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Bad banking in Thailand? An empirical analysis of macro indicators

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ZEF Bonn
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Lukas Menkhoff

Number **14** **Bad Banking in Thailand?**
An Empirical Analysis of
Macro Indicators

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Abstract

It appears to be common wisdom that the basic cause of Thailand's crisis is its extraordinarily weak financial institutions. The paper questions this proposition from an empirical viewpoint. It is well established that the long-term performance of Thailand's financial system is favorable. The insight from moral hazard indicators is unexpected regarding the bad banking proposition, although not compelling. Finally, the liberalization process produced inadequately addressed risks. However, this also applies to experienced and well-regulated foreign banks. It is argued that the facts provided can be better explained in a framework of system change than by bad banking in Thailand.

Kurzfassung

Ausgesprochen schwache Finanzinstitutionen werden heute generell als die dominierende Ursache der thailändischen Krise dargestellt. Diese Vorstellung wird in diesem Beitrag empirisch hinterfragt. Es ist gut abgesichert, daß die langfristige Leistung des thailändischen Finanzsystems vorteilhaft ist. Indikatoren, die auf „Moral Hazard“ im Verhalten der beteiligten Akteure hinweisen könnten, stützen die Vorstellung des „Bad Banking“ nicht. Schließlich ergibt sich, daß der Liberalisierungsprozeß Risiken verursacht, die nicht angemessen berücksichtigt wurden. Allerdings trifft letzteres teilweise auch auf erfahrene und gut regulierte ausländische Banken zu. Es wird gefolgert, daß die Fakten eher mit einem Ansatz erklärt werden können, der die Krise auf den Wandel des thailändischen Finanzsystems als auf „Bad Banking“ zurückführt.

1 Introduction

The now widely accepted account of the Asian crisis states that weak financial institutions played a major – or even decisive role. In its in-depth analysis, the BIS (1998) stresses "*domestic sources*" (p.3), prominent among them the "*fragility of financial systems*" (p.117) promoted by "*banks and others to underestimate risk*" (p.117). The IMF (1997, p.2) also emphasizes "*structural weaknesses, particularly in the financial sector*". The first reason mentioned has to do with the "*pricing and managing of risk*" (p.12). Later on, banking practices are characterized as "*imprudent lending, including lending associated with relationship banking and corrupt practices*" (p.12).

Whereas these international institutions have to use diplomatic language (see also World Bank 1998), it is up to academics such as Krugman (1998) to speak clearly: "*The problem began with financial intermediaries - institutions whose liabilities were perceived as having an implicit government guarantee, but were essentially unregulated and therefore subject to severe moral hazard problems.*" Krugman summarizes his analysis by saying that "*the Asian crisis ... was mainly about bad banking...*". Bad banking, as characterized above, creates excessive credit growth, (sectoral) overinvestment and an asset (price) bubble. According to this interpretation, the Asian crisis, and with it Thailand's crisis, is the bursting of the bubble that was mainly caused by bad banking in Thailand and the other countries concerned.

This now popular stance contrasts markedly with the high reputation that Thailand and its financial sector had earned before the crisis. The inclusion of Thailand in the group of the "*East Asian miracle*" countries, as the World Bank (1993) called its respective study, met with great approval (see also Christensen et al. 1993, Warr and Nidhiprabha 1996). Thailand, however, was not only a member of this group of excellence, but within this group was among those countries whose growth was driven by remarkable improvement in total factor productivity. The efficient use of resources is generally positively related to the ability of institutions to organize factor allocation, i.e. at particular banks. This research seems to lead to the almost self-evident conclusion that Thailand's banks have been efficient institutions, a characteristic that is not likely to disappear within a few years. How do these findings fit with the current interpretation of bad banking in Thailand?

There seem to be only three "*solutions*" to this puzzle: first, the implied proposition of *good banking* in the past might not be well founded, but might possibly wrongly attribute growth to financial sector performance. Second, in Thailand's case the *bad banking* proposition might be wrong or at least a gross overstatement. Third, something might have changed over time: as this cannot be simply the institutional quality of a whole system consisting of many quite different banks, there must be a more subtle reason. A candidate for this might be a change in the

environment that turns former winners into losers under changed circumstances. This could be formulated as *inadequate banking*.

To address these questions, the performance of Thailand's banks is analyzed empirically. As the crisis produced an enormous structural break, the inclusion of post-crisis data does not seem to be useful (see also Demirgüç-Kunt and Detragiache 1998). Even a sound banking system would have run into problems from insolvent borrowers when facing – as Thailand did – an abrupt currency devaluation of more than 50% (at its peak), a collapsing stock market, a sharp interest rate increase and a swing in growth of about 15 percentage points. Thus the causality between banking shocks and macro shocks becomes difficult to disentangle in the case of post-crisis analysis. However, identifying failures in banking using *ex ante* data is not easy either. As there is no data giving exact information about interesting kinds of performance, which would obviously go beyond simple profit figures, one is forced to work with proxies, i.e. empirical indicators, proposed in the literature. Among these indicators, the word "*macro*" hints at the data base used, which is always aggregated at the level of all banks or even all financial institutions.

The result of the analysis is straightforward. Whatever the empirical discussion about the causes of the East Asian miracle may show for larger country samples, for Thailand there is no reason to doubt the proposition of good banking. The shortcoming of this approach is its inertia in measurement. However, an evaluation of indicators showing more recent decision making, as proposed by the BIS and others, does not support the notion of moral hazard in banks either. If one compares the risk-return policy of Thailand's banking system with that of other countries, Thailand is quite consistently positioned in a surprising direction, indicating sound and efficient rather than bad banking. Although this picture emerges almost homogeneously from the macro indicators, it falls too short in understanding the origins of the banking crisis. It becomes clear that the crisis is not due to inherent problems of governance among Thailand's banks but to an adversely changing environment. The macroeconomic information that Thai banks could have used in operating more cautiously was just as available to banks from industrialized countries. The latter were eager to increase their exposure in the crisis region. It is thus not Thai banks which have operated worse than everyone else, but regulatory and macroeconomic policy that didn't work properly.

Section 2 begins by explaining how banking used to work in Thailand, why this looks like "*crony capitalism*" at a superficial level but may have functioned. Section 3 introduces the empirical part with what is possibly the broadest concept of the success of a banking system, i.e. the efficiency with which resources are allocated in the economy. Section 4 examines several indicators concerning the risk-return policy of Thailand's banks that have been proposed by skeptics. As a third empirical approach, Section 5 addresses the changing banking environment with regard to risk measures and risk awareness. Section 6 provides the conclusion.

2 Considerations on the Thai-style Capitalism

The financial sector performs several functions which contribute to the improvement of economic welfare, among which the quality of credit allocation is probably the most important. During this allocation process, a decision is made as to which investment projects will receive the funds necessary for their implementation. If "good" projects are chosen, then resources are used efficiently; but if "bad" projects are chosen frequently, capital is wasted in the economy and growth will be lower.

In modern theory, the banks are therefore often described as institutions specialized in making good credit decisions. The problem with giving credit is that lender and borrower have different interests. In simplifying the analysis, one can reduce it to the notion of "limited liability" (Stiglitz 1972). Borrowers may tend to pursue plans involving unacceptably high risk levels. This is rational given their incentives – and in particular when limited liability is borne in mind – but it is not in the interests of lenders, represented here by the bank. Attempts to control this by making appropriate contractual arrangements are complicated by the fact of asymmetric information between the parties involved:

First, from an ex ante point of view, the lender has less information on possible investment projects than the borrower. The latter thus has an incentive to propose projects to the bank characterized by comparatively high risk. Allocation quality can therefore be interpreted as an effort to reduce the knowledge gap as much as possible. It seems plausible to assume that there are returns due to specialization in this process.

Second, from an ex post point of view, i.e. after having granted the loan, a second asymmetric information problem arises as the borrower can decide on how to utilize the loan. She can decide on her level of effort and to some extent on the riskiness of the strategy followed. Again, banks may amass expertise on how to handle this kind of problem.

The "solution" to these problems in industrialized countries is the development of institutional settings that help reduce asymmetric information and thus find efficient arrangements between lender and borrower. In particular, the ex ante problem can be reduced by reliable accounting and reporting rules that give information about the enterprises' state of affairs. The ex post problem requires not only timely information about the use of the loan but also instruments for the lender to enforce the contract. It is obvious that this institutional setting is not self-evident in developing countries where, among other things, legal rules have to be implemented. Rather, one could say that it is a characteristic of the development process to make institutions work in this sense. So how can banks operate without the necessary tools?

From this perspective, the often-criticized practice of relationship lending in many countries, among them Thailand, looks justified to a certain extent. If books and other data do not say much about the success of a business, how do you evaluate the creditworthiness of potential borrowers? A personal relationship serves to close the gap stemming from information asymmetry. This relationship helps inform lenders about the personal abilities of the future management team, about any earlier successes and, possibly, about important qualitative information related to the project.

The situation is similar for the ex post problem of possible moral hazard. If contracts are not worth much because reliable data about their performance and instruments of enforcement are missing, embedding a borrower in a network of personal relationships, such as a family, extends the one-period moral hazard problem to a multi-period decision, in which moral hazard becomes costly in further periods. Thus, there is a strong incentive to fulfill the "*contract*" without legal enforcement.

The specific role in this environment of Thailand's family centered banks - which are part of business syndicates - is outlined by Phongpaichit and Baker (1998, p.20): "*[The major banks] acted as much more than just banks. They worked like investment houses, informal chambers of commerce, and business consultancies.*" "*For [their] associates, the banks not only provided finance but facilitated deals, found overseas contacts through their networks, and managed their political relations.*"

We do not want to discuss how efficient this kind of banking relationship is in comparison to others, but one should keep in mind that it is in principle a set of complementary institutions. Thus, it should come as no surprise that such a system can produce favorable outcomes as long as the elements comprising it all function. If this system, which has been called the (old) "*Thai-style capitalism*" (Siamwalla and Sobchokchai 1998, pp.49ff.), is transformed into a more market-oriented system, that the elements continue to complement each other becomes crucial.

3 Total Factor Productivity and Banking

Perhaps the most comprehensive indicator for measuring the usefulness of a banking system for the whole economy is its contribution to real growth. The problem is, of course, that there is no measure for capturing this contribution directly. However, there does seem to be a plausible way of accounting for the performance of the financial sector: the size of national financial sectors is positively related to macroeconomic growth. Going even deeper into this relationship, it has been argued that the most important function of the financial sector lies in the efficient allocation of resources within the economy (Levine 1997). One may thus expect this argument to imply that efficient resource allocation is reflected in comparatively favorable total factor productivity growth. Although empirical growth accounting studies typically relate banking to growth rather than to productivity growth, the second nexus is probably more relevant (an exception is Levine and Zervos 1998). Its disadvantage is severe measurement problems. In the Asian case, the issue of total factor productivity growth has been made public by Krugman's critique of the Asian "*miracle*" (Krugman 1994), a paper that relied heavily on empirical work by Young (1995)(see also the methodological debate by Hsieh 1999).

A convenient way out of these struggles about the most appropriate way of accounting for productivity emerges if we focus on Thailand and not on the diverse group of Asian countries. Regardless of the measurement criteria used, Thailand is certainly among the countries with above-average growth in total factor productivity (see Table 1).¹ Even in the study of the Asian "*contrarian*" Young (1994), it ranks in the top 25% of the 66 countries covered and in Kim and Lau (1996) it is above average.²

If one interprets this consistent finding as the relatively efficient use of resources, this supports the good banking proposition. There are, however, at least two major empirical objections to this claim. On the one hand, high total factor productivity could be the result of good decision making outside of the banking sector. On the other hand, the results for longer period averages may be irrelevant for the more recent past. These two objections will be addressed below.

Regarding the importance of banks in capital allocation, it is informative to see whether banks play a comparatively large role in the economy. Besides qualitative evidence, such as Jansen (1997) or Phongpaichit and Baker (1998, p.19ff.), there is quantitative evidence: the

¹ The list of countries used in the international comparisons, such as Table 1, is documented in [Annex 1](#). The selection is basically determined by data availability.

² Much of the debate is confusing insofar as different benchmarks of success are implicitly applied: Thailand's TFP growth is comparatively good in comparison to all developing countries; it is more or less average for East Asia and comparatively weak in relation to industrialized countries (see also the account taken in Chen 1997).

credit volume coefficient (CVC), i.e. the ratio of the credit volume to GDP, can be used as a simple indicator to measure the importance of banking. As the level of GDP systematically influences this measure, it is interesting to know whether Thailand deviates from the respective cross-country regression of CVC on GDP. In order to control for a possible credit boom during the last few years, the regression for the year 1996 is supplemented by data for the year 1980. The results depicted in graph form in Figure 1 clearly show that Thailand has a financial system with a comparatively large banking sector and that its CVC in 1980 was already above the median value for all countries covered.³ It can therefore be expected that successful capital allocation derives from good banking rather than existing despite bad banking.

³ The regression in Figure 1 seems to be heavily dependent on two high income countries, i.e. Hong Kong and Singapore. However, the relation has systematic character beyond the country sample covered. Moreover, taking the mean instead of the regression as a benchmark would not change the result. This also applies to further figures.

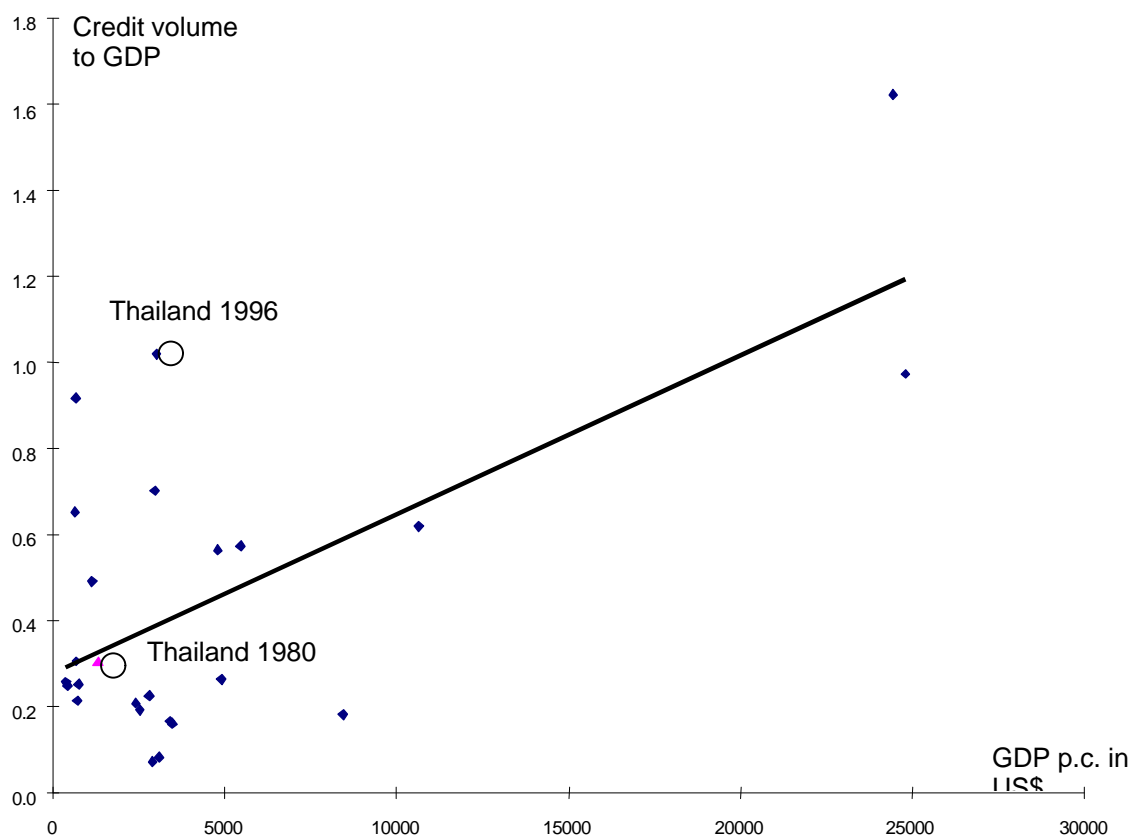
Table 1. Thailand's total factor productivity growth in international comparison

| Study | Period | Countries covered | Results on TFP for East Asia | Results on TFP for Thailand | TFP growth p.a. in % ¹ |
|---|---------|--|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| World Bank (1993), Tables 1.9, 1.10 | 1960-85 | 113; East Asia: Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand | leading in the group of developing countries; productivity-driven (Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan) vs. investment-driven (p. 57 f.) | unusually high TFP-growth | 1.31 (1.85) [0.01] |
| Young (1994), Table 3 | 1970-85 | 66; East Asia: Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore Taiwan, Thailand | East Asia: average (Hong Kong possibly "extraordinarily high", p. 972) | rank 15 of 66 (Hong Kong: 6; Taiwan: 21; Korea: 24; Singapore: 63) | 1.9 (1.4) [1.3] |
| Harberger (1998), Table 3 | 1971-91 | 32 (20 listed); East Asia: Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand | East Asia: all countries clearly above average | rank 2 of 20 countries listed (behind Taiwan) | 2.96 (2.83) [1.20] |
| Collins and Bosworth (1996), Table 6, 7 | 1960-94 | 88; East Asia: China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan | East Asia: among the leaders | rank 3 of 8 East Asian countries; 1973-94: rank 2 (behind China) | 1.8 (1.1) [0.37] |
| Sarel (1997), Table 2 | 1978-96 | 6; Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, USA | East Asia: much higher than US with exception of the Philippines (p. 29) | rank 2 of 6 countries (behind Singapore); 1996: rank 2 (behind Singapore) | 2.03 (1.33) [1.16] |

Note: 1. Value of Thailand, value in parenthesis for East Asian countries, values in squared brackets for all countries covered (figures are unweighted means of country or country-group data)

Even if the long-term level of capital allocation quality is satisfactory, there may be a declining trend in the quality of credit allocation. The limited information available on this does not give a clear-cut picture:

Figure 1. Credit volume to GDP in relation to GDP p.c. in 1996



$$\text{Regression: } y (\text{credit to GDP}) = 0.313054 + 0.0000366x (\text{GDP p.c.}) \quad R^2=0.39343$$

| | |
|---------|----------|
| (4.178) | (3.862) |
| p=0.004 | p= 0.008 |

Notes: T-values in parenthesis; data for 24 developing countries from IMF International Financial Statistics (IFS); Credit volume = deposit money banks' claims on private sector (=IFS line 22d) GDP p.c. calculated by 1996 average exchange rate (=IFS line rf); Thailand's 1980 GDP inflated by CPI

The studies in Table 1 cover different time periods but do not give the impression that Thailand's position has recently become weaker. For example, Sarel (1997), quoted in Table 1, explicitly states a constant level of TFP growth.

A related measurement "clearly reveals that during 1991-1995 the capital stock per worker increased at a much higher rate ... than did value added per worker" (Tinakorn and Sussangkorn 1998, p.388). This is interpreted as overinvestment in capital stock in comparison to other input factors, in particular human capital (see in this vein also Alba, Claessens and Djankov 1998, p.3).

Others who claim that the financed investments were of a low quality base their argument on an increasing incremental capital-output ratio (ICOR)(see e.g. Bank of Thailand 1998c, p.12). However, the evidence provided is not compelling. An increase may depend not only on project quality but also on cyclical influences or the kind of investments involved (e.g. infrastructure

investments with a relatively long period of depreciation). Moreover, the ICOR level in Thailand during the 1990s has not been extreme, or even above average in comparison to other countries (see Radelet and Sachs 1998).

A further approach is presented by Demetriades et al. (1998), who examine determinants of the average productivity of capital, among them the influence of banks. In their sample of five Asian countries, the proxy for banking activity seems to indicate a negative relation only in India and Thailand. *"This somewhat surprising result may reflect inefficiencies in the Thai banking system"* (p.79). However, the period covered unfortunately ends exactly where other work sees the problems growing, i.e. in the year 1992. Moreover, cautious interpretation of the data quoted above seems to be justified, as the proxies available are definitely questionable. For example, the approach applied produces a negative relation between financial repression and capital productivity for the years around 1982 when Thailand was in an economic crisis. This relation is not, however, a causal one: the macroeconomic slowdown led to low capital productivity and the banking crisis required state intervention to prevent systemic failure, which fostered high *"repression"* (see Fig.5 in Demetriades et al. 1998). This example of third-party causation highlights the methodological problems and shows why the results should not be overinterpreted.

Unfortunately, the inconclusive evidence cannot be overcome, due to methodological weaknesses: the exact results of TFP growth studies are notoriously heterogeneous, especially when short periods are evaluated. The ICOR approach, *"in a time-series context ... is likely to be a very erratic measure of capital productivity"* (Demetriades et al. 1998, p.67). In addition, the capital productivity measurement based on capital stock figures, as applied by Demetriades et al. (1998), has other limitations, such as the fact that it neglects the influence of further input factors and possibly blurs measurement, as demonstrated. Despite these weaknesses, one may argue that the 1990s in Thailand are characterized by a level of investment that could hardly be efficiently absorbed by enterprises (see Pomerleano 1998). However, the adverse effect on productivity can (partially) be rationalized by declining interest rates from relying more on foreign currency loans as will be shown later (see section 5).

In summary, there is strong evidence that a comparatively large banking system provided good credit allocation in the past. The level of return on capital may have gone down during the 1990s, but at least the system did not break down and it may have been relieved by the sinking price of capital. However, as productivity figures do not consider risk, there is still the possibility (indeed this is the main claim of those supporting the 'bad banking' hypothesis) that during the 1990s the risk levels associated with the projects financed may have become too high in relation to returns.

4 The Risk–Return Policy of Thailand's Banks

At its core, the bad banking proposition is a proposition of moral hazard behavior of financial institutions in Thailand. Its main empirical indicator would be the financing of overly risky projects, i.e. projects whose expected total return is not covered by expected payments to the lender. In some sense, this can be interpreted as a situation in which the underlying incentives get out of control due to limited liability. This raises two questions in the case of Thailand: are there any empirical indicators supporting the notion of an overly risky policy, and is there any information about possible (dis)incentives for Thailand's banks to pursue a moral hazard strategy?

The problem with risk indicators is that one ideally needs measures of *ex ante* risk, i.e. the risk as it was perceived by the bank when granting its loans. However, this requires data that is usually strictly confidential and thus not available. The information that can be used is therefore, in effect, always a variety of *ex post* information showing how risky the projects carried out were or have been analyzed to be in hindsight. To make the information even hazier, the data is supposed to be restricted to the period before the crash to avoid interdependent influences. This leaves one in the somewhat unpleasant situation of finding indicators for excessive risk before this. In general, there are four ways of approaching the risk-return policy being followed:

If *ex post riskiness* is comparatively high, this may hint at excessive risk taking *ex ante*. However, two qualifications need to be made. First, a low degree of risk could be due to luck, even though the *ex ante* policy was excessive. Second, a high degree of risk could be due to the selection of high-risk projects with appropriate yields, which would also create a misleading picture. Nevertheless, our cautious understanding is that excessive risk taking over a period of years will show up in some indicators.

The aspect of *ex post return* was just mentioned. Moral hazard banking is expected to yield not more but rather less than average profitability in the long run. Here too, looking at isolated measures of return may lead to similarly misleading interpretations as in the case of risk.

As a result, *risk-return measures* should be granted the most weight. These measures relate the risk involved to the return received, which is informative in the very long run. In the short run, however, there are similar problems to those discussed above: (un)favorable circumstances may have arisen during the period of investigation or may show up only at a later, unobserved time.

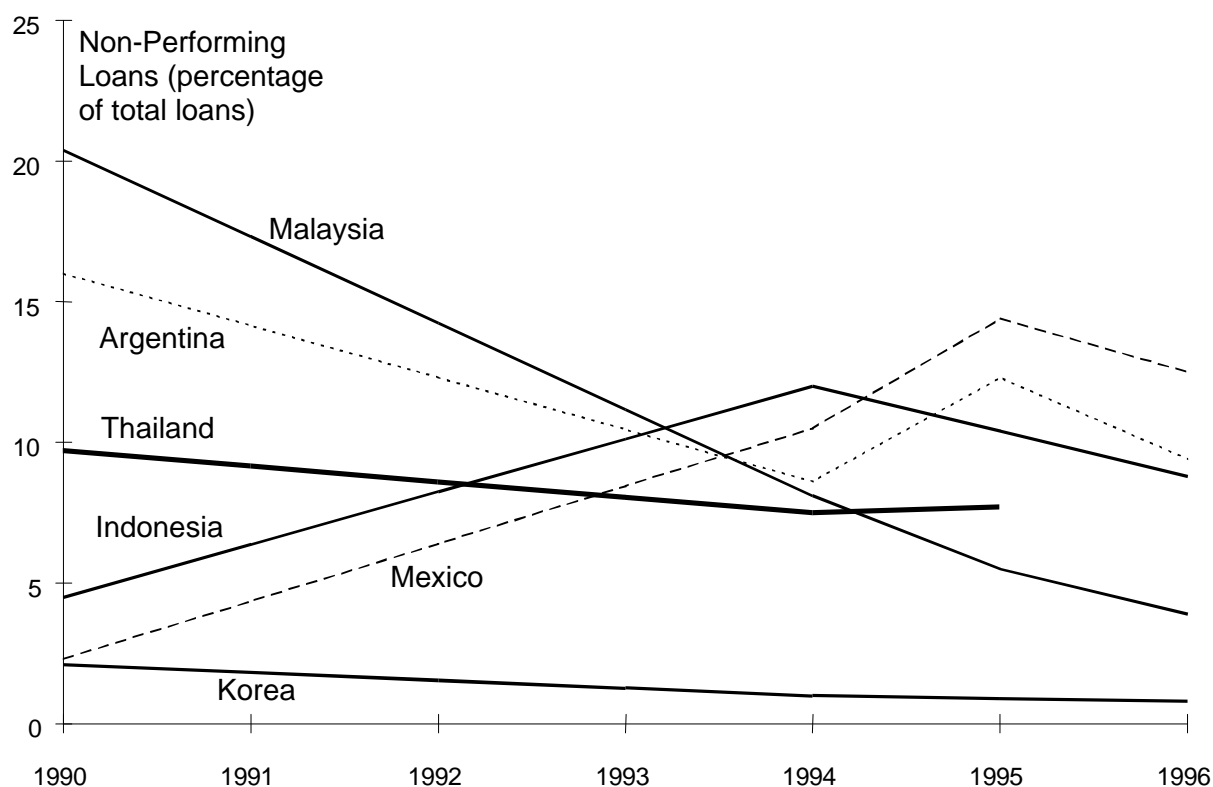
As the three quantitative approaches discussed all involve severe identification problems, it may also be useful to apply a qualitative approach: ask about the *incentives* for taking excessively risky positions. The higher the incentives, the more reasonable is the assumption to be realistic.

The methodological qualifications require care in the interpretation of data but do not necessarily forbid inquiry. Indeed, the literature has used several indicators to evaluate the policy of banks or bank systems (see recently Karels and McClatchey 1999). These will be discussed for the case of Thailand. One would expect either that Thailand demonstrates a greater element of risk in comparison to other countries (where no such severe banking crisis has happened) or that the indicator has worsened for Thailand over time.

4.1 Ex post risk levels

One indicator that is often used to measure ex post risk levels is an analysis of the proportion of non-performing loans to assets (or total loans). For example, Radelet and Sachs (1998) have argued that Asian countries, including Thailand, did not show behavior different from Latin American countries (see Figure 2). Of course, as with many single indicators, the share of non-performing loans depends on several influences, only one of which is the risk level of the policy adopted (others include the state of the business cycle, accounting rules and the extent of credit growth).

Figure 2. The share of non-performing loans during the 1990's

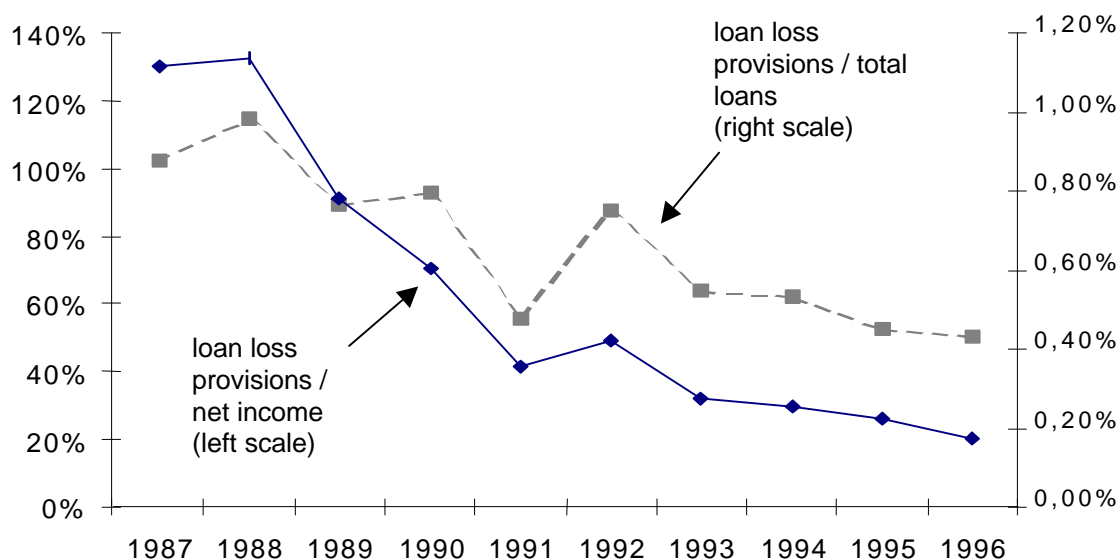


Note: values for 1991 - 1993 linearly interpolated; data from Radelet and Sachs (1998), Table 10

With regard to the first influence, there are no panel data for non-performing loans available that would allow one to normalize the levels of bad loans. With regard to the second influence, it is now well known that Thailand's rules were generous compared to those of industrialized countries. The criterion for non-performance was no payment within 12 months (in contradiction to shorter periods and stricter definitions in other countries). However, it is not clear how strictly the rules are applied in countries at a similar stage of development. Differences in behavior could be even more problematic. There is informal evidence that paying back one's debt was a strong behavioral imperative in Thailand until the early 1990s - the rationalization for this behavior may be the pronounced relationship banking system, which means that it is more or less impossible to switch lending institutions. Another rationalization for introducing the above-mentioned 12-months criterion is the high proportion of income in Thailand that is dependent on agriculture, implying a seasonally varying income.

Once again, if one analyzes loan loss provisions, there is no evidence of an emerging crisis (Figure 3)⁴. Nevertheless, here too one must consider the possibility that banks either manipulated the data to avoid a loss of confidence, that strong credit growth diluted the problem or that banks were just lucky until 1996.

Figure 3. Loan loss provisions at Thailand's banks



Notes: Loan loss provisions and net income (before income tax) data from Bank of Thailand (1996 based on data only for Thai commercial banks); total loans data from IFS (=line 22d)

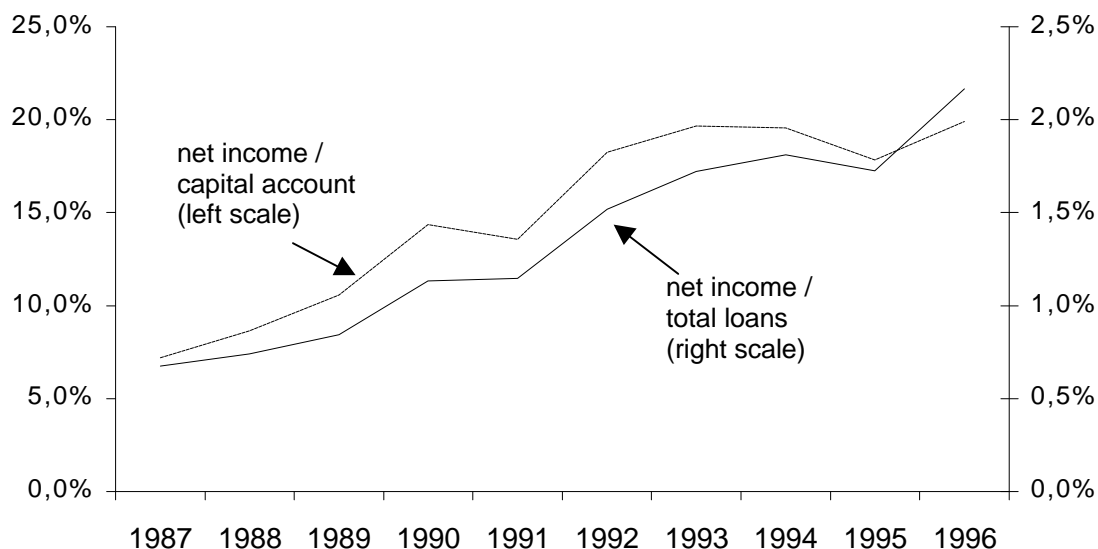
4.2 Ex post returns

Standard measures of performance with regard to returns are the return on equity and the return on assets (assuming that the business structure of the banks compared is similar). As no internationally comparable data for developing countries are yet available⁵, a solution is to watch the time-series data for Thailand's banks; these do not exhibit any major trend (see Figure 4).

⁴ Also in comparison to commercial banks from OECD countries the ratio of net provisions to total assets was roughly on average for Thailand's commercial banks in 1996 (see OECD 1998, Table 4).

⁵ Comparing again Thailand's commercial banks record in 1996 with banks from OECD countries shows above average profitability for Thailand (see OECD 1998, Table 3).

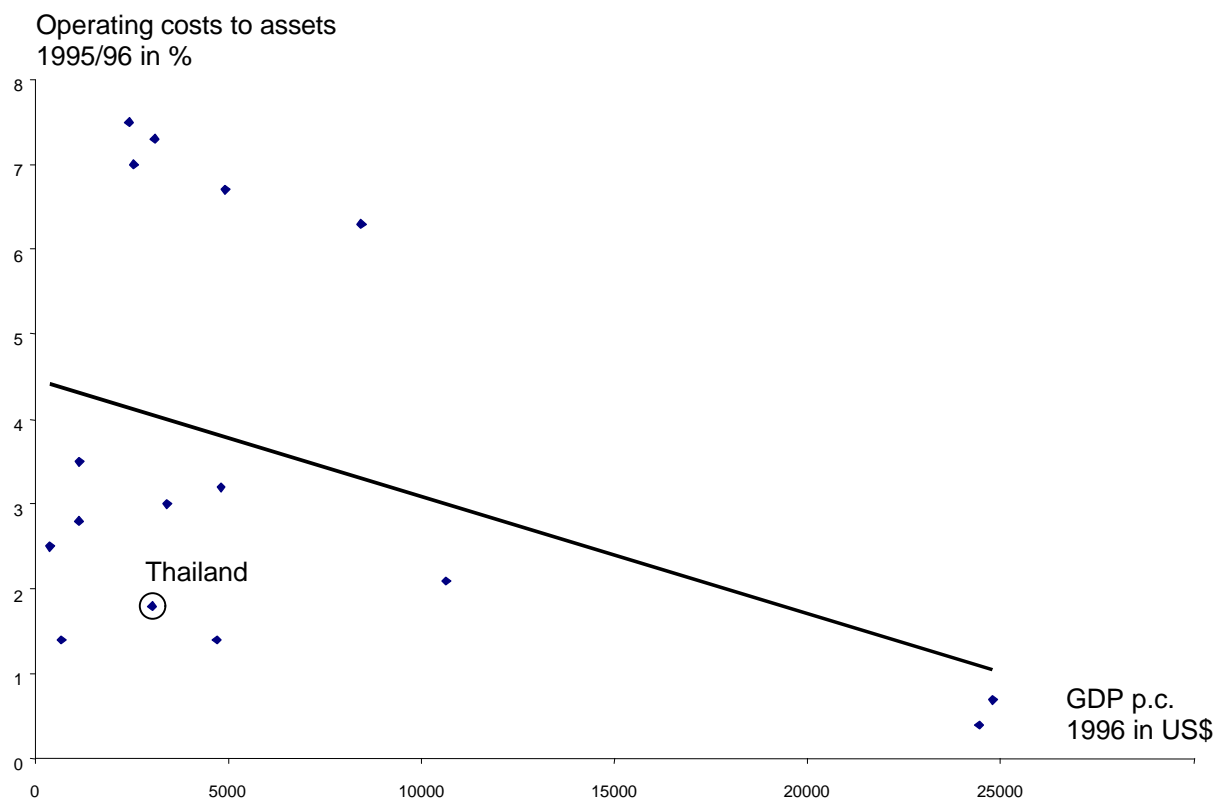
Figure 4. Return ratios for Thailand's banks



Notes: Net income data (before income tax) from Bank of Thailand (1996 based on data for Thai commercial banks only); capital account data from IFS (=line 27a); total loan data from IFS (=line 22d)

As the absolute profitability shown in the profit and loss statements does not seem to be remarkably low, this raises the question as to whether the reason is good banking or restricted competition. The latter claim is often made for Thailand but has hardly been empirically substantiated. One way of challenging its plausibility is to examine the inference to be drawn from low competition that operational efficiency is lacking by means of an international comparison. One measure of this is the ratio of operating costs to assets, a figure provided by the BIS (1998). Based on these absolute figures, Thailand's banks do not appear to operate expensively. As one would expect this ratio to vary systematically with income per capita, it can be "normalized" by applying a linear regression. Again, however, Figure 5 shows that Thailand is positioned below the income-adjusted average.

Figure 5. The relationship between operating costs and GNP p.c.



$$\text{Regression: } y (\text{operating costs ratio}) = 4.4654 - 0.0001377x (\text{GDP p.c.}) \quad R^2 = 0.178$$

$$(5.815) \quad (-1.743)$$

$$p=0.00 \quad p=0.103$$

Notes: T-values in parenthesis; operating costs ratio from BIS (1998), Table VII. 1, p. 119 (data for 16 developing countries); GDP p.c. from IFS

Other arguments put forward in favor of collusive behavior between banks are concentration ratios and observations of similar interest rates offered. Both arguments lack theoretical and empirical substantiation. Regarding concentration, Thailand's banking market could be described as a wide oligopoly, in which the market outcome depends on strategies but is not generally worse than a situation in which there are many small competitors. It is precisely these strategies which critics claim are coordinated, as similar interest rates on deposits offered by the many different banks seem to show. However, market forces would not allow much variety between the prices for almost homogeneous goods in a competitive market, either.

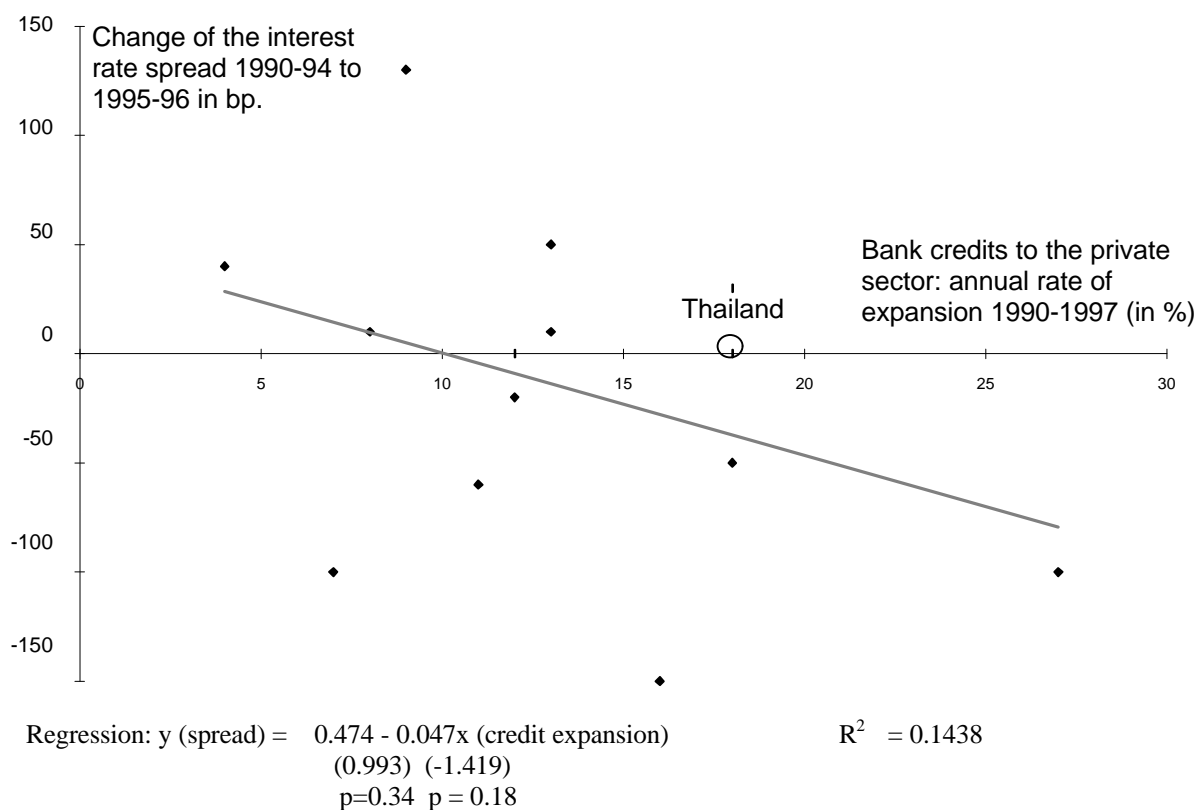
In summary, the profitability observed is not low in absolute terms and is also not (obviously) caused by oligopolistic collusive pricing. This leaves room for efficient behavior.

4.3 Risk-return measures

Combined risk-return measures are definitely more preferable than isolated risk or return measures. However, risk can only vaguely be assessed or approximated by means of empirical indicators. In this respect, the BIS (1998) has argued that an enormous increase in credit extensions, as took place in Thailand during the 1990s, should be accompanied by an increase in the net interest margin. The reasoning is that, in such cases, a greater share of the project applications presented to the banks will be approved, thus bringing less favorable projects onto the banks' books. If the banks are, however, prone to moral hazard, they may not consider the price of risk appropriately and thus show a decline in the net interest margin.

The data sample provided by the BIS (see Figure 6 for a graphical presentation), indeed shows the theoretically unwanted situation of a negative relationship, which seems to indicate moral hazard behavior. From a statistical point of view, however, the evidence is not really convincing. Furthermore, Thailand, which might be expected to be a leading example in this respect, is positioned on the conservative side of the regression line.

Figure 6. Change of the net interest margin and the credit expansion

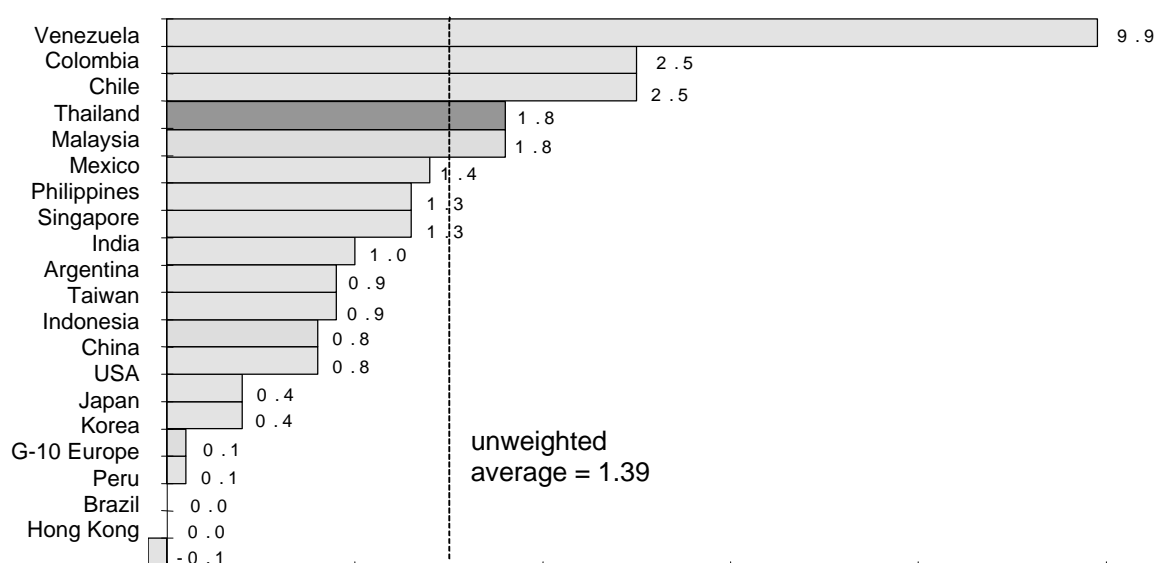


Notes: T-values in parenthesis; data from BIS (1998), Table VII.1, S. 119 (data for developing countries excl. 3 outliers)

In another attempt to get to grips with the risk-return problem, the BIS (1998, p.119) proposes a very rough measure for risk provision, i.e. the difference between the net interest margin and the operating cost margin. The theoretical expectation would be that countries in which banks take greater risks are characterized by higher risk provision margins. Assuming that the risk in crisis countries has been above average, these countries have moral hazard problems because their risk provisions are below average. Once more, though, the data for Thailand do not fit the moral hazard case based on this simplistic measure (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. A rough estimation of risk provision

(risk provision = net interest margin minus operating cost margin, in % of total assets)



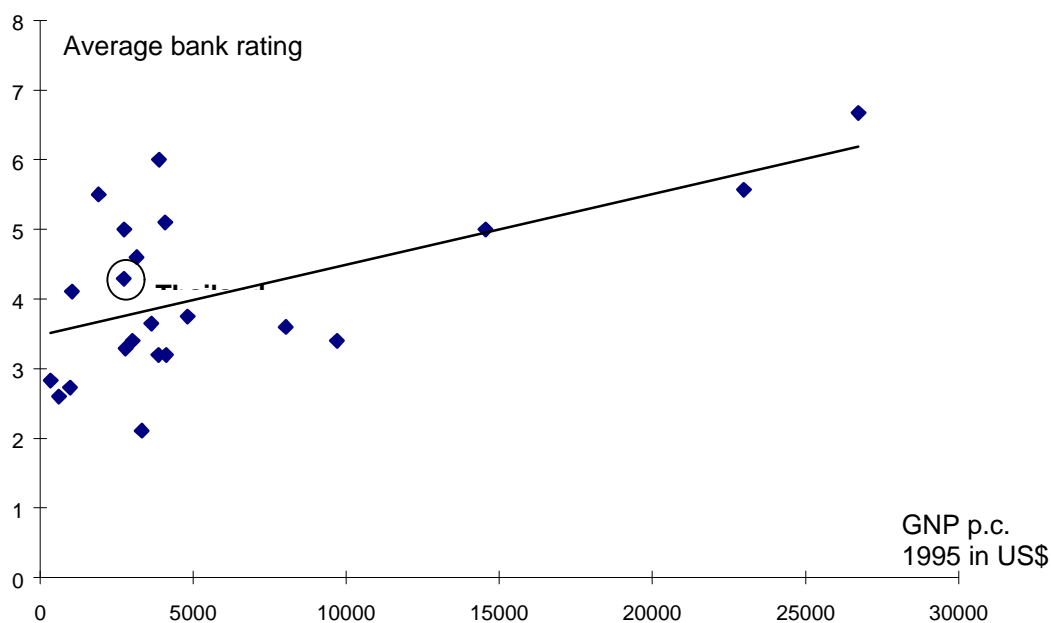
Note: data from BIS 1998, p. 119; net interest margin and operating costs 1995-1996

Finally, one could argue that all information available about the risk-return policy followed is considered by the rating industry. The expected consequence is that banking systems with moral hazard problems will receive lower ratings than others will. As the financial strength of banks is systematically related to the general stage of development, a linear regression is applied to produce an average ratio between GNP per capita and average bank ratings. According to the data supplied by an IMF study (IMF 1996, p.114), Thailand is again on the safe side of the regression line, where misbehavior would be expected to be less (see Figure 8).

Although these measures should not be overinterpreted, it is surprising that they are introduced to identify moral hazard but do not deliver the expected results for Thailand. It is, of course, possible that the inferences made above demonstrate the uselessness of these indicators. However, if one accepts the fact that the indicators have been introduced by experienced institutions and that they are, for example, more informative for Indonesia and Korea (see the short summary in Table 2), the fact that Thailand is the only one of the crisis countries to be consistently positioned in an unexpected way should give pause for thought. What if the

measurements are not wrong, but rather that Thailand's banks do not really fit into the category of excessive risk taking?

Figure 8. The relationship between average bank rating and GNP



Regression: $y \text{ (rating)} = 3.4782 + 0.0001 \text{ (GNP p.c.)}$ $R^2 = 0.33877$
(12.242) (3.201)
(p = 0.00) (p = 0.0045)

Note: average bank rating (= Moody's Financial Strength Rating, May 1996) from IMF (1996), p. 114; (transformation: A→9, B→8, ..., E→1); GNP p.c. from IFS

Table 2. Summary of information from risk-return measures on Asian crisis countries

| In this Paper | Measures | Indonesia | Korea | Malaysia | Thailand |
|-----------------|--|------------|------------|----------|-----------|
| Figure 6 | Change of net interest margin and credit expansion | + | 0 | - | 0 |
| Figure 7 | Risk provision | - | - | + | + |
| Figure 8 | Bank rating | - | - | + | + |
| Signs of crisis | | yes | yes | ? | no |

Note: + indicates reasonable risk-return policy etc.

4.4 Incentives for excessive risk taking?

When empirical indicators do not deliver very clear results, the policy of banks may be analyzed indirectly: have there been incentives for imprudent risk taking? The moral hazard framework often stresses two assumptions in this respect, as explained by Krugman (1998). First, an (implicit) government guarantee reduces monitoring efforts by depositors, a notion that is supported empirically rather than rejected by the study of Demirgüç-Kunt and Detragiache (1998). Second, weak prudence regulation leaves room for imprudent lending. A third aspect is that certain financial institutions, i.e. finance companies, were treated differently to banks, thus creating different incentives. Finance companies made up about 20% of all financial institutions' assets - compared to more than 60% for (commercial) banks – and experienced a strong increase in market share during the 1990s (see Menkhoff 1998, p.226).⁶

Analyzing the situation applying to deposit insurance is more complicated than is often assumed. Until August 1997, there was neither a government guarantee nor a deposit insurance scheme. Although in the past the central bank had helped depositors, it effectively did not insure deposits fully in the recent crisis. Why, then, should depositors have expected to be bailed-out? If they had formed rational expectations, they would have realized that in the recent crisis there would be no complete insurance. The regulations are quite complicated in detail but can be summarized as follows: stakeholders of bankrupt financial institutions do not receive anything, whereas depositors often keep the principal amount of their investment but have to compromise on the interest or a (longer) holding period.⁷ The differences between depositors follow the logic that the professional participants have to accept a higher burden, whereas only the truly small retail deposits are completely insured.

This practice by Thailand's authorities is in line with the modern understanding of how deposit insurance should be applied. It has to be emphasized that it is simply wrong to assume that deposits would have been fully insured in Thailand, and it is also implausible to assume that this could have been expected.

The case is different for prudential regulation. The verdict e.g. of the World Bank (1997a) is very clear, and it enumerates the failures. A widely cited example may serve to demonstrate the severity of the problem: first, a loan was only classified as non-performing if no payment was made for a whole 12-month period (compared to the 3 month international standard). Second, it seems to have been not uncommon practice to renegotiate these loans by adding interest payments to the principal shortly before finalizing the 12-month period, thus effectively circumventing the regulation. Third, if a loan was non-performing, accrued interest was still

⁶ The ratio of assets of finance companies to commercial banks increased from 1:5 to 1:3. The remaining share is mainly held by specialized state financial institutions.

⁷ This policy decreased the net present value of large deposits in the banking crisis of the early 1980s often to a value of roughly 70%. The same happened in the recent crisis.

calculated as if it had been received, which bolstered the capital basis (by fictive earnings). Fourth, loan loss provisions for accepted non-performing loans seem to have been insufficient.

Although these practices and their implications may not have been easily recognizable for outsiders, the bankruptcy case involving the Bangkok Bank of Commerce (BBC) in May 1996 disclosed the risks involved (see e.g. Phongpaichit and Baker 1998, p.105ff.). Not only was the bank technically bankrupt, but politicians were also heavily involved in exploiting to their personal profit advantage; what is more, the central bank kept quiet despite knowing better. In the end, the head of the Bank of Thailand, a deputy finance minister and others had to leave office, taking with them a lot of the trust in Thailand's financial system.

The third aspect besides deposit insurance and prudential regulation refers to the situation of finance companies. As these financial institutions were not allowed to open branch networks, they could not directly compete with (commercial) banks but had to specialize in certain ways. In the savings sector, they offered promissory notes for relatively large amounts of money that not only offered higher yields than small savings deposits, but also higher yields than equally large time deposits at banks. There are three possible reasons for this interest rate difference: first, finance companies could not offer identical convenience. Second, they were less known and less visible to the general public. Third, informed savers may have realized that the risk was higher, e.g. due to the perceptibly lower equity capital regulation. In any case, finance companies were thus "*forced*" to engage in riskier business. Consumer credits, margin loans and housing finance were among their preferred fields. The need to accept higher risks may have been amplified by the chance that some finance companies might be upgraded to banks.

Summing up the risk-return policy of banks in Thailand, the country does not really look like a case of general intentional moral hazard behavior in banking (although the BBC case could serve as an example). This still leaves open the possibility that, according to their old standards, banks operated in a prudent manner, i.e. that they did not misbehave deliberately. However, one side effect of a changing environment is that the factors that previously accounted for market success may turn into wrong strategies. This idea will be developed further in the next section.

5 Consequences of Internal and External Financial Liberalization

Thailand's financial markets changed markedly during the early 1990s. The driving forces behind this move towards liberalization are similar to the efforts of other countries: the insight into the power and efficiency of functioning markets, the wish to "upgrade" to international standards and, finally, the need to open up in the financial sector in line with the gains from free trade. The changes in Thailand's financial markets during the 1990s can be summarized in one phrase: a rapid liberalization process. Although this process consists of numerous measures that are documented e.g. by the Bank of Thailand (1998a), three major elements can be singled out:

In 1992, the three-year process of interest rate liberalization was completed. Interest rates were no longer decreed by the Bank of Thailand but were determined by national and international market forces, with some influence from the central bank.

Thailand allowed new competitors to enter the banking market. No new banking licenses had been issued for decades, but 15 additional banks entered the market in 1993 when the Bangkok International Banking Facilities (BIBF) was implemented. A second element is that the upgrading of some finance companies into full banks was announced. There is evidence that productivity of banks increased significantly during the earlier years of liberalization (see Leightner and Lovell 1998).

The capital account was liberalized in significant steps during the early 1990s. One of these measures was the introduction of the BIBF.

These three major reforms transformed the character of banking in Thailand to the extent that one could say the entire system has changed. To oversimplify the argument, the former system of relatively exclusive relationship banking has been transformed within only a few years into a system of market-oriented competitive banking. Although the latter seems to work as a reference standard and thus looks almost natural, it is not, as section 2 of this paper has demonstrated. The key conclusion to be drawn here is that because of this rapid change in the environment, the financial institutions had severe problems adapting to the new situation.

In the following sections, the new environment is described in terms of increasing risk and decreasing risk awareness. The first two sections, 5.1 and 5.2, discuss why market and credit risk have almost inevitably increased due to liberalization. This, of course, does not mean that liberalization per se brings disadvantages, but one must realize that the advantages are accompanied by negative side effects if not proper market institutions are established. The latter

make take a lot of time, however. In the next two sections, 5.3 and 5.4, the effect of liberalization – decreasing risk awareness – is more indirect.

5.1 Increasing market risks due to liberalization

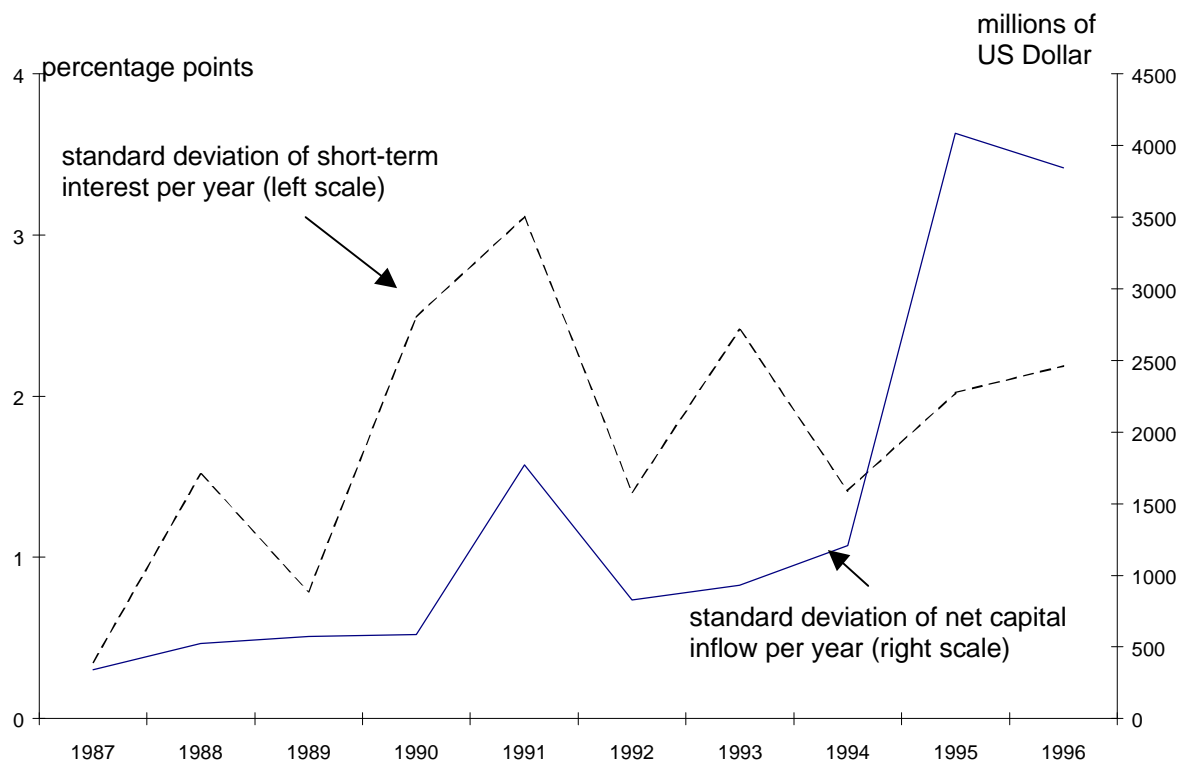
Financial liberalization can have risk-increasing as well risk-decreasing effects from a theoretical *ex ante* point of view. With regard to financial institutions, it is quite obvious that the nature of the business changes, and with it the kind of risk involved. In an environment of financial repression in which the state dictates prices and possibly also quantities or the kind of quantities, financial institutions also run risks. These risks can be related to the incentives set by the state, such as changes in administered prices or in pursued credit steering, etc. As in a market environment, the financial institutions have incentives to control the quality of their borrowers; however, instead of a market risk they run a kind of state risk, which they must learn to manage.

Thus the market risk or at least the extent of the market risk which Thailand's banks faced from the early 1990s onwards took on a new quality. This is obvious in the case of interest rates, which were previously administered. Although "*administered*" is different from "*fixed*", it seems to be common practice for bureaucrats to adjust nominal interest rates less than markets. This still leaves the possibility that real interest rates are more stable in a market environment. However, experience does not support such a supposition. The reason for the more volatile prices that occur in a free market as opposed to under administered regimes is probably that markets permanently adjust to new information, whereas "*fixed*" prices contain less information. In the last instance, however, there is no theoretical determinacy; it is a question of empirical realization.

Another aspect in addition to the change from an administration- to a market-run system is the influence from abroad resulting from external financial liberalization. Again, in theory more or less volatility may be expected, depending on the circumstances. In general, liberalization works in the same way as increase in market size and may thus dampen volatility. However, international markets do not seem to be perfectly integrated, with the result that certain risks may increase, such as shocks from exchange rate shifts or from volatile, voluminous capital flows. Furthermore, internationalization fosters specialization and may thus increase the sensitivity of the economy towards industry-specific shocks.

To estimate these influences, two measures of market risk are compared over a ten years period. Besides the volatility of short-term interest rates, which are the most relevant factor due to the financing structure in Thailand, foreign influences as described above may be identified in capital inflows. The results are given in Figure 9. In the case of Thailand, it does not seem implausible to assume that the advantages of liberalization are accompanied by increased market risk since 1990 and by increased capital inflow volatility since 1995.

Figure 9. Measures of market risk in Thailand 1987 - 1996



Notes: monthly short-term interest rates (= IFS line 60b); quarterly capital inflow (= IFS lines 78 bed +78 bjd+78 bid)

5.2 Increasing credit risks due to liberalization

Whereas the increase in market risk from liberalization is to be expected, the increase in credit risk is not so obvious. In terms of the quality of borrowers, it might not be possible to identify a direct link. However, this is not the only relationship between liberalization and credit risk. The impact of liberalization can also be channeled through a change in the market structure of the banking business. The main impact of liberalization, which was intended both in Thailand and elsewhere, is to increase competition (see also Hellwig 1999). What has changed in this respect?

- First, more suppliers are chasing the same amount and kind of projects than before. In an effort to keep market share or simply to enter the market, one can expect projects that would have been rejected before to be financed now. However, this requires a greater pool of funds. As long as credit expansion is under control, the increased competition may result in a decreased net interest margin, which was not the case in Thailand (see e.g. Figure 6).
- Second, comparatively inexperienced suppliers are entering the market. At least in the beginning, they may have to pay for their learning process, e.g. by underpricing risk. This effect is limited to new entrants and to their learning period.

- Third, new entrants shake up the long-lasting relationships between banks and customers. Today, relationships cannot be expected to be for an indefinite period, as in the old regime; customers may change their bank. This creates two problems. On the one hand, if a bank does not adapt its loan approval technology to take this into account it is ignoring the fact that its knowledge and, what is more important, its control have weakened. On the other hand, borrowers now have a stronger incentive to demonstrate moral hazard behavior, as their market access is not restricted to a single bank. If they do not at first succeed, they can now try again more easily with a different lender.
- Fourth, disintermediation dilutes credit quality. Domestic capital markets have been reformed, and this expansion worked not least because of foreign investments in the stock market. The direct tapping of foreign sources via debentures issued abroad was also important. These new opportunities, however, are open only to established enterprises with good standing as borrowers. This implies that the quality of the remaining bank customers is decreasing.

In summary, while one might expect the first two channels to be less important, weakening customer relationships and credit quality dilution are signs of a fundamental change. Whether this was really important is a matter of fact, a rough answer to which can be gathered from Table 3. In summary, the market share of local banks providing new external funds to private enterprises has been clearly diminishing over the 1990s, dropping from 75% in 1990 to about 50% in 1994-96. Thus local banks were losing one third of their *"potential"* new business to competitors, which marks a landslide change. Moreover, declining credit quality may also have to be added to this.

5.3 Decreasing risk awareness due to "easy money"

The preceding section already mentioned that the increase in credit risk becomes much more important if financial liberalization is accompanied by an easy stance on monetary policy. In this respect, Thailand's institutions, and in particular the central bank, the Bank of Thailand, have gained a high reputation for their conservative approach. The long-run inflation record of Thailand is remarkable in the international context and even more so in comparison to developing countries. The average annual inflation measured via the GDP deflator was 5.0% during the period from 1985 – 1995. This puts Thailand comfortably among the high achievers: it was ranked number 7 out of 47 middle-income economies for low inflation (World Bank 1997b, Table 2). Thus Thailand cannot serve as an example of a deliberate *"easy money"* policy.

Table 3. Sources of new external funds for private non-financial enterprises in the years 1990-96 (in bn. Bath)

| Source of funds | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----------|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|
| Bank Credit of Local Banks | 351.1 | 265.9 | 333.8 | 424.1 | 561.7 | 604.5 | 535.2 |
| Bank Credit of Foreign Banks | 12.4 | 22.1 | 14.4 | 67.4 | 205.9 | 180.6 | 62.9 |
| Private Domestic Issues: Stock | 20 (e) | 17.7 (e) | 55.7 | 55.1 | 137.2 | 129.6 | 117.9 |
| Private Domestic Issues: Debentures | 5 (e) | 3.5 (e) | 8.8 | 16.4 | 59.0 | 52.4 | 53.8 |
| New Securities Issued Abroad | 10 (e) | 10 (e) | 10 (e) | 31.2 | 54.2 | 35.0 | 86.2 |
| Finance Company Credit | 65.9 | 67.9 | 112.2 | 134.8 | 189.8 | 220.7 | 139.6 |
| Total Volume | 464.4 | 387.1 | 534.9 | 728.8 | 1207.8 | 1222.8 | 995.6 |
| Share of Local Banks | 75.6 % | 68.7% | 62.4 % | 58.2% | 46.5% | 49.4% | 53.8% |

Notes: Total bank credits are claims on private sector by commercial banks (=IFS line 22d); bank credit is allocated to local and foreign banks respectively according to their respective share of advances and investments (= Bank of Thailand Monthly Bulletin Table 12; local bank volume reduced by volume of personal consumption loans (Table 13)); data for private domestic issues are from Bank of Thailand Monthly Bulletin Table 24 (e = estimate according to other sources); new securities issued abroad are from Bank of Thailand Monthly Bulletin Table 24 (=line 17; e are rough estimation); finance company credit is from IFS line 42d, reduced by 30 % for personal consumption and banking and other financial business (Bank of Thailand 1998a, Table 2)

This low inflation contrasts markedly with the relatively fast credit growth mentioned above; indeed, the gap between monetary expansion and inflation was not completely filled by real growth. The gap could have two origins. On the one hand there is the – basically intentional – increase in monetary aggregates in relation to real figures, such as GDP, in as far as it reflects the increasing depth of the financial structure (Levine 1997). On the other hand, there is the negative development represented by an asset (price) bubble (see Bank of Thailand 1998b). The latter is a matter for concern that can explain the parallel occurrence of heavy monetary expansion and low inflation.

The reason for this monetary expansion is not to be found in a deliberate policy stance by the Bank of Thailand. On the contrary, it becomes quite clear from official statements that the aim of monetary policy was generally directed towards restricting demand via high interest rates.

The banks would not have been able to counteract this direction through their own sources of credit extension. Rather, the reason that the central bank could not achieve its goal was the influence of the liberalized capital account. For several years, monetary policy was severely handicapped by the *"impossible trinity"*: after having voted for a liberalized capital account and still aiming for a quasi-fixed exchange rate (versus the US dollar), there was only very limited room for an internally oriented monetary policy. Superficially, the capital inflow seemed to free monetary policy for demand management but, in effect, the policy problem was one of too great an inflow, and thus appreciation pressure on the exchange rate. High interest rates seemed to help cool down the economy but attracted even more foreign funds (see Figure 10). A regression for the period of large net capital imports, i.e. from the first quarter of 1987 to the second quarter of 1996, demonstrates a lagging, significant relation between a higher interest rate advantage compared to the USA and larger capital inflows (see Table 4). The relationship is, however, more complex as the specification in Table 4 shows. It includes changing signs according to different lags - a phenomena of the period of high capital inflows since the late 1980s - and furthermore includes a strong element of inertia in capital flows.

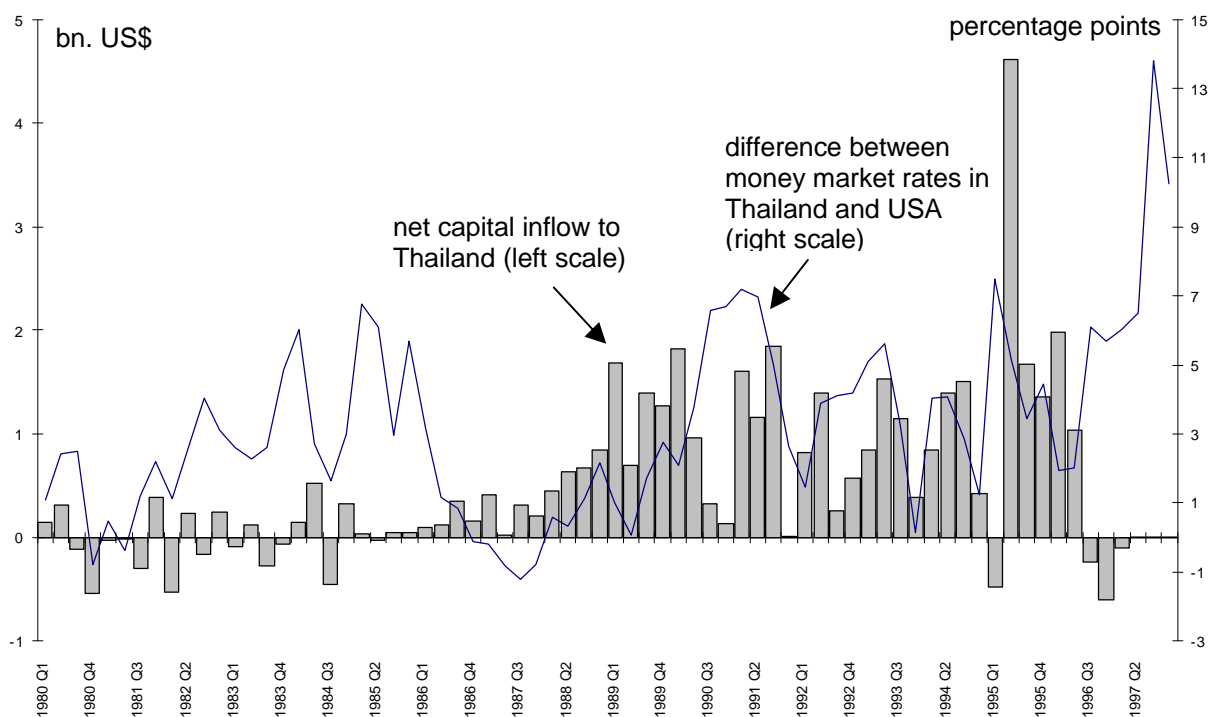
Table 4. Regressions on changes in net capital inflow

| Variable | Period | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | 1980:4-1986:4 | 1980:1-1996:2 | 1987:1-1996:2 |
| Const. | -0.012478 [-0.244940] (0.8091) | 0.052695** [2.575872] (0.0126) | 0.088546*** [3.747228] (0.0007) |
| Interest rate differential | 0.032017* [0.951192] (0.3535) | -0.075429 [-1.684739] (0.0975) | -0.114969 [-1.550870] (0.1308) |
| Interest rate differential (lag 1) | -0.017720 [-0.265055] (0.7938) | 0.260346*** [2.968624] (0.0044) | 0.403175*** [3.155255] (0.0035) |
| Interest rate differential (lag 2) | -0.048887 [-0.708427] (0.4873) | -0.326486*** [-3.896947] (0.0003) | -0.498141*** [-3.892411] (0.0005) |
| Interest rate differential (lag 3) | 0.042576 [0.864461] (0.3981) | 0.125767*** [2.814863] (0.0067) | 0.194709** [2.598295] (0.0140) |
| Moving average term (first order) | -1.577728*** [-4.795993] (0.0001) | -1.205239*** [-16.56708] (0.0000) | -1.399440*** [-13.10712] (0.0000) |
| Number | 25 | 63 | 38 |
| R ² | 0.823491 | 0.716467 | 0.816264 |
| Durbin-Watson | 3.089849 | 2.223003 | 2.304169 |

Notes: money market rate from IFS (=line 60b); capital inflow from IFS (=line 78cbd = overall balance); t-values in squared brackets, significance in parenthesis, stars refer to level of significance, *: 10 per cent, **: 5 per cent, ***: 1 per cent

The major problem with these inflows is not the inflow itself, which on its own would lead to higher capital supply and thus potentially to overinvestment. The true problem is that the price mechanism was put out of force - the foreign funds came in at interest rates several percentage points below the former market-clearing price for Thailand's internal capital market. In combination with a fixed exchange rate, this made money available readily – with supply being virtually totally price-elastic – and cheaply, as there seemed to be no currency premium but only a slight country premium to pay. Effectively, Thailand was in an "easy money" situation, although the central bank did not intend it and although no (goods) inflation was recognizable.

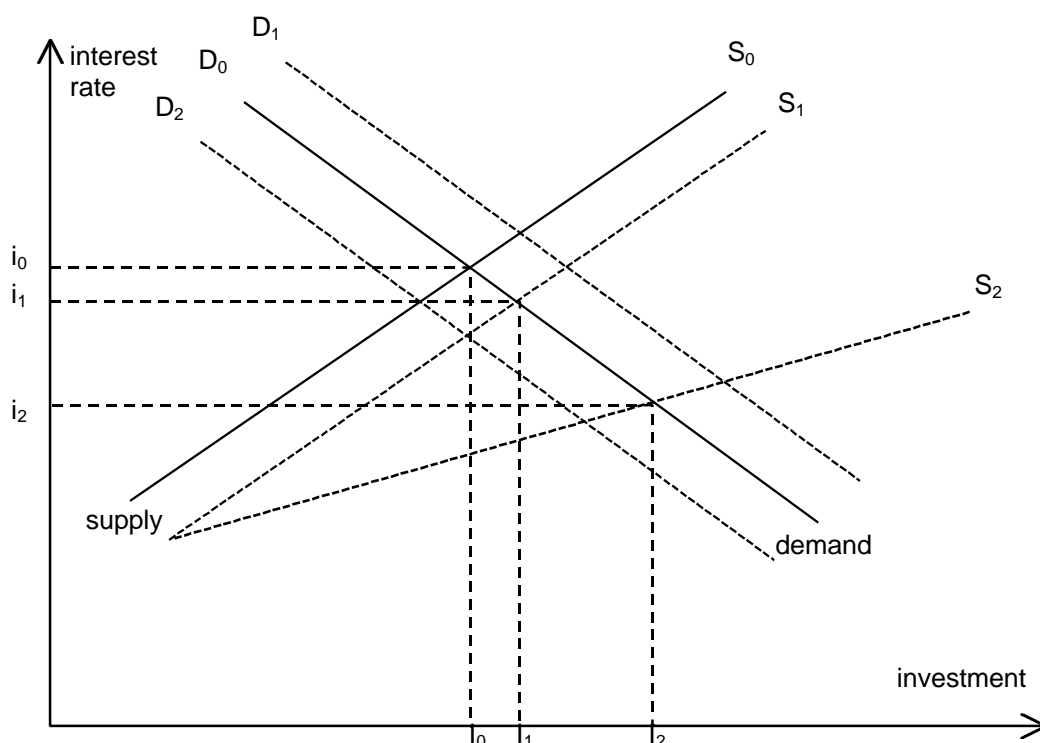
Figure 10. Interest rate differential and net capital inflow



Notes: money market rate from IFS (=line 60b); capital inflow from IFS (=line 78cbd = overall balance)

The shock of this kind of liberalization can be demonstrated in the generic Figure 11, which represents a highly simplified capital market in Thailand. Market opening basically causes an enlarged supply of capital (in the figure a shift from S_0 to S_1). Demand may also increase due to improved investment opportunities, i.e. shifting D_0 to D_1 . However, it is also possible that liberalization has no volume effect but only improves diversification. In marginal cases, this could lead to a shift from D_0 to D_2 , implying an identical investment volume but a lower interest rate. Far more important than any slight shift in the demand curve, however, is the radical downward movement of the supply curve when opening occurs at an extremely high domestic interest rate without any exchange rate risk (the limited country risk is not taken into account). The new "equilibrium" $i_2 - I_2$ is characterized by much lower interest rates and much higher real investment. The increase in investments is due solely to capital inflows: these projects may be profitable at the now lowered interest rates, but are not necessarily so at the "true" domestic rates.

Figure 11. Demand and supply shocks in the capital market



In this sense, capital account liberalization decreases awareness of the market risk involved when investments are financed in foreign currency, a practice that became increasingly popular in the 1990s. From the viewpoint of individual banks, it seemed rational to use the cheap funds and to reduce requirements on the profitability of projects, in particular as intensifying competition provoked this policy.⁸ From a macroeconomic point of view, one has to question the rationality as the interest rate was "subsidized" by an artificially stable exchange rate.

5.4 Decreasing risk awareness due to international benchmarking

The split between the risk perception of a bank and the effective risk run by the economy was not only caused by easy money. The international liberalization widened the horizon of many actors and introduced internationally competitive financial institutions into their "world of thought". The interesting point is that this internationalization may not have helped Thai financial institutions to cope with the new environment. Instead, these institutions may have felt reinforced in their behavior from the favorable feedback they received from the "international benchmark". At least four aspects of these unfortunate feedback channels merit examination:

- Quite obvious confirmation of Thai financial institutions' strategy must have come from the fact that foreign banks were very eager to deposit money with them, as the massive capital inflow shows. This inflow implies that professional foreign bankers saw profitable investment opportunities, thus rejecting the notion of overinvestment,

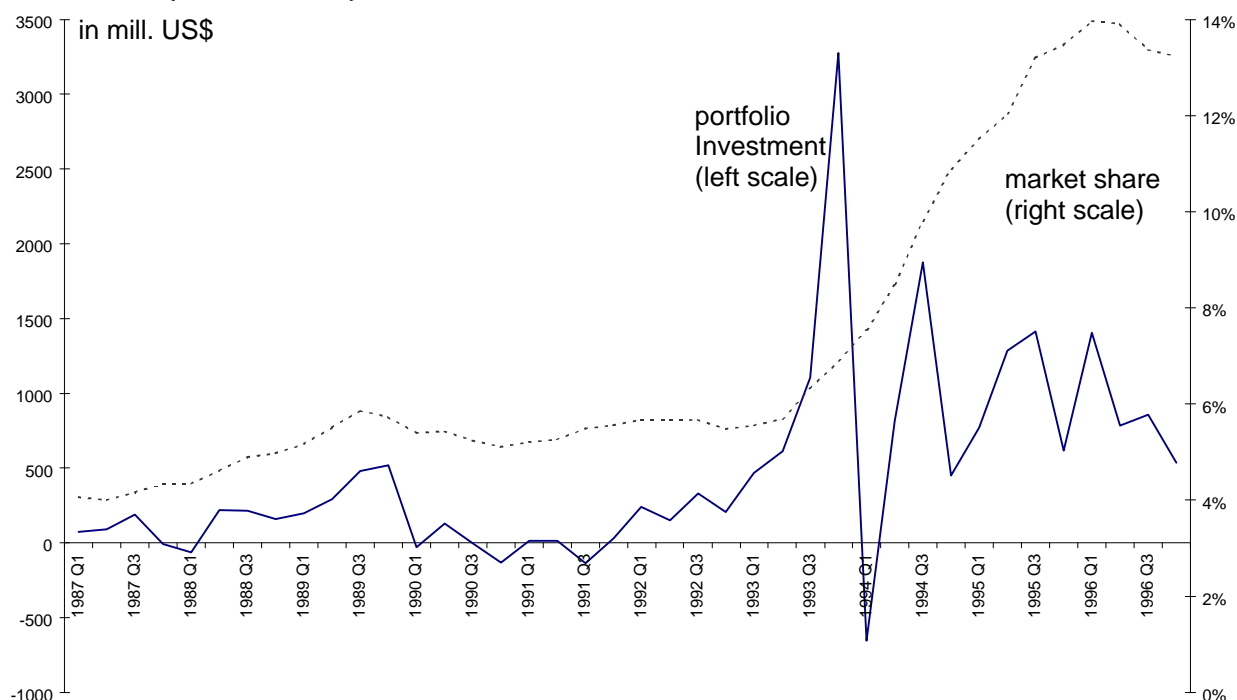
⁸ The interest rate advantage was about 4 percentage points for the US-Dollar (see Figure 10) and sometimes even more for the Yen.

asset inflation and financial fragility. An empirical indicator would be the increase in international bank lending to Thailand (IMF 1998, Table 2.4).

- Related behavior signaling relatively attractive investment opportunities is to be seen in the high portfolio investments by foreigners, as most of these channel their funds via professional fund managers or are advised by professional analysts.
- A third indicator of a positive international evaluation of the Thai market is the high and continuing interest of international banks in increasing their presence in Thailand. During the process of cautious liberalization of foreign access, the market share of foreign banks increased markedly.
- Finally, international rating agencies and, closely related to them, institutional investors expressed high confidence in the solidity of Thailand's economy, as the country rating and the country risk premium improved until 1996 and were not really damaged before the crisis (IMF 1998, p.53).

Empirical evidence for the second and third of the above-mentioned four aspects is provided in Figure 12.

**Figure 12. Thailand's attractiveness for international financial institutions
(1987 1996)**



Notes: portfolio investment (=IFS line 78bgd); market share of foreign banks in Thailand (= Bank of Thailand Monthly Bulletin Table 12)

6 Conclusions

The basic issue addressed in this paper is whether Thailand suffered from bad banking in the sense of deliberately risky loan excesses and intentional moral hazard behavior. The result is clear: the evidence available does not support such a proposition. On the contrary, rather the opposite is true: in terms of efficient capital allocation, operational efficiency or indirect indicators of moral hazard, Thailand is very reasonable in comparison to other countries' experience. This result has important consequences for the course of economic policy to be adopted in dealing with the crisis.

To exaggerate the argument somewhat, trusting into the bad banking proposition would require the drastic reform of Thailand's corrupt and inefficient financial institutions, thus healing the origin of the present crisis. If, however, the true problem is not bad banking but that reasonable institutions with governance structures that basically worked nevertheless failed badly, the framework has to be modified and the reform carried out should be more moderately. To overstate the point, the deep involvement of professionally managed and professionally regulated international financial institutions in the crisis indicates that the case is not specific to Thai institutions but to financial institutions in general. Above and beyond this, it is also a crisis of macroeconomic management, as can be recognized from the overvalued currency.⁹

It would, of course, be misleading to end the story here, as the crash reveals severe shortcomings in the financial sector. These shortcomings can be understood as the consequences of a liberalization process that was probably performed too fast, and in the wrong order (see in detail Vajragupta and Vichyanond 1998). Liberalization, as discussed in Section 5, changed the rules of the game without offering appropriate guidance to financial markets. It increased new kinds of credit risks and market risks. So, formerly good banking practices transformed into inadequate banking. Negative effects were magnified by easy money and by the fact that the growing confidence in economic success was shared by international institutions. A side effect of this argument is that there have been elements of moral hazard and corruption in Thailand, too. However, finance companies only accounted for 20% of the market, and the BBC scandal was not an example of general practice.

The interpretation suggested, i.e. a system change leading to inadequate banking, cannot be based on compelling evidence. One may even ask, whether macro indicators are appropriate to detect perverse microeconomic incentives. The more useful data of banks' credit policies are not available, however. The purpose is thus to cut across anecdotal evidence and to provide a

⁹ This refers to the course of the policy, as e.g. emphasized by Corbett and Vines (1999), and to the administrative and political aspects of macromanagement, as addressed by Lauridsen (1998).

more systematic picture. It is up to later research trying to collect microdata and to evaluate them.

The approach taken appears to have the major advantage that it does not require us to neglect the longstanding history of good banking in Thailand. If it is not adopted, analysts run the danger of overshooting their target and to concentrate one-sidedly on the failures made. The more balanced approach has, however, an unpleasant implication: there is no clear policy prescription on the exact transformation of institutions and the sequencing of reforms.

It is beyond question that upgraded institutions are required for orderly functioning financial markets and that these should be established the faster the better (see e.g. Moretti 1998). Thailand needs an improved regulatory framework, institutions being able to enforce the new rules as well as financial institutions which are able to operate adequately in a liberalized environment. Thus, the policy problem is not the direction in which to go but the specific steps, their coordination and the patience that may be needed until the institutions operate efficiently. A major bottleneck to be expected is a shortage in expertise knowledge on several levels of the financial institutions. It would not be sufficient for example that a few experts in a bank understand modern risk management but also the medium management level would benefit greatly from this understanding. Therefore, it does not seem unrealistic to think of a 10 or 20 years period until most financial institutions can behave efficiently in a liberalized market environment.

In particular, implementing isolated measures that make the market work better in some way could be even harmful in the intermediate time when the system changes from the Thai-style capitalism to a modern market economy. This seems to be at least the message from the 1980s liberalization and sequencing literature and from the recent Asian experience. More detailed work on the transformation of institutions and the sequencing of reforms may be necessary (see e.g. Johnston et al. 1997).

Annex

Table 1: Countries used in International Comparisons

| Countries | Fig. 1 | | Fig. 5 | Fig. 6 | | Fig. 8 | |
|--------------|---|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | GDP p.c. 1996 in US\$ ¹⁾ | Credit Volume to GDP | Operating Costs to Assets | Rate of Expansion | Change of int. Rate Spread | GNP p.c. 1995 in US\$ | Average Bank Rating |
| Argentina | 8446 | 0.181 | 6.3 | (4) ² | (-590) ² | 8030 | 3.6 |
| Brazil | 4908 | 0.263 | 6.7 | (2) ² | (-880) ² | 3640 | 3.65 |
| Chile | 4800 | 0.564 | 3.2 | 11 | -60 | 4090 | 5.1 |
| China | 677 | 0.916 | 1.4 | 13 | 50 | 620 | 2.6 |
| Colombia | 2424 | 0.207 | 7.5 | 9 | 130 | 1910 | 5.5 |
| Czech Rep. | 5471 | 0.574 | | | | 3870 | 3.2 |
| Hong Kong | 24445 | 1.622 | 0.4 | 8 | 10 | 22990 | 5.57 |
| Hungary | | | | | | 4120 | 3.2 |
| India | 384 | 0.256 | 2.5 | 4 | 40 | 340 | 2.83 |
| Indonesia | 1127 | | 2.8 | 18 | 30 | 980 | 2.73 |
| Jordan | 654 | 0.652 | | | | | |
| Korea | 10640 | 0.618 | 2.1 | 12 | 0 | 9700 | 3.4 |
| Malaysia | 4684 | | 1.4 | 16 | -150 | 3890 | 6 |
| Mexico | 3411 | 0.164 | 3 | 7 | -100 | 3320 | 2.11 |
| Oman | | | | | | 4820 | 3.75 |
| Pakistan | 449 | 0.248 | | | | | |
| Panama | | | | | | 2750 | 5 |
| Peru | 2547 | 0.191 | 7 | 27 | -100 | | |
| Philippines | 1152 | 0.490 | 3.5 | 18 | -50 | 1050 | 4.11 |
| Poland | 3484 | 0.159 | | | | 2790 | 3.29 |
| Russia | 2908 | 0.072 | | | | | |
| Singapore | 24799 | 0.973 | 0.7 | 12 | -20 | 26730 | 6.67 |
| South Africa | 2978 | 0.701 | | | | 3160 | 4.6 |

Table 1: Countries used in International Comparisons/ cont d.

| Countries | Fig. 1 | | Fig. 5 | Fig. 6 | | Fig. 8 | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | GDP p.c. 1996 in US\$ ¹⁾ | Credit Volume to GDP | Operating Costs to Assets | Rate of Expansion | Change of int. Rate Spread | GNP p.c. 1995 in US\$ | Average Bank Rating |
| Sri Lanka | 759 | 0.251 | | | | | |
| Taiwan | | | | 13 | 10 | 14550 | 5 |
| Thailand | 3024 | 1.019 | 1.8 | 18 | 0 | 2740 | 4.29 |
| Turkey | 2811 | 0.223 | | | | | |
| Venezuela | 3095 | 0.080 | 7.3 | (-9) ²⁾ | (-770) ²⁾ | 3020 | 3.4 |
| Zimbabwe | 725 | 0.212 | | | | | |

Note: ¹⁾ for Figure 1 and Figure 5
²⁾ outliers

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