Historical Bibliometric Analysis: A Case of the Journal of the Siam Society, 1972-1976

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents results of a study that applies a historical bibliometric treatment on the Journal of the Siam Society in the period from 1972 to 1976, aiming to chart a life story of the Journal in such the timeframe. The research approach taken brings together quantitative and qualitative research methods to trace the historical development of a learned publication devoted to the academic studies of Thailand. The bibliometric methods examine the trend and change in the Journal’s bibliographic characteristics which are viewed as the intellectual contours of the Journal. Then, these contours are contextualised and interpreted through historical research methods which primarily engage documentary evidence. The findings of the study show that both bibliometric and historical analyses complement each other, suggesting that the research design and methods are workable. Contributions of the study are outlined.

Keywords
Historical bibliometrics, history of scholarly journal, Journal of the Siam Society, Thailand.

INTRODUCTION
Bibliometrics has established itself as a key area of inquiry on the library and information science (LIS) research landscape. In fact, it has extended well beyond such the terrain, being used by researchers in various knowledge domains. The popularity of bibliometrics is due, in part, to its evaluative capability to assess scientific literature on the one hand, and, in part, to its nature of not being domain-specific on the other (De Bellis, 2014). These two major reasons contribute to the broad applicability of bibliometric methods to every knowledge domain. Bibliometric measures are widely used as indicators of productivity, influence, impact, and research performance. This constitutes the stronghold of the mainstream bibliometrics, central to which is its evaluative power.

Overwhelmed by the notion and obsession of performance, impact, and the like, researchers have, however, overlooked other possibilities that lie in the various data derived bibliometrically. For instance, it is possible to study the literature and identify characteristics of disciplines, obsolescence of scholarship, authorship patterns, and types of materials consisting scholarly pursuits. This is what Hérubel (1999) calls “historical bibliometrics” which means “the bibliometric study of periodicals and books published in the framework of time and space” (p. 382). It is an approach that brings together bibliometric and historical research methods, which yield “insights into the scholarly record biographically and sociologically. Consequently, the history of a given discipline can be mapped through the bibliographic record inherent in journals” (Hérubel, 1999, p. 382).

In this light, it is proposed that historical bibliometrics could be used for investigating the historical development of serial publications. It is possible to treat bibliographic data acquired bibliometrically as a primary source — “an analog and complement to archival material or statistical data” (Hérubel, 1999, p. 383) – when tracing the evolution of a given publication. Despite having been marginal on the LIS research landscape (McNicol & Nankivell, 2003; Uzun, 2002), the history of periodical is a promising area of inquiry. As Weller (2008) points out, a social function of periodicals is to produce and preserve knowledge. Then, it is possible to trace the way in which a certain kind of knowledge has been produced through the history of a given journal. This study will take the historical bibliometric approach to study the evolution of the Journal of the Siam Society (JSS), which is the oldest learned journal dedicated to the geographical theme of Thailand and its neighbouring countries. Published since 1904, it is a serial publication of the Siam Society which is one of the oldest learned institutions in South East Asia. The study will focus on the time period from 1972 to 1976 when Tej Bunnag was the editor of the Journal. The reason for this is that the Siam Society Library holds the Tej Bunnag’s Private Papers collection. It is a comprehensive collection of correspondence between Bunnag and those involved in the production of the Journal, such as authors, reviewers, and printers, during Bunnag’s editorship. Such the
collection is the primary source of information for the historical part of the study.

This paper will show the contribution of the historical bibliometrics to the study of the history of serial publications. Using JSS under the editorship of Tej Bunnag (1972-1976) as a case study, it will (1) examine the trend and change in its bibliographic characteristics through bibliometric methods, and (2) interpret such the trend and change through historical research methods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracing what is usually referred to as the evolution or history of scholarly journal is a theme of research in LIS, the methods and approaches of which are also employed by many other disciplines. Despite not being a major research theme (Blessinger & Hrycaj, 2010; Prebor, 2012), there are a number of studies that investigate how publications in various subject areas, such as those by Edzan (2005), Gonzalez (2008), Gordon (2007), Haley (2010), Luyt (2012) Shorvon (2007), Smith (2009), Spearman (2008), and Stewart (2011). These examples show how both bibliometric and historical research methods have been used to study journal history. However, it has been more often the case the either one of these approaches is used in a given study. Very few exceptions can be found, such as those studies by Goedeken (2003), Hérubel (2005; 2007), Hérubel & Goedeken (2008), and Young (2006). Besides, it seems that it is Hérubel himself who has used historical bibliometrics in most cases.

Overall, bibliometrics and historical research methods have contributed to the understanding of how serial publications evolve through time. However, it has been less often that these research methods are employed together in the same study. Moreover, it seems that the literature has focused more on periodicals published in Europe and North America. Also, it is highly likely that journals in the humanities and area/regional studies are not well represented, when compared to those in science, the social sciences, and business-related fields. As such, a historical bibliometric treatment of JSS would contribute to improving an understanding of this oldest serial publication dedicated to the geographical theme of Thailand. In addition, this study would help to fill a lacuna of research on scholarly journals published in tropical Asia, thereby expanding the frontier of understanding about knowledge production in more marginally situated parts of the world.

METHODS

This study takes the historical bibliometric approach to study the evolution of JSS under the editorship of Tej Bunnag (1972–1976). It will firstly examine the bibliographic characteristics, which would uncover the ‘contours’ of the Journal. The bibliometric findings will, in turn, lead to questions for a historical inquiry that will take documentary evidence into account. In this light, both parts of the study are intertwined. The former will provide the contours of JSS, while the latter will seek to elaborate the contours generated bibliometrically. The methodological framework fits the objectives of the study in that it makes use of both the bibliographic data which can be gleaned from JSS, as well as the documentary evidence held by the Siam Society Library.

Bibliometric Data

A total of 109 source articles were recruited from all nine issues of JSS edited by Tej Bunnag, between 1972 and 1976. The bibliographic characteristics examined in this study fall into two different datasets. One set pertains to the source articles themselves, and includes the subject matters of the articles and the country of origin and institutional affiliation of the authors. As the Bibliography of Asian Studies (BAS), published by the Association for Asian Studies, indexes JSS, its subject assignments will be adopted for this study. The other set pertains to the citations in the source articles, which include the number of citations in each article, the subject, format, age, country of origin, and the language of cited sources. JSS is not indexed in citation indexes. Data will, therefore, be collected manually from the source articles.

Data from Documentary Evidence

In this study, the main primary source is the Tej Bunnag’s Private Papers collection, held by the Siam Society Library. The collection comprises letters, correspondence, submissions, proofs, and other personal records, mostly regarding his editorial work at the Siam Society, totalling almost 1,200 items. Contents of these records were analysed in order to contextualise the bibliometric data gleaned from the source articles. Besides, secondary sources, such as monographs and published articles, were consulted in order to interpret the results of the bibliometric analysis. It should be noted that this part of the study did not follow the quantitative approach to content analysis. The aim was to make sense of the statistics generated bibliometrically. As a result, no code book was developed. Nor was the systematic scheme for coding the contents.

RESULTS

Bibliometric Analysis

In this study, the subjects and disciplines, and certain characteristics of authors, of the source articles were analysed.

The Bibliography of Asian Studies (BAS) was used to determine subjects. Its subject classification is available online at [http://bmc.lib.umich.edu/bas/Help/subjects](http://bmc.lib.umich.edu/bas/Help/subjects). The disciplinary distribution of the source articles is presented in Figure 1. The source articles fall within 13 disciplines, but are concentrated more in history (41 per cent), and anthropology and sociology (24 per cent). All other disciplines have their small share of less than 10 per cent each. The subspecialties were however not analysed in this study.
It should be noted that BAS assigns each of the source articles a geographic heading, beginning with a geographic name such as Asia, Cambodia, or Thailand. Therefore, it is possible, albeit parsimoniously, to classify these articles according to their geographic coverage. However, the majority, unsurprisingly, focus on Thailand (see Figure 2).

From January 1972 to January 1976, 79 authors contributed to nine issues of JSS. Most (78.48 per cent) of them published in JSS only once. There were only 17 authors (21.52 per cent) who contributed more than once. Table 1 lists the recurring contributors and their frequency of appearance (that is, the number of articles) in JSS. Among these 17 contributors, only four were Thai.

Due to the length of each source articles that varies from one to another, the frequency of appearance or the article count may not be sufficient to reflect how productive each author was. The author’s productivity could, therefore, be measured by the number of pages they had published, as the size and page layout of JSS were consistent throughout Bunnag’s editorship. Although this metric is questionable, it is much too simplistic, especially in the humanities and social sciences, to assume that it rewards authors who are long-winded over those who are concise. At least, the page count gives a general idea of how much each contributor has published. Such a measure was also used by Torgler and Piatti (2013) in their analysis of the American Economic Review.

The most productive contributor was M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani who had published 263 pages in the journal. Top 20 contributors are listed in Table 2. It is obvious that the majority of the productive authors was non-Thai. Only four Thai authors were ranked among the top 20.

A History of JSS by Number

The previous subsection has shown the disciplinary concentration of and some characteristics of contributors to JSS between 1972 and 1976. Even if a clear picture of the journal’s evolution could not be drawn, it is possible to see some trends in the subject matter and the authorship pattern of JSS. Perhaps, this is all bibliometrics has to offer when used to study the history of a given serial publication. However, one would likely wonder, having seen them speaking for themselves, what account for these numbers?

This subsection seeks to contextualise the statistical findings presented above. In other words, the bibliometric data are treated as the basis of the interpretation to explain those numbers.

The nine issues of JSS Bunnag edited between 1972 and 1976 add up to 3,578 pages. So, it is 398 pages each issue on average. If the total number of page indicates productivity, Bunnag was less productive around the middle of his tenure. The JSS issues of July 1973 and January 1974 were shorter than 300 pages. However, perhaps, these numbers could be more than an indicator of the editor’s
productivity. Indeed, turning to some of the documentary evidence from the Siam Society Library, there was something else going on: the printing cost and the overall appearance of the journal. This can be seen in Bunnag’s reply to Nicholas Tarling, whose article was accepted for publication, but had to be kept in a backlog. Bunnag noted “I am sorry you have to be kept waiting, but we have to limit the journal to under 400 pages, otherwise the printing is too costly and the volume get too bulky for comfortable reading” (Bunnag, 1974b). Previously in 1973, Bunnag had also asked a contributor to wait or otherwise to withdraw the submission, because he already had too many manuscripts, writing that he felt he “cannot publish it … until January 1974. The July 1973 number of the J.S.S. has ready bursted its seams. So, do please write to tell me whether or not you can wait until 1974, if you cannot do please withdraw …” (Bunnag, 1973a). In fact, the July 1973 issue of JSS (volume 61, part 2) was the thinnest of all Bunnag edited in his first tenure, having only 279 pages in total. Therefore, it was likely that the production cost made it difficult to print a bulky volume. Indeed, in November 1973, Bunnag wrote to a contributor explaining “the long delay in the publication of this article, consideration of which also depended on the cost factor at the time when the cost of paper has gone up by some 250% in Thailand” (Bunnag, 1973b).

Apart from the total page number, there are more numbers regarding the articles published in JSS. As shown in Figure 1, the disciplinary concentration of the source articles focuses on history (41 per cent), and anthropology and sociology (24 per cent). Besides, these papers were mostly written by non-Thai authors. This can be accounted for by the fact that by the 1970s, the world of Thai studies had entered the age of professional scholars (Warren, 2004). Therefore, JSS seems to have had to rely on specialist contributors rather than amateurs. It was the Cold War which heightened the global interest in South East Asia (Emmerson, 1984). Consequently, a large amount of funding went into studies about the region (Bowen, 2004; Szanton, 2004). JSS became an outlet for such research projects.

Moreover, the 1970s were not an easy time for Thailand, the reverberations of which were inevitably reflected in the pages of JSS. Early in that decade, Thai students, like their counterparts in the West, began to display a concern over the country’s political situation. This began with relatively small protests, but escalated until, in October 1973, a massive demonstration led to bloody street battles, the fall of the military government, and the exile of three of its leaders. There followed three turbulent years of frequently changing governments, labour disputes, and a widening gap between conservatives and reformists, played out against the alarming background of Communist victories within the region. The unrest culminated with a violent attack on student demonstrators at Thammasat University in Bangkok, on 6 October 1976, and the installation of a government determined to root out all real or suspected communist sympathisers. ‘Subversive’ books were banned and burned, journals closed, publishers harassed, and political meetings outlawed (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005). This consequently kept JSS out of any matters that could be deemed ‘too sensitive,’ leading it to publish learned articles on ancient history, traditional arts, and the like (Warren, 2004). Furthermore, some Thai scholars might have hesitated to make their work visible. All this partially accounts for the disciplinary concentration of the source articles (see Figure 1) and low number of Thai contributors (see Tables 1 and 2).

In fact, it appears the Siam Society had its own path of steering clear of contemporary politics, thus focusing more on things historical or even antiquarian. This can be seen, for instance, in the *Epigraphic and Historical Studies* (EHS) series published in JSS throughout the 1970s. All the articles in this massive series were co-authored by Alexander B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagar. They were the most productive authors in the 1970s, and ever since, contributing altogether 21 articles all of which dealt with deciphering and interpreting Sukhothai-era inscriptions. It is true that M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani was the most productive author (see Table 2). However, Griswold and na Nagar worked together to produce the EHS series. For Bunnag, the series was a great pride of the Society, for it was a “real, solid contribution to Sukhothai history,” internationalising the understanding of Thai history prior to the 14th century, and also serving as a rich pool of source materials (Bunnag, 2012).

The geographic classification of the source articles suggests that Bunnag mostly accepted, for publication in JSS, articles about Thailand (84 per cent), as shown in Figure 2. However, it is too simplistic to assume that this high number is not surprising for the fact that the Siam Society has been a learned institution devoted to the geographical theme of Thailand and its neighbouring countries. Indeed, Bunnag also played a significant role in shaping the scope and coverage of articles that would appear in JSS. The correspondence provides traces of this. For example, in his reply to Srinivasa Rao, whose submission was rejected, Bunnag explained “our Journal publishes articles on Asian countries other than Thailand only when they bear direct relevance to our Country” (Bunnag, 1972b). On another occasion, a manuscript dealing solely with Laos was not accepted (Bunnag, 1972a).

Aside from the geographic scope, Bunnag also played a part in defining the thematic or disciplinary coverage of the journal, as exemplified in his letter soliciting such an article as that on the first Siam Embassy in Europe based on newly found information. He explained: “It has been some time since we had an article on the 17th century in JSS; and your article would, I feel sure, fill the gap most ably” (Bunnag, 1794a). It is clear that by rejecting articles on particular topics, the editor defined what JSS ought not to cover. On
the other hand, by accepting articles on other particular themes, the scope of the journal was demarcated.

It is evident that the numerical data, when contextualised, could be even more informative. As discussed above, bibliometric data, which typically signifies the nature of contributions and contributors, also provides traces about another key element of the journal community: the editor who mediates between every other member of the community. The bibliometric analysis of the source articles from issues which Bunnag edited between 1972 and 1976 points to some changes and trends regarding the contributions and contributors to the journal. This is what these numbers speak of. However, when put in context through the historical research methods, they, in turn, reveal that it was the editor who significantly influenced these changes and trends.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has argued that historical bibliometrics is a promising approach to studying the history of serial publications. It has taken JSS as a case study to show that bibliographic data generated bibliometrically when interpreted and contextualised together with information from primary documents can be more informative and meaningful. The results of both bibliometric and historical analyses appear to complement each other well, thus yielding, as Hérubel (1999) puts it, “a more complete picture” (p. 383) of JSS under Tej Bunnag’s editorship between 1972 and 1976. This apparently is the major benefit of taking primary source materials into account when interpreting the ‘numbers’ derived bibliometrically.

The contributions of this study are two-fold. First, in terms of research methods, it is among the very few study to employ historical bibliometric approach to studying the history of scholarly journal. It can serve as a model for applying historical bibliometrics to research of a similar kind. Despite the fact that this study is limited by the primary source (i.e. the Tej Bunnag’s Private Paper collection), the results show that the approach is workable. Certainly, to conduct a study of this kind will require more bibliometric measures and in-depth historical research. Second, as it focuses on a journal publishing scholarly works about Thailand and the region, this study will expand the frontier of understanding about knowledge production in this marginally situated part of the world.

**REFERENCES**


