been several attempts to ban *Rub Nong* rite either by the governmental offices or the public, but none has succeeded in doing so as they were strongly opposed by the *Rub Nong* supporters. In 2010, the Facebook page called “Anti SOTUS<sup>3</sup>” was found by a group of university students who opposed the idea of the hazing SOTUS system as many of them personally experienced it themselves. As of 2016, this page has gained more than 42,000 followers. The effects of the Thai *Rub Nong* tradition are still questionable and debatable among the general public whether it provides a more positive or negative impact on freshman students in Thai universities.

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<sup>1</sup> The Associations of Southeast Asian Nations

<sup>2</sup> The ASEAN Economic Community

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/AntiSOTUSPage/>  
Accessed on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016

## **1.6 The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of Thai first-year undergraduate students during the *Rub Nong* or the university initiation period serving as an initial transition to university and to understand its effects towards students. This research focused on providing answers to the research questions as follows:

- How does the *Rub Nong* tradition affect freshmen students during and after the *Rub Nong* period?
- How is Thai university initiation rite different from or similar to another country in the Southeast Asian region (Indonesia) and some other Thai organizations?

## Chapter 2: Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, this study used a small number of sampling of first-year students (N = 25) as a group of representative samples asking about their opinions on the effects of *Rub Nong* activities due to the limited time and cost constraints. The researcher verbally contacted a local lecturer of Thammasat University, Rangsit Campus in Pathumthani province<sup>4</sup> for her approval to ask her first-year Liberal Arts students from her elective English course to participate voluntarily in this research. The local lecturer also agreed to let the researcher use the leftover time at the end of her very first lecture of the second semester of the 2015 academic year to ask students to complete the questionnaire and ask for volunteers to be interviewed further after the class. Fortunately, every student agreed to participate as it was the first day of school of the second semester and everyone was free after the class. Both questionnaire and interviews of the first-year students took place on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at the university.

**Table 1:** A group of representative sample from Thammasat University

Sex	N	%
Male	5	20
Female	20	80
Total	25	100

The questionnaire comprises only one part, consisting of 24 questions using the 5-point Likert scale, asking questions regarding on how the *Rub Nong* activities affected them. The answering scales range from: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree. All the questions were written in Thai as it is a native language of both researcher and respondents. The SPSS program was used to analyze the data gained from the

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<sup>4</sup> One of the five adjacent provinces of Bangkok known as the Bangkok Metropolitan Region

questionnaires. The following intervals were used to interpret the tendency of the 'descriptive statistics' obtained from data analysis (Ketsingha, 1995, p. 10):

4.21–5.00	=	Strongly agree
3.41 to 4.20	=	Agree
2.61 to 3.40	=	Neutral
1.81 to 2.60	=	Disagree
1.00 to 1.80	=	Strongly disagree

Interviews were also conducted face-to-face in a semi-structure style. The interviews were designed to compare the university *Rub Nong* initiation rite to the initiation rite in other Thai sectors and initiation rite in Indonesia. The questions focus on their experiences during the initiation rite and their opinions related to the *Rub Nong* activities. The samples used in this research are as follows: the same group of first-year Thammasat students (Liberal Arts), a police officer, two office workers, and two Indonesian university students. In the case of the Thai respondents, all the interviews were also conducted in Thai as it is a native language of both interviewer and interviewees. In the case of Indonesian interviewees, the interviews were conducted in English. The data from both interviews were collected between January to February 2016.

### **Chapter 3: Results & Discussion of the Findings**

The official orientation seminar organized by the faculty staff that was mandatory for every student, taking place during the first half of the day. It was the very first activity that the student had to do as a university student. After that, the Rub Nong rite had finally begun.

From the interviews of 25 first-year Thammasart students, it was reported that there were 2 main types of *Rub Nong* activities for Liberal Arts students: in-campus and off-campus activities. The in-campus activities had lasted for a month, starting from the second half of the first day of official orientation seminar (about two weeks before the first semester started). *Rub Nong* activities were led by the second-year students and all rest of the activities were claimed by the upper class students to be voluntary. This is because two of the main ideologies of Thammasat University are equality and liberty; this is due to the fact that Pridi Banomyong, who was a French graduate and the former Prime Minister was the founder of Thammasat University (Boonmanum, 2008, p. 37). The institution claimed that Thammasat University does not allow SOTUS system to co-exist with its *Rub Nong* activities, especially the seniority and order system. Therefore, their *Rub Nong Mai*<sup>5</sup> which means 'receiving new brothers and sisters', was changed its name into "*Rub Puen*<sup>6</sup> *Mai*", meaning 'receiving new friends' (Boonmanum, 2008, p. 38). This is because for Thammasat students, everyone is equal and will not be forced to do things they do not wish to do so. So technically, studying on the land of freedom and liberty had provided a more comfortable lifestyle for students who have lived in a stricter and forceful world most of their lives. However, this does not mean that every upper-class student may follow the policy (see Table 2). Despite being called as the land of freedom and liberty, some upper-class students still violated the university's basic policies regarding the practices of *Rub Nong* activities, which states that the upper class students must

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<sup>5</sup> *Mai* means 'new'

<sup>6</sup> *Peun* means friends

hold the *Rub Peun Mai* with equal right and without coercion. Also, there is one student who did not participate at all. The reason why the rest of the 24 students decided to participate the in-campus *Rub Nong* activities were categorized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2:** The main reason for attending in-campus Rub Nong activities

Reason	N	%
Voluntarily attended	13	52.0
Not want to feel being an outcast	5	20.0
Forced by upper-class students	1	4.0
Follow the tradition	5	20.0
Not attend	1	4.0

The second step of Rub Nong was that freshmen were randomly divided into small groups of around 18 to 20 people. In Thammasart University, a group is also uniquely called “Table” because each group would possess a designated table located in some places around the faculty building, which will later become their gathering place of the whole group. One gathering Table consists of 4 generations of students, ranging from freshman to senior year. Like most universities in Thailand, the *Rub Nong* period lasted for around one month.

**Table 3:** How often did students attend the in-campus Rub Nong Activities?

Frequency	N	Percent
Never	1	4.0
Seldom	3	12.0
Sometimes	6	24.0
Often	12	48.0
Always	3	12.0

From **table 2 and 3**, it can be clearly seen that almost half of the Liberal Arts students at Thammasat University often voluntarily participated the in-campus *Rub Nong* activities. From the interview session, they claimed that *Rub Nong* at Faculty of Liberal Arts is considered

as one of the tamest in the university. Only one students did not participate the *Rub Nong* activities.

**Table 4:** How many students attended the out-of-campus *Rub Nong* Camp?

Decision	N	Percent
Yes	20	80.0
No	5	20.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>100.0</i>

**Table 5:** The main reason for attending off-campus *Rub Nong* activities

Reasons	N	Percent
Voluntarily attended	16	64.0
Not want to feel being an outcast	2	8.0
Forced by upper-class students	1	4.0
Follow the tradition	1	4.0
Not attend	5	20.0

By looking at the *Table 2, 3, 4* and *5*, a fifth of the total Thammasart respondents did not participate the off-campus *Rub Nong* at a resort at Petch-buree province. It is interesting to note here that none of the 5 students who skipped the off-campus *Rub Nong* had ever voluntarily participated the in-campus *Rub Nong* activities. They were either joined for not wanting to be left out or following the Thai student tradition.

**Table 6:** Would you like *Rub Nong* activities to be done before the school starts?

Decision	N	Percent
Yes	16	64.0
No	4	16.0
Undecided	5	20.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>100.0</i>

According to the interview, 64 percent of the total student sample group would like the all *Rub Nong* activities to be ended before the beginning of start of the school. The majority mentioned during the interview that it would be nice if they have 'real' free time after school to take care of personal stuffs and

personal relationship.

**Table 7:** Do you think the total length of period is appropriate?

Decision	N	Percent
Yes	12	48.0
No	9	36.0
Undecided	4	16.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Interestingly, the percentage of students who would like the length of *Rub Nong* period to be changed was almost as high as that of students who would not. 5 out of 9 students preferred that the *Rub Nong* period would last only a week.

**Table 8:** Should Thai universities continue organizing *Rub Nong* rite?

Answer	N	Percent
Yes	8	32.0
No	2	8.0
Undecided	15	60.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>100.0</i>

**Table 9:** If you could travel back in time, would you still attend *Rub Nong*?

Decision	N	Percent
Yes	16	64.0
No	3	12.0
Undecided	6	24.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>100.0</i>

**Table 10:** The effects caused by *Rub Nong* activities

Effects caused by <i>Rub Nong</i> activities	Mean	Std. Deviation
I love my faculty and institution.	3.2400	0.43589
I made new friends and become close to them.	4.1200	0.66583
We have built the sense of sisterhood and/or brotherhood.	3.6800	0.69041
I was motivated to help each other.	3.7200	0.61373
I become seeing the importance of order and disciplines.	3.1200	0.78102
We have learnt to create unity and harmony.	3.5600	0.82057
I learnt to be responsible for others.	3.5200	0.71414
I learnt to forgive others.	3.2000	0.81650
I have learnt to be patient.	3.5200	0.96264
I can adapt myself to fit into the group/society.	4.1200	0.66583

I have learnt about the importance of Thai seniority system.	3.2800	1.06145
I felt ashamed and/or angry with upper class students.	2.7200	0.89069
I was afraid of upper class students.	2.4800	0.91833
My human dignity was devalued.	2.4400	1.00333
I lost my self-confident.	2.3600	0.90738
I was physically injured during <i>Rub Nong</i> .	2.2800	1.02144
I experienced mental pressure.	2.6000	1.08012
My human rights were violated.	2.7600	1.16476
I felt physically exhausted.	3.7200	0.84261
I want to seek revenge from upper class students	2.1200	1.01325
I want to vent my anger and shame at younger students.	1.9600	0.93452
My parents or guardians became worried.	3.0000	1.08012
Rub Nong negatively affected the GPA.	2.4800	0.87178
I have received academic advantages.	3.4000	1.11803

### 3.1 Effects of *Rub Nong* towards Students:

#### 3.1.1 Physical effects

In the context of physical effects towards students, the average level of physical injury caused during *Rub Nong* activities in this study were quite low as the majority of the participants did not get injured (Mean = 2.28; SD = 1.02144). During the interview, one student reported to gain small bruises from falling down onto the concrete floor after got bumped accidentally by another student while performing a group dance. Seven students reported to get multiple mosquito bites on their body exposing themselves to get infected with hemorrhagic fever while practicing to sing faculty and university's song in many evenings for 2 to 3 hours a time. One of them has sensitive skin that the mosquito bites would leave a scar on her skin. One reported to get sprained ankle when attending the off-campus *Rub Nong* at Petch-buree province. However, the majority of students confirmed in the questionnaire that the *Rub Nong* activities caused physical exhaustion in a high degree (Mean = 3.7200; SD = 0.84261). This was partly due to the lack of sleep as they practiced singing and cheering in the evening until 9-10 p.m. while some of them had morning classes on the next day or had to stay up late to

finish doing the due assignment.

In addition, due to occasional news about physical violence and injuries caused by the upper-class students onto the first-year students, parents felt worried about their children experiencing the *Rub Nong* activities in a moderate level (Mean = 3; SD = 1.08012). The reason that the average number is not that high is due to the fact that Thammasat University's Liberal Arts has a good reputation for years for organizing softer and tamer version of SOTUS system compared to other faculties. According to the interview finding, the second-year students only orchestrated the yelling session for one night (the night that held *Bai Sri Suu Kwan* ceremony which symbolized the official acceptance of new brothers and sisters).

### ***3.1.2 Emotional Effects***

In this study, the students were affected with their mental pressure just a little (M = 2.6; SD = 1.08012). However, violation of their human rights affected them to a moderate level (2.7600, 2.1.16476), which might be related to the sense of embarrassment and humiliation. Embarrassment might also cause the decrease sense of self-confident as they become lacking in self-confident (M = 2.96; SD = 0.90738) and it in turn affected the increase level of shyness. During *Rub Nong*, student's human right was violated forcing to dance obscene *Rub Nong* songs. The case that first-year students were given obscene nicknames that would verbally sound similar with their real nickname was also mentioned in the interview. Some examples of the nicknames are Smelly Pussy, Stirring Nipples and so on.

This number was supported by the finding from the study of Mann, Feddes, Doosje & Fischer (2016, p. 86) on alumni and present members of a sorority or fraternity in the Netherlands, which found that when people experience humiliating or embarrassing situations together as a group of people who share same social status during the initiation ritual, the level of humiliation within themselves would lower and the sense of group cohesion may increase.

Being singled out among the peers of first-year students would mean a biggest embarrassment. But if they share the pain together, that will create sense of belonging between each other.

Implanting the ideas in the head of the first-year students—that every student in the same faculty has to love each other and should not leave someone behind—are the way to craft a utopian or ideal university environment. Going through a long one-month period of hardships, sadness, and happiness together as a group usually motivate first-year students to feel that they belong to their group. Their love for the faculty and institution also affected and increased in a moderately high level ( $M = 3.24$ ;  $SD = 0.43589$ )

### ***3.1.3 Social effects***

The highest ranking positive effects that show in this research are the expansion of peer networks and the assimilation into a new group or society, receiving the same rank (Mean = 4.12;  $SD = 0.66583$ ). Creating sense of belonging to their own university and faculty was one of the main objectives for upper-class students to organize the *Rub Nong* activities. According to Goodenow & Grady, sense of belonging is “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school social environment” (1993; cited in Xin Ma, 2006, p. 340). From the findings, the ability to adapt oneself to fit into a new group or society is also moderately high, resulting from participation of *Rub Nong* ( $M = 4.12$ ;  $SD = 0.66583$ ).

Despite the fact the Thammasat University does not support the concept of seniority, the sense of sisterhood and/or brotherhood, and the superior-inferior relationship, they still thrive either inside or outside *Rub Nong* activities ( $M = 3.28$ ;  $SD = 1.06145$ ). Mulder (1996, p. 65) explained that the role playing between superior and inferior in Thai society is too high developed that it cannot be eradicated. Therefore it is really impossible to claim that every Thammasat student is equal regardless of age or class. The social hierarchy still exists behind

our mind.

*Rub Nong* activities are used as a tool to ensure the transition of students from high school to university, helping them in settling into a university life. Theoretically, *Rub Nong* is supposed to be a bridge that freshmen can calmly and leisurely walk across the river from one side to the opposite side end. In reality, however, it is a burning bridge that groups of freshman students are herded by their upper class students to hurriedly cross to the other side as fast as possible. In other words, *Rub Nong* is a shorter process of acclimatization of the freshmen students during their first month in higher educational level. Although *Rub Nong* activities help students to make new friends very fast, the nature of making new friend might be questioned and their relationship would possible not last long as its process does not happen naturally, but rather by force. *Rub Nong* activities do not fit definitions of either 'extracurricular activities' or 'student activities' mentioned in Chapter 1, which state that students should not be forced to attend those activities and they have the rights to voluntarily join or to skip the events if they are not interested in a particular activity.

#### ***3.1.4 Financial effects***

Student respondents reported that by participating the *Rub Nong* rite during the one-month initiation period does not mean that it does not cost them any single Baht. In fact, it does require a long term monthly payment that students are 'unofficially' obligated to pay for the next four year of their study. For those who decided to participate, financial requirement is inevitable. It would become a long time burden that Student No. 7 explained in the interview that this was her most important reason for not joining *Rub Nong* activities at all.

After the first-year students were randomly selected to be a member of a particular 'Table' group, they were required to pay a monthly payment. This is because many *Rub Nong* activities including the off-campus *Rub Nong* (2 days 1 night) at another province were not

supported and funded by the university. This means that students would have to find enough budget to fund all Rub Nong activities they would want to hold. In the case of the Liberal Arts students, they were required to pay 500 baht (around 13 euros) per month to their Table group's appointed treasurer for the next 4 years. For example, the freshmen would spend this money on treating a meal to the second-year students of their Table's group at a restaurants as a way to payback gratitude for taking care of the new guys during *Rub Nong*. The second-year would use this budget to book a resort for accommodating freshmen during the off-campus activities, which requires a big budget. For students, 500 baht a month is quite a challenge for some students. According to the survey conducted by the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) and Sripatum University, the current average salary of a bachelor's degree graduate with no job experience is still at 14,131 baht or about 350 euros a month (Fernquest, 2013). Moreover, students can pay for their lunch at the canteen for around 10 times with the monthly payment (around 50 baht per meal by considering the current living expense in Thailand where a bowl of meatball noodle costs around 40 baht and a 500ml bottle of water for 10 baht).

### ***3.1.5 Academic effects***

Interestingly, the finding shows that *Rub Nong* activities negatively affected the GPA (Grade Point Average) in a moderately low level (Mean = 2.48; SD = 0.87178) despite the fact that students had less time to study because of less free time after class. However, it can be explained by looking at the fact that students who attended the Run Nong activities and Table group meeting would receive academic advantages at moderately high level (Mean = 3.4; SD = 1.11803). These advantages are: receiving notes and reviews documents from their brothers and sisters of the same Table group as well as receiving tips or advices from the upper-class students about choosing easy classes. This means that those who never attended the *Rub Nong* or rarely joined would miss the golden opportunity like this. It is a common behavior of Thai

university students. They likely tend to pass on generations of notes, books, review summary of the exam questions to the next generation of their Table or group mates.

Students spent more and more time on the campus but less and less time in studying during their free time and doing homework. Spending more time in the campus can also imply that freshman students would have a more stable student community. Especially those who were admitted to the elite and prestige institutions would gain the attitude of positioning themselves as the dominant groups of students in the Thai society.

### **3.2 University Rub Nong in Comparison to *Rub Nong* in Other Areas:**

As the concept of *Rub Nong* has evolved and later become a part of Thai culture, it is not too surprising that the practice of *Rub Nong* can be seen more or less in other areas other than in the university campuses as well. However, it should be noted that there is no academic research which is directly related to initiation practice in other sectors. The researches tend to focus only on the first-year university student's *Rub Nong* rite.

#### ***3.2.1 Rub Nong in Thai Workplaces***

The *Rub Nong* initiation in Thai workplaces are not widespread when compared to that of Thai universities. It might be because many believe that *Rub Nong* activities are only suitable and necessary for younger people, not for grown-ups. In the case of the *Rub Nong* tradition in workplaces in Thailand, the length of this type of initiation rite is much shorter than that of Thai universities. This is because there is no need to practice singing the company songs, meaning that it is less energy consuming. Two interviewed were conducted in January 2016.

The first case is a 26-year-old civil engineer working at a big and very well-known Japanese construction company in Thailand. The name of this interviewee is Nisa. She has worked for this company for four years since 2012. Her company's *Rub Nong* was organized

by the Human Resource Department for the first time ever in the first year of her career due to the fact that many young workers had left the company after working at the company for a short time (between one to twelve months). The company wanted to keep young and ambitious workers as long as possible. As a result, a two-days-one-night *Rub Nong* camp was held at a military camp during the weekend. At the camp, new workers from every company's division and department were mixed together and then divided into small groups of 10 to 12 individuals. Each group must attend all activities, ranging from dancing, singing, playing games related to construction, designing buildings, and presenting construction project ideas. All activities were not harsh at all when compared to Thai university's *Rub Nong* as there was no yelling or *Wark* by senior workers. Because new workers had to work together in each activity, they got to know each other, widening their contact lists. At night at the campfire, senior workers shared their long experience of working at the company, giving advices and informing what to expect. All of these became very helpful later on as now she knows who to contact when she needs to cooperate with or ask for help from other division or department. Her feelings for this *Rub Nong* camp are very positive. However, the interviewee mentioned that none of her university friends have ever experienced any kind of *Rub Nong* activities in workplaces. She considered herself to be the lucky one.

The second case is quite the opposite. The second interviewee is a 22-year-old IEP (Intensive English Program) teacher hired by the licensed company of the program. She is responsible for teaching English, Math, and Science in Primary and secondary levels in an English language learning environment at the assigned school. This interviewee would like to be called in this study as Mint. The company provided its own licensed textbooks, computer program to be used with the book, and together with teachers as a package to schools that purchased their program for a one-year contract. Because of this reason, each year, all newly hired teachers are required to attend the one-night-two-day camp held at a resort in a province

closed to Bangkok. The activities at the camp were as follows: orientation, welcoming speech, learning teaching techniques, learning how to use company's textbooks and computer program, and presenting a short demonstration of how they would be teaching in a real scenario. Mint said that it was a good thing that this camp help her to befriend with many other new teachers. However, she did not like the way the trainers yelling loudly at her and other new teachers (like being yelling by university *Rub Nong's Warker*) during or after presenting a demonstration on the stage. She was not happy with this kind of behavior because she considered herself as an adult. The only thing those trainers needed to do is to give advice and feedback, not yelling and criticizing loudly and harshly that forced many new teachers in tears, including Mint herself.

From these two cases of *Rub Nong* in workplaces, it can be seen that the real main goals behind the activities is to develop the human resources and improve the working skills of workers. *Rub Nong* activities in this sector actually tend to affect and produce positive outcome for the sake of the company as a whole, not for the workers themselves. Even though the way how the companies treated their employees are completely opposite (nicely VS harshly), the outcome is the same in the sense that the working skills of each workers would have improved one way or another after those *Rub Nong* Camps. In the case of Nisa, those activities were designed to find out what skills the new workers actually have in relation to their specific field of work. It is like the quest to discover the real potential of the new employees that might be overlooked during the job interview session.

In the case of Mint, the *Rub Nong* rite was to shape and craft the specific teaching skills that the new workers are still lacking in order to meet with the job requirements and for the sake of maintaining the reputation and high standard of the company.

The Thai company's orientation has a hidden agenda, it promotes the system of junior-senior and superior-inferior relationship, which both are called in Thai as "phuuyai-phuunoi". According to Mulder (1996), it requires the inferior little person to show respect towards and

listen to the big superior boss without argument.

### ***3.2.2 Rub Nong in Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School & the Royal Police Cadet Academy***

As mentioned earlier, the university Rub Nong activities help to develop a new social network for students that would be helpful later when they graduated and became alumni and a member of a particular class. According to Phongpaichit, Teerat & Baker, Chualongkorn and Thammasat University's alumni had developed the original model of strong political alumni networks of a particular faculty until 1960s (2016, p. 20-21). This type of social bonds which last for decades were crafted by experiencing *Rub Nong* hazing rituals, campus activities, and sports. These faculty alumni networks helped these people form ties and preserve power in the bureaucracy; thus, the military eventually adopted this kind of university *Rub Nong* model (ibid., p. 21). Classmates at the Cadet School and the Chulachomklat Military Academy started to form strong ties and preserve those ties through alumni activities in following years; consequently, the class groups of particular years had become key players in the military's internal politics by the 1980s (ibid.). While university's Rub Nong last for a month at most, Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School and the Royal Police Cadet Academy's Rub Nong last for one whole year and much more physically and mentally harsher. Both military and police cadet would be yelled at during the night by the senior students for a year. During the first year they would not be called as a new "cadet", but as a new "student". According to the interview of a commissioned police officer who studied at both school 19 years ago (3 years at Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School and then moved up to the Royal Police Cadet Academy for another 4 years), the 1-year hazing ritual had been done to filter out the weak students. So, at the end of the academic year, those who were left would now be called as a cadet and would become their Nong. The bond of each Year Class is really strong that benefit

his career today as everyone will try to help each other.

A clear example is Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Thai Prime Minister who also graduated from military cadet school and the Royal Police Cadet Academy (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2009, p. 180). In 2004, he put 35 of his classmates from the military cadet school Class 10 in key positions in the Military and the Police Departments (ibid., p. 248 - 249).

### **3.3 Thai Rub Nong versus Indonesian Initiation Rite:**

Despite the fact that Indonesian universities are also quite internationally well-known for its harsh treatments and hazing practices during the initiation rite done by the upper class students. There is no study written in English that directly focuses on their rite of passage. Both Thai and Indonesia initiation share similar root that can trace back to military. While Thai Rub Nong originated from the U.S. Military Cadet Academies, Indonesian university initiation is believed to be originated under the rule of Suharto. However, there is no literature or evidence that can prove that at the moment. The only one English literature that mentioned Indonesian university hazing is a book called "Memoirs of Indonesian Doctors" written by Tjien Oei (2009).

During Thai Rub Nong, undergraduate students are obligated and regulated to wear a university uniform (Prangpatanpon, 1996, p. 15). But the Indonesian freshmen just need to wear a proper cloth.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

*Rub Nong*, or the so-called SOTUS system, frequently show on the front page for its infamous moments, from shameful actions to the casualty of one or two first-year students annually. Though, it has a lot of fan clubs, which include university students, famous graduates, lecturers and university administrators. *Rub Nong* initiation in SOTUS style flourishes in this country due to the fact that Thai culture and society have what it essentially need in order to survive. Thailand is a country that is an intensely hierarchical, strict, and authoritarian society. The concept of Thainess is the most important thing in controlling what should do and should not. However, what we should do must depend on a person's social status. We must understand the social hierarchy first. The supporters of Rub Nong under the SOTUS system would claim that harsh activities were to prepare students for the real world. Not only that, the real world is a lot harsher than where we are now. This should be said that it was such a common claim from that side that people can hear very often from those supporters. Social alumni networks has been crafted with the help of SOTUS which could last a lifetime. Generally, SOTUS is responsible in shaping the next generation of Thai members who will represent Thainess.

SOTUS needs more attention from the general public and academic sectors as it actually hide its actual role in the Thai society too well, which will need more research to find out more on how SOTUS affect Thai people and Thai society.

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**Appendix**

**Questionnaire (Translated from a Thai Version)**

Please leave some of your contact information below if you would like to contact the researcher for further inquiry.

*Email address:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Mobile phone number:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Line ID:* \_\_\_\_\_

**Please tick in the box in each question for the answer that represents your own opinion.**

<b>Opinion on the experience of and Feeling on Rub Nong</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
I love my faculty and institution.					
I made new friends and become close to them.					
We have built the sense of sisterhood and/or brotherhood.					
I was motivated to help each other.					
I become seeing the importance of order and disciplines.					
We have learnt to create unity and harmony.					
I learnt to be responsible for others.					
I learnt to forgive others.					
I have learnt to be patient.					

I can adapt myself to fit into the group/society.					
I have learnt about importance of the Thai seniority system.					
I felt ashamed and/or angry with upper class students.					
I was afraid of upper class students.					
My human dignity was devalued.					
I lost my self-confident.					
I was physically injured during Rub Nong.					
I experienced mental pressure.					
My human rights were violated.					
I felt physically exhausted.					
I want to seek revenge from upper class students					
I want to vent my anger and shame at younger students.					
My parents or guardians became worried.					
Rub Nong negatively affected the GPA.					
I have received academic advantages.					