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Reading lowbrow autobiographies: The rich, the gorgeous and the comical

In the mid-1990s, Craig Reynolds gave a talk in the Kahin Center at Cornell's Southeast Asia Program about the meaning and importance of Thai manuals. I remembered how inspiring it was to listen to him talk about his fascination with Thai *khumue* (handbooks), *tamra* (manuals/texts) and *khamphi* (treatises/canons) that he had collected during his trips to Bangkok. He later wrote up his talk as a study of business manuals popular with Sino-Thai entrepreneurs during the boom years of the late 1980s and early 1990s. We can also read about his full-blown obsession with Thai manuals in his extended essay in *Seditious histories*.¹

When I received a copy of his *Seditious histories*, I was touched to see in the hand-written inscription that Reynolds referred to me as a 'crypto-historian', perhaps parodying Michael Herzfeld's neologism

1 Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 214–42. See also his 'Sino-Thai business culture: Strategies, management and warfare', *Asia-Pacific magazine*, (6–7) (1997): 33–8. In a private email, he told me that if he were to write his intellectual autobiography it would reveal that:

for many years I thought Buddhism was the key to understanding Thai civilization, then for a long time it was Marxism, then the *intoe* [international] globalizing Thai person with a bit of *jek* thrown in, and then manuals—absolutely the key to civilization everywhere!

Craig's latest hunch is now about risk and uncertainty and 'the sciences of prognostication that empower decision-making and the capacity to deal with tricky situations with a bit of policeman thrown in' (personal correspondence, 5 November 2013).

of crypto-colonialism to describe Thailand's colonial condition. I was honoured that he accepted me as a fellow traveller in the discipline of history and a sympathetic observer of Thai civilisation. In this chapter, I acknowledge his generous interpellation but shall steer clear of saying anything about Thai politics where I am most at home.

But instead of handbooks, manuals, texts, treatises and canons, I will focus on contemporary lowbrow pocketbook autobiographies, which are, in a loose sense, a form of manual knowledge 'that is self-consciously organised for preservation, retrieval, transmission, and consumption.'² To help explain the significance and relevance of the pocketbook autobiographies in this study, I am guided by the insight of Hayden White whose controversial theorising of history and literature I, nevertheless, find useful.³ I will apply his tropes of emplotment as romance, comedy and satire to make sense of the lives of the iconic types of people who could be considered models of success or celebrities in contemporary Thai society—the filthy rich, the gorgeous women and the tragic comedians.

To begin, I offer a caveat. My discussion cannot by any means be a definitive look at all iconic models of success in contemporary Thai society. It should be seen as one example of how autobiographies can give us a glimpse of prevailing social values. I have identified only three representative models based on a research trip in 2005. The reader will see that my methodology is limited and uncomplicated.

During six months in Bangkok in that year, I made a habit of walking out of the little lane where my sister lived to the main thoroughfare to have lunch at *Nang Linchee*. After a delicious meal, usually spicy noodles, chicken rice or stir fry, I would work off unneeded calories by walking briskly down the street to the neighbourhood Tops Supermarket to pick up a newspaper and buy freshly peeled pomelo, guava, *langsats* or mango. At Tops there was also a small book stall that sold popular magazines, stationery, CDs and colourful pocketbooks. Contrary to the former Prime Minister Police Lt Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra's lament that Thais do not

2 Reynolds, *Seditious histories*, 214.

3 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical insights of a nineteenth century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). White has been criticised by traditional historians for promoting relativism and determinism. He theorises that historical narrative falls into four large categories of emplotment—romance, comedy, satire, tragedy—which, in turn, determines how history is interpreted or narrated. His influential thinking about narrative has also affected literary analysis. In this chapter, I use White's definitions of romance, comedy and satire to analyse the life narratives of the filthy rich, the gorgeous women and the tragic comedians.

read, implying that he is a super reader who consumes at least a book or two each week,⁴ I saw many customers buying books at that small book stall. Because I was curious about what people read, every time I visited Tops, I would also buy a few of the popularly rated pocketbooks, each costing about 120–150 baht.

After reading 15 of the books, it struck me that many were autobiographies that fell into distinct categories. First, I noticed that many were written by young women telling us about their lives. Second, some were by politicians; but, on the whole, these were uninteresting. Third, many autobiographies were written (or ghostwritten) by rich and successful business tycoons. These were sold side-by-side with manuals about sure-fire ways to get rich. Lastly, I also found interesting autobiographies written by comedians.

These pocketbook autobiographies had provocative covers and even racy titles. Many had pictures to show important life-changing events. The print was usually large and easy to read. The prose style was conversational, intimate and straightforward. Several of these autobiographies apparently had sold very well, as many were into multiple printings and were affixed with stickers proclaiming the latest print run as a bestseller.

This study, a snapshot of this literary genre in pocketbook form, is my initial foray into unknown territory to see if I can catch a glimpse of changing paradigms or ideal types of successful people in these lowbrow autobiographies. I hypothesise that the high consumption of pocketbook autobiographies reflects not only public curiosity of the rich and famous, but also popular ideas of what are considered ‘icons of success’. By ‘public’ I limit this readership to mostly upper middle-class shoppers who live in the vicinity of the *Nang Linchee* Tops Supermarket. I also assume that this particular clientele is representative of a larger readership that consumes these publications. But beyond readership, I am also assuming that publishers are market-conscious when selecting autobiographies of popular public figures, and that success is based on the sales figures of each book. At the least, the authors, in a self-affirming manner, believe they have arrived at the pinnacle of what is considered success in Thai society.

4 Ban Phitsanulok [pseud.], *109 Nangsue khuan an jak nayok thaksin* [109 must-read books from Prime Minister Thaksin] (Bangkok: Se-education Public Company Limited, 2005). Of the 109 titles, only five are in Thai.

Autobiographies differ from biographies. Biographies are usually of those already famous. In most cases, biographies are written about those who have already achieved greatness, or historical figures who are deceased. Biographies are usually well-researched, annotated and carefully constructed narratives written by scholars. They are valuable as reference texts. The value of autobiographies, on the other hand, is harder to evaluate because the genre is about self-promotion. Autobiographies are written by those who believe that they have succeeded in life (or by those who have failed utterly) and feel compelled to share their experiences with the public. Sales figures, if they are good, reinforce the notion that the writers are, in fact, celebrities admired by the public. A bestselling pocket autobiography can help make a celebrity.

As a genre, the autobiography in the West appeared in the late 18th century but did not become respectable as a literary form until much later. In 1798, the passage below appeared in one of the *Athenaeum* fragments of Friedrich Schlegel:

Pure autobiographies are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case; or by authors of a robust artistic or adventuresome self-love, such as Benvenuto Cellini; or by born historians who regard themselves only as material for historic art; or by women who also coquette with posterity. Or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries.⁵

I assume that the egotistical Thai business tycoons fit Schlegel's first category. The autobiographies of gorgeous women may fit the description of coquettish women. In a sense, the tragi-comical have left commentaries behind for all to read. An autobiography is 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his own personality'.⁶ They are constructed narratives that privilege some selected pivotal moments of success or failure that shape life. They are as much imagination as experience, and are representative of their time. I think that the general appeal of the autobiography is the possibility of learning about intimate, privileged and secret information known only to the author.

5 Quoted in Robert Folkenflik, *The culture of autobiography* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3. *The Athenaeum* is a literary journal established by Schlegel and considered to represent the German Romanticism school of literary criticism.

6 Paul John Eakin, ed., *On autobiography/Philippe Lejeune*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4–5.

Perhaps these revelations, aside from their value as gossip, can be used as a rough guidebook for success. Although the autobiographer may have private intentions, his life story is also for public interpretive uses. The autobiography is part of a discourse on the endless possibilities in life, which explains why readers are fascinated with self-narratives especially of ‘rogues, swash bucklers, and instant tycoons’.⁷ It also allows for imagination and conversations about ‘conceivable lives’.⁸ To extrapolate from this observation, Thai pocketbook autobiographies should be able to tell us something about the kinds of conceivable or iconic lives that readers can imagine for themselves.

The filthy rich

Just prior to his first victory at the polls and becoming prime minister, Police Lt Col. Thaksin Shinawatra commissioned an autobiography called *Ta du dao thao tit din* [*Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground*], published in 2000.⁹ Thaksin portrays himself as a child of an ordinary business family from Sankamphaeng, Chiangmai. He tells his readers that his family was descended from Chinese immigrants and that he is a member of the fourth generation to be born in Thailand. From ‘humble’ beginnings, Thaksin made it rich after gaining an education at the military prep school, the police academy and doctoral studies in the United States. He tells readers about his career in business (even while he was a police officer) and how he took many risks to sell computers, paging machines and cell phones. He tells readers about his ability to tolerate debt and high risk. Thaksin is a new kind of millionaire whose fortunes were made on the surge of global communications networks and the stock market.

In this most recent period of Thai capitalist formation, many nouveau riche families have derived their wealth from such global industries as telecommunications, multinational business conglomerates, tourism, and the service and entertainment industries. The previous generations of bureaucratic and banking capitalists resent these newly rich tycoons, and the coup that ousted Thaksin in September 2006 is said to have resulted from this tension. Fifty years ago, young people wanted to be

7 Folkenflik, *The culture of autobiography*, 41–3.

8 Folkenflik, *The culture of autobiography*, 41–3.

9 Thaksin Shinawatra, *Taa duu dao thao tit din* [*Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground*] (Bangkok: Matchon Press, 2000). This book was ghostwritten by ‘Wallaya’ (a pseudonym).

government officials; 30 years ago they wanted to be bankers; now they want to be global entrepreneurs and media tycoons. Of course Thaksin's autobiography was a clever political document that depicted him as a provincial boy who made good and became wealthy. Nonetheless, that autobiography became a prototype for self-promotion emulated by several others that followed in its wake.

Similar to Thaksin, the subjects of the two autobiographies I have selected for discussion here are also representative of the new global entrepreneur—Sonthi Limthongkul's *Tong phae siakon jueng ja chana dai* [*One has to lose before winning*], published in 2002, and Vikrom Kromadit's *Phom cha pen khon di* [*I will be a good person*], published in 2004.¹⁰ Vikrom's book has an English title on its spine, albeit a slight mistranslation—giving the book an international character even though it is in Thai. Unlike academic texts, where one is lucky to print 3,000 copies and hope to sell these in 10 years, Sonthi's autobiography was already in its fifth printing when I bought my copy; my copy of Vikrom's autobiography is a first printing, but it enjoyed phenomenal sales of 130,000 copies. The two have since published other books detailing other aspects of their lives and achievements. Both of the authors are male, both come from Sino-Thai families, and both are listed among the top 150 wealthiest people in Thailand today. What confirmed my hunch that they are public icons of success, or celebrities, is what I was able to observe firsthand when I met each of these authors.

I met Sonthi Limthongkul for the first time in Nongkhai, a provincial capital in the Northeast of Thailand, in March 2005. He was there to give a talk to some young researchers from Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. He, Ajarn Pramote Nakornthab and I were having breakfast in a restaurant when two men approached the table to ask Sonthi to autograph his book. I found out later that they were police officers who also took the liberty of asking permission (*kho anuyat*) to pay for our breakfast that day. A similar thing happened to Vikrom when I met him at the Bira

10 Vikrom Kromadit, *Phom ja pen khon di* [*I will be a good person*] (Bangkok: Amata Foundation, 2004), ghostwritten by Prapatsorn Sewikun. The English title on the spine of the book is *Be a better man*. Sonthi Limthongkul, *Tong phae siakon jueng ja chana dai* [*One has to lose before winning*] (Bangkok: Manager Classic, 2005). Since its first printing in 2004, various new versions of Vikrom's book have appeared annually. Vikrom's autobiography is hagiographic and self-aggrandising. It is printed by Vikrom's Amata Foundation and mostly distributed free of charge. Another book that appeared in 2005 is Wimon Sainimnuan, *Mong lok baep wikrom* [*Seeing the world Vikrom's way*] (Bangkok: Amata Foundation, 2005). It is a compilation of Vikrom's radio show that started in 2003.

International Racing Circuit near Pattaya in February, 2004. He was test-driving a Porsche Boxster S at an exclusive introductory Porsche sports car event for potential buyers. He came in his Lamborghini, a car that sells in Thailand for almost US\$1 million. Most of the invited guests to the event, who were fellow millionaires, brought along his autobiography and asked him for autographs. Everywhere I went with these two men, people appeared respectful and in awe of their presence.

Sonthi Limthongkul's paternal grandfather came from Hainan and settled in Sukhothai. Sonthi's father was sent to China to study and eventually became an officer in Chiang Kai-Shek's army. He fought the Japanese in China until summoned by Sonthi's grandfather to return to Thailand. After his return, he worked at a Chinese newspaper and later started a lumber business. He was closely tied to the clique of Police General Phao and Field Marshal Phin and became bankrupt after Phao was ousted by the Sarit coup in 1957.¹¹ Sonthi's mother is from Hainan as well. She was disowned by her own father when he learned that she was marrying a half-Thai, half-Chinese man. Sonthi says, therefore, that he is three-fourths Chinese but he is unable to read or write Chinese. He attended Assumption School before he was sent in 1965 to study in Taiwan for a year at the National Taiwan University through his father's KMT (Kuomintang) army connections. Although he says he is Thai, he acknowledges his Chinese roots and says that he cherishes his one year in Taiwan over his eight years in America.

Although to his father the world was either black or white, Sonthi's experience abroad and his love for history made him realise that the world exists in many shades of grey. From Taipei, he enrolled at UCLA and later Oregon to study history. His stay in America coincided with the anti-war movement. At UCLA, Sonthi worked as a reporter for the student paper, writing anti-war articles. He returned to Thailand in 1974 as an idealist, determined to succeed and to do good for society. He says that he is a child of the 1960s. His original goal was to change the world and to rid Asia of Western domination. However, after the 6 October 1976 suppression of university activists at Thammasat University, he decided to limit his ambition to changing only Thailand.

11 For details about this period see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition), Chapter 2; in the Thai translation of a previous edition, *Kanmueang rabob phokhun uppatham baep phadetkan* (Bangkok: Munnithi Khrongkan Tamra, 2005), 86–139.

His first job was with the Paul Sitti Amnuay (PSA) group, which had interests in publishing and investments. He was assigned to oversee the progressive newspaper, *Prachathipatai* [*Democracy*], which was a favourite of the radical students. However, he was disillusioned when he was asked by his conservative bosses to fire reporters who were writing anti-government articles. This was one of his first brushes with the realities of business. After the 6 October 1976 incident, the paper was closed by the Thanin government. Following that experience, Sonthi was assigned to manage the magazine *Business times*, *Who's who in Thailand* and the PSA group's pocketbook publications company. He learned to think big and strategically from his work with the PSA group. To launch *Business times*, the company allocated 20 million baht, with the stipulation that it should be spent in two years. Although the enterprise failed, he learned that it is better to lose 20 million baht in two years rather than in five years because time and opportunity are more important than money.

By the 1980s, Sonthi had his own newspaper called *Phujatkan* [*Manager*]. It caught the fancy of the public, which was increasingly tuned to trade and business. It became the equivalent of *The Wall Street journal* in Thailand, a serious newspaper that did not tolerate the tabloid sensationalism of the other major Thai papers. Before long, the paper had a circulation of 400,000 a day. By 1991, as Thailand's economy boomed, Sonthi had visions of becoming Asia's leading media tycoon. He organised Asia Inc. to expand his media network into other parts of Asia and Europe. His company quickly acquired many newspapers abroad and, by 1993, *The Asian Wall Street journal* featured Sonthi on page one touting him as the future Rupert Murdoch of Asia. By that time he owned 12 newspapers in Asia and *Buzz* in the United States. A few years later he launched a satellite costing US\$200 million, aiming to broadcast news directly to clients in Laos and elsewhere.

With the Thai stock market booming and foreign loans cheap, he expanded his business into hotels, land holdings and publishing. In an interview he gave to *Asiaweek*, he said that he wanted to be known as a pioneer, the first Asian to rise against the 'repression of the West'. He felt that information and the news industry was a monopoly of the West, and he vowed to break that monopoly. He revealed that he had made three promises to himself when he was still in college: to help expel the US from Vietnam; to become an Asian nationalist; and to destroy the Western monopoly of news in Asia.

At its height, Sonthi's company, the M Group, had total assets of US\$500 million. But, after the Asian economic contagion hit in 1997, the M Group found itself holding debt of US\$235 million. Sonthi was forced to sell off assets at a loss, and he soon retired from running his newspaper. He is not a pauper by any means and is still considered one of Thailand's wealthiest men. He regularly appeared on TV talk shows and at one time supported Prime Minister Thaksin. He has strong opinions and is privy to a lot of inside political information that makes him a popular political and economic commentator on TV and radio. He is one of the most recognisable public figures in Thailand, especially after his successful campaign to topple Thaksin. Even today, Sonthi remains a controversial public figure. He survived an assassination attempt in 2009 and, more recently, he has been sentenced to serve time for securities fraud and for committing *lèse majesté*.

Vikrom Kromadit's family is Hakka Chinese, who migrated to Thailand in 1850. They settled in Kanchanaburi and traded tobacco with China. His father was born in Thailand, the youngest of seven children. The eldest was sent back to study in China, but his father studied Chinese in Thailand. Vikrom's maternal grandfather is also Hakka but his maternal grandmother is Thai-Mon-Chinese. His mother did business with the Japanese during the Second World War and later continued to do business with the Japanese. Vikrom is the eldest of 10 children by the same mother. He also has 10 other siblings from several of his father's wives.

His childhood was rough because his promiscuous father was also a tyrant, who would beat up his children and who always carried a gun and was not afraid to use it. His mother would eventually leave his father because of the womanising. Vikrom himself would leave home after a fight with his father. The quarrel occurred after Vikrom's mother ordered him to go fetch one of his father's mistresses for a confrontation. But, before he could leave, his father dragged Vikrom from the family car. During the struggle, Vikrom struck his father. As punishment, his father's men held him down while his father beat him up. He apologised for hitting his father and left home. His family life was also dysfunctional in other ways. In another violent incident, his father and his younger brother shot at each other to settle a disagreement. His brother missed and was shot in the head by his father. Although he survived, he is seriously disabled. His brother's injury at the hands of their father made Vikrom think about killing his father. To this day, Vikrom has yet to forgive him.

According to family tradition, Vikrom was sent to study Chinese in Taiwan in 1969. After some tutoring, he was able to gain entrance to National Taiwan University. His father only gave him enough money to study for a year, but Vikrom was able to secure a scholarship from the Taiwanese government. He was a good student and a good athlete. He was also the first president of the Thai Student Association at the university. Even as a student, he was always looking for business opportunities. When he returned to Bangkok for visits, he would introduce himself to shop owners as a student from Taiwan and ask if they would be interested in doing business with Taiwan or whether they wanted to buy some goods he brought back with him.

After graduation, he had to forgo dreams of MA studies in Australia for lack of funds. He returned to Thailand and immediately started a small business with borrowed capital to export black onyx. He also helped manage a paper mill that had connections with Taiwan. He married his Chinese college sweetheart and received some help from his Taiwanese in-laws. His familiarity with Taiwan was put to good use. His early business ventures included management of a paper mill, partly owned by a Taiwanese company, and trade in tapioca and animal feed with clients in Taiwan. His first major break was marketing Thai canned tuna. The Chicken of the Sea Company began importing his canned tuna in 1980. Four years later, his company became the largest exporter of canned good to the United States.

The novel idea of constructing an industrial park was suggested to him during a visit to Taiwan in 1987. With the help of a large loan from the Thai Farmer's Bank (Lamsam family), he started the Bang Pakong Company. His first 300-*rai* (about 118 acres) industrial park immediately sold out, giving Vikrom a profit of 100 million baht. He followed that success by building a 1,400-*rai* (about 553 acres) estate. The Amata Group was soon formed to build another gigantic industrial park in Rayong. In 2005, the Amata Nakorn industrial estate housed 300 factories with an investment of 1 trillion baht (about US\$25 billion) and sales of 2 trillion baht (US\$50 billion). He also opened a branch of his company in Vietnam.

These two men represent the successful entrepreneur, the hard-working Sino-Thai who had parlayed family business acuity, a foreign education, risk-taking and successful forays into global enterprises—telecommunications, media, export industry—to make their millions. Their rise to wealth was also driven by their large egos, wanting to share

their political, economic, and social ideas with the public. Both Sonthi and Vikrom had their own talk shows, and they appeared frequently on radio and television to express their strong opinions about domestic and foreign affairs. If future Thai politics is to be led by another leader similar to Thaksin, there appears to be others like him among the ‘filthy rich’, waiting in the wings to lead another charge.

Another indication of public interest in how to make money and how to become a business tycoon is the large selection of business manuals sold at Tops. Although there are still books about American tycoons (Lee Iacocca is a favourite), most of the business handbooks are based on Chinese business practices. I believe that the readers think—and this belief is no different from the World Bank study touting Confucian Culture—that the Sino-Thai tycoons made it rich because they know about Chinese business practices. The business manuals range from *A gong son wa* [*Lessons from a Chinese grandfather*], *69 khamphi jin* [*69 lessons from the Chinese bible*], *Sun wu son jao sua* [*Sun Tzu teaches the tycoon*], and a translation of *Sun Tzu's The art of war* where the Thai script is ingeniously made to look like Chinese characters.¹²

For example, the first story in *Lessons from a Chinese grandfather* teaches the reader how to ‘spend money in order to accumulate money’. The advice is to buy gold ornaments for women because these are easily transportable and can be readily converted to cash when needed. This observation faults Thai people for buying jewellery as decoration and as markers of social status. Jewellery does not easily convert to cash and, in most cases, one loses money in such transactions. Therefore, to the Chinese, gold ornaments are not for decoration but are ways to accumulate capital. There are other gems of advice like this one that celebrate Chinese acumen and deride the Thai for their poor financial habits.

In *Sun Tzu teaches the tycoon*, each of Sun Tzu's five conditions (legitimacy, environment, battlefield, commander and military discipline), and 64 victorious strategies are illustrated with examples of real business transactions in Thailand.

12 Ah Koo Khon Sae Chang, *Ah kong sorn wa* [*Lessons from a Chinese grandfather*] (Bangkok: One World Press, 2004); Ah Koo Khon Sae Chang, *69 khamphi jin* [*69 lessons from the Chinese bible*] (Bangkok: Good Morning Publishing, 2004); Thot Khanaphorn, *Sun wu son jao sua* [*Sun Tzu teaches the tycoon*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Wannasan, 2004); *Tamra phichai songkhrum khong sun wu* [*Sun Tzu's The art of war*] (Bangkok: A.R. Business Press, 2004). When I purchased these manuals in 2005, most were in their fifth or sixth printings. This is the genre of business manuals discussed by Reynolds, ‘Sino-Thai business culture’.

The incredibly gorgeous

The icon for female success is harder to construct because it emerges as a composite. In general, autobiographies of the Thai women are stories of family survival, struggle against social conventions, living abroad, defying the odds, self-affirmation, agency and the attention to their physical assets. None of the women in the autobiographies I read fixate on material wealth or power. Their stories are of survival. Although the stories these women tell differ in the scale of risk-taking in business, they do take risks by challenging established social conventions. These autobiographies appear to be declarations of independence from traditional normative behaviour, and from male exploitation and abuse.

I have concentrated on five autobiographies: Suntharee Wechanon, *Yindi jao* [*Pleased to meet you*]; Jidapha Na Lamliang, *Rak khong jina* [*Jina's love*]; Wae Soul, *Wae Soul*; Prisna Phraisaeng, *Pooki no tom*; and Khemika Na Songkhla, *Ok hak rueang lek ok lek rueang yai* [*A broken heart is a small matter, a small breast is a big matter*].¹³ All of these autobiographies have striking pictures of the women on the covers. The women are shown provocatively, and everyone is smiling. Three are by themselves; one is shown hugging her daughter; one is naked and clearly pregnant à la Demi Moore. The titles of the last two autobiographies are also suggestive. *Pooki no tom* is immediately recognisable by the Thai reader to be *Pooki nom to*, a reversal of consonants that gives it a different meaning. *No tom*, which means 'no filth' or 'no more suffering', whereas *nom to* means 'large breasts'. Indeed, Pookie, who appears on the front page, is quite well-endowed by Asian standards. The other title, *Ok hak rueang lek ok lek rueang yai*, contains rhymes in Thai that again pander to men's fixation with women's breasts. In addition, the subtitle says that the author is known as 'Phi Kung: the originator of the breast slapping formula' (*phi kung jaokhong sut top nom*).

Suntharee's story resonates with many Thai women, especially those from the north or northeast who end up marrying *farang*. At a very young and vulnerable age, Suntharee, who is from Chiangmai, found work with

13 Suntharee Wechanon, *Yindi jao* [*Pleased to meet you*] (Bangkok: Amarin Book Center, 2004); Jidapha Na Lamliang, *Rak khong jina* [*Jina's love*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Sai Jai, 2004); Wae Soul, *Wae Soul: I am proud to be mom* (Bangkok: Samnakphim To Be Love, 2005); Prisna Phraisaeng, *Pooki no tom* [*Pookie Big Tits*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Baanphot, 2005); Khemika Na Songkhla, *Ok hak rueang lek ok lek rueang yai* [*A broken heart is a small matter, a small breast is a big matter*] (Bangkok: Anit Publishing, 2004).

an Australian government project constructing roads. She had worked in a hotel before and even started a singing career with the late singer and songwriter Charan Manophet. At 23, she married Terry Anderson, an Australian Foreign Service officer, who helped her find work. After his assignment in Thailand, Terry took his wife to live in Australia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Life in Australia was tough for Suntharee, who had two children by Terry, and she suffered abuse and loneliness. After Terry resigned from the Foreign Service, they moved back to live in Bangkok. Suntharee eventually divorced her alcoholic husband and returned to live in Chiangmai where she bought a small house, converted it into a restaurant and began to sing again.

Suntharee's book is full of romantic poems and stories about her failed love life. The only thing that saved her from self-destruction were her children, Lanna and Andrew. While Andrew lives in Australia, Lanna has become a popular Thai singer with many CDs to her credit. As a Eurasian (*luk khrueng*), Lanna fits the contemporary Thai model of a beautiful woman who combines Asian and Western features. Suntharee does not reveal much about herself except that she comes from a poor family. Her father was a primary school teacher, but her grandfather served King Rama VI as a soldier in the palace. Her life is about being a mother trying to survive a broken marriage to a foreigner.

It is not uncommon today in Bangkok to see Thai women with Caucasian men. Many in fact do marry and move abroad. One only has to look at the long lines of people seeking visas to go to Italy, Germany and the United States to witness Caucasian men with their Thai wives and children in tow. But there are also those who live in Thailand, or who have returned to live in Thailand with their Eurasian children. Nowadays, young women from villages in the north and northeast actively seek out older white men to marry and to have their children. There are villages where these men have built new homes for their Thai wives and children.¹⁴ I assume that young Thai women, who desire financial security if they are from less affluent families, want Eurasian children for three reasons: they want to have children; they want to have Eurasian children who can find

14 For example, Andrew Hicks, *My Thai girl and I* (Bangkok: Konstrukt Books, 2008). The author is a retired English lawyer who married a Thai woman and moved to live in Isan. He writes about the clash of cultures but enjoys his new life.

good jobs in the entertainment business so they can rely on these children in their old age; and they want the children to have legal rights to claim their foreign father's estate when he dies.

Suntharee's life reflects the danger, pitfalls and possibilities of success for many Thai women. The internet is full of sites advertising romantic relationships with young Thai women. The copy of Suntharee's autobiography that I bought had been on sale for less than a year, but it was already affixed with a label declaring it a bestseller in its twelfth printing.

Two of the autobiographies in my sample are about very beautiful women intent on becoming single mothers. Unlike Suntharee, who married a *farang* and became a single mother after her divorce, Jindapha Na Lamliang and Wae Soul wanted to have children but without marrying their children's Thai fathers.

Jindapha, or Jina, is a Eurasian whose father is Thai and whose mother is American. Her Thai father moved to the United States when he was just 16 years old. He married an American woman whom he later divorced. Jina grew up in the United States and started a career as a model while she was still in high school. On a whim, she was asked to enter Thammasat University's Thida Dome Beauty Contest and easily won. Following that success, she was entered in the Miss Thailand Beauty Pageant where she was first runner-up. Many thought that she should have won, except that the Miss Universe competition was to be held in Bangkok that year, and nationalistic considerations demanded that Miss Thailand should be a 'real' Thai and not a 'half-Thai'. Jina returned to the United States, enrolled at Cornell University, and continued her modelling career.

In today's beauty business, which is now global in scope, Jina continued to work in New York and in Bangkok. She met a man in Bangkok who fathered her daughter Jeda. In her book, she never mentions his name, only that he was well-known in the entertainment business. Jina returned to the United States to give birth to her daughter. She reveals that her daughter's father came to see the baby when she was born and then left. Jina tells us of her determination to be a good single mother. It is interesting that her autobiography is in Thai and not English. The book is about the meaning of life, a woman's life. It is a declaration of sorts, because it celebrates the independence of a professional woman who also wants to be a mother. If she married, it is possible that her husband would not have allowed her to work.

Wae Soul's story is similar. Her autobiography, published in 2005, was also advertised as a 'bestseller'. My own copy, purchased soon after the book was published, is in its third printing; a total of 10,500 copies have been sold. Wae's father is a Chinese man who fenced pilfered and stolen goods. Her mother, who is illiterate, is a Thai from Chiang Mai. Wae's early life was hard, especially after her mother abandoned her and two other siblings. Living with an abusive father was not that easy either. Sometime later, Wae reconciled with her mother and even went to live with her. The family was quite poor, and Wae even tried to commit suicide but survived. As a young girl, because of her good looks, she was hired to model clothes at the Jatujak Sunday Market. An advertising agency spotted her and gave her a job. She became a model and eventually tried her hand at acting.

Her book tells her life story, but only superficially. She writes about her friends and her suitors. One particular suitor even ran off with her money and left her pregnant. Like Jina, she too never mentions the name of her child's father. Instead of getting an abortion, she decided to keep the baby. She believes that she herself was almost aborted because her father did not want to have another mouth to feed. Only her mother's determination saved her.

In defiance of social convention, Wae made public her pregnancy and told the press that she had decided to keep the baby. She made pictures of herself during the various stages of her pregnancy and published them unabashedly in magazines and in her autobiography. Wae gave birth to a baby girl on 22 March 2005 and, as she was wheeled out of the delivery room, she gave a quick interview about how great it was to become a mother. Wae's autobiography declares once again a woman's emancipation from both husband and the nuclear family. Similar to Jina's autobiography, it valorises motherhood. Motherhood is a woman's right even if she is unmarried. Wae's success exploits her physical beauty, which she flaunts by showing the public that a pregnant woman is also a beautiful woman. She is an individual, a model, an actress, a mother and a survivor.

Two other autobiographies focus mainly on modifying a woman's body to make it fit conventional ideals of Thai beauty. They mainly focus on a woman's breasts and how to manage them. As we have seen, the titles of the books are rather scandalous at two extremes, one proclaiming that bosoms that are too large can be reduced, the other promising a way to enhance breasts that are too small. The two autobiographies deal with what is traditionally a woman's private issue in an open and matter-of-fact

manner. That is to say, there is no need to feel ashamed of one's physical shortcomings when there is help on the way. It is interesting to note that both authors say little about their family backgrounds, but focus mainly on breast treatment techniques that are rather unusual and based on Thai herbal medicine. Both involve massaging but, in the latter case, the term used is *top*, which means to slap.

Prisna Phraisaeng, or Pookie, is a Thai Australian who returned to work in Thailand when she turned 15. The account of her life was written in response to an unfortunate incident that occurred on 28 February 2005, when Pookie, as PR director of a cosmetics company, arranged a private demonstration for specially invited guests of how to apply a breast-enhancing cream. Reporters got wind of it and appeared at the demonstration. Although Pookie, as emcee, asked the photographers not to take pictures, her requests were ignored. The following day, pictures of beautiful models having their bare breasts massaged were splashed on the front pages of the morning dailies. The police were called, and charges of public lewdness were levelled against the organisers and the emcee.

The book is her way of countering the accusations and explaining her role in the scandal. Pookie begins by telling readers about her youth in Australia and the 'problem' she had even as a child. She was troubled with ample breasts. By the time she was a teenager, she was wearing a C cup bra. She believes that she inherited that trait from both her mother and her grandmother who also had large breasts. Her autobiography focuses mainly on her breasts and her flabby stomach, whose appearance worsened after she gave birth to her first child when she was only 18. She admits that her bra size jumped to an E cup. But, in spite of her ample endowment, Pookie was another *luk kbrueng* who became active in the entertainment business as a model and a singer.

In her book, Pookie tells about the surgery she underwent to reduce the flab on her tummy and eventually the operation to reduce the size of her breasts. She even described, in some detail, what was involved in the procedures. And, in a very strange but matter-of-fact manner, she launches into an elaborate discourse of the merits and drawbacks of different types of nipples. She tells her readers that it is their right to go under the knife if they want to alter the appearance of their bodies.

Because she believes in the principle that women can manage their own bodies without being ashamed, she agreed to help promote a special cream that promises to enhance a woman's breasts. The cream was made with secret Thai herbal medicine that has been marketed successfully abroad. The cream did not directly enlarge breasts, but it made the tissue firmer and tauter. Pookie wanted Thai woman to have the benefits of that cream, and she also wanted to sell it in Thailand.

The second autobiography about breast enhancement is by Khemika Na Songkhla, or Phi Kung, who invented the *top nom* 'slapping' method. I think that the *top nom* method would not be suitable for mass marketing, unlike Pookie's herbal cream marketed by a company with an impressive foreign name. Phi Kung's herbs and the method of application was at first limited to advertising by word-of-mouth. Phi Kung's *top nom* service received national attention when it was featured in the mass circulating *Thai Rat* newspaper on 2 June 2001. From that moment her phone rang off the hook. She even appeared on several TV shows. The title of her book comes from a popular bumper sticker found on commercial trucks.

When she was young, she says that she was flat-chested until she found the courage to ask if she could inspect the beautiful breasts of her 74-year-old grandmother. Apparently her grandmother had a secret formula she was willing to pass along to Phi Kung. She tells us that her apprenticeship was serious and strenuous. She had to spend 15 days bending her fingers to make them strong and supple. That exercise was followed by daily exercises where she had to hold on to the foundation post of her grandmother's house while using the other free arm and hand to massage the side of her body and eventually to move up to her massage her own breasts. She performed 500 of these movements a day. Following the exercise, some herbal concoction was massaged onto the breasts, and a long strip of cloth was used to wrap around the breasts. Apparently, her grandmother had no conception of the modern bra. Phi Kung later designed a special bra for this purpose.

Although she learned this supposedly ancient method from her grandmother, she was able to use it only on herself. She made a living doing odd jobs to save money to go to school. She eventually opened her own beauty salon. The autobiography also revealed that she found other ways to make more money than cutting hair, which brought 50 baht a head. She tells the reader of a service she provided called 'maintaining

one's private preserved forest' (*du lae pa sanguan suan tua*). For this delicate service she was able to charge 500 baht, equivalent to 10 times the price of a haircut.

Phi Kung says that her clients talked only about three things: their eyes, their noses and their breasts. Most were unhappy with the way their breasts looked or 'performed'. Because she had been taking good care of her own breasts using her grandmother's method, many of her clients often asked if they could inspect her breasts. Soon she was offering a service to enhance breasts using her grandmother's formula. At first, she only charged 70 baht and called it *phok nom*, which referred to applying a special cream to the breast. As a marketing ploy, she would stop cutting a client's hair and excuse herself to look into the condition of another client who is in the process of *phok nom*. Phi Kung says that 10 out of 10 women wanted to know about that procedure.

In no time, her breast enhancement service became the main service she offered, even though the sign outside her shop said that it was a hair salon. From *phok nom*, the terminology used among the women became cruder, and *top nom* was coined, that is, to slap one's breast around. From a fee of 300 baht, she soon decided to charge an exorbitant 16,000 baht for the procedure. In spite of the high fee charged, she continued to draw customers. One even sent her a ticket to fly to Chiang Mai to perform her magic treatment. Having never flown before and unaware that she was in the first-class cabin, she hid in the toilet the entire flight because the cabin was full of *farang*. According to Phi Kung, the procedure is good for three years and can increase the size of a woman's breast by one to three inches.

The tragically comical

The last example of an icon for social success is the Thai comedian. At first glance, such a person could hardly be considered an icon. But the fact that there are several autobiographies of these performers suggests that, in the minds of some readers, they are heroes and models of success. My sense is that, to the lower classes, most of whom are Thai (here I include those from Isan, the north and the south but do not include the ethnic Chinese who are also successful comedians), the comedians appearing on TV and in movies represent a kind of indigenous lower-class success story popular in the mass-mediated entertainment business.

The two examples are Thep Pho-ngarm, *Kho tok din thao tit khlon* [*Head bowed to the ground, feet stuck in mud*]; and Note Chern-yim, *Chiwit khot talok* [*Life is damn funny*].¹⁵ The title of the first book no doubt parodies the title of Thaksin's autobiography. It sold well, because the copy I bought was the book's fifth printing within a year. The second book was in its fourth printing. Both comedians felt compelled to share the story of their humble beginnings, their rise to fame, and how, in spite of the opportunities they had, they failed to make it rich in the entertainment industry. Unlike the 'filthy rich' who were from somewhat humble beginnings but were able to climb into the higher echelons of Thai society, the comedians came from the lowliest class and have made it too, in a sense, but not quite as big nor as lasting.

Thep Pho-ngarm's family lived in the basement of a hotel in Hat Yai, Songkhla, in southern Thailand. His father was a carpenter who built schools. Thep noted the irony that his father built schools for others but had no home for his own family. The family washed clothes for a living, charging 1 baht per item. It was not a lucrative business and most of the time they had little to eat. To get by and put food on the table, his mother resorted to cooking rice mixed with yams, potatoes or taro roots. Many times Thep had to sell their clothes for cash to buy food. As a young boy of 11, he even made money sleeping in the same room with newly initiated prostitutes who were afraid of sleeping alone at night and who paid him to stay with them as company.

Thep's big chance came when a travelling outdoor movie company adopted him as a gofer, paying him 5 baht a day. When time permitted, he would practise dubbing live Thai voiceovers when the movies were shown. After the movie company folded, he found work in a charcoal factory. For entertainment, he bought a cheap radio to listen to his favourite Thai country folk songs. He practised singing the songs so he could enter singing contests, which were popular with the country folks. Many singers are discovered in this way: for rural folks, becoming a successful folk singer was a coveted avenue of social mobility. On one occasion, Thep bought beer for the leader of a famous band, got him

15 Thep Pho-ngarm, *Kho tok din thao tit khlon* [*Head bowed to the ground, feet stuck in mud*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Aksorn Khao Suay, 2004); Note Chern-yim, *Chiwit khot talok* [*Life is damn funny*] (Bangkok: Anit Publishing, 2004).

drunk and then proceeded to sing for him. The band leader was too drunk to know if the singing was good or bad and, out of pity, he hired Thep to cook for the band.

Thep wanted only to sing, but all country folk bands had a comedy team to fill in time between sets. The comedy team also needed someone they could use as the butt of their jokes, and they soon dragged Thep onto the stage. Because of his funny looks, anything he did on stage drew laughter. He decided, after failing as a tricycle noodle vendor, to return to perform comedy at small cafes. He subsequently formed the comedy team of Den, Doeh, Thep, who were funny enough to be invited to perform on television.

Thai comedy is mostly based on crass jokes, slapstick and the innocence or gullibility of the country bumpkin. The role of the comedian is thus easily assumed by lower-class Thai (mostly men), especially those with physical deformities. These performers are not seen as tragic figures, but their odd physical features are regarded as comedic. In some instances, many comedians who are far from good-looking are asked to play romantic leading roles with beautiful women. Many comedians are dwarfs or men with deformed faces who somehow are seen as funny, although in the West this would be politically incorrect and seen as humiliating. Thep finally made it to the big time when he was cast in a Thai movie where the comedian was one of the lead characters. He made a handsome 15,000 baht (about US\$500) in his first movie, and his career in the national entertainment business began to take off.

Thep's use of language in his autobiography is raw and vulgar. He has no trouble using obscenities, nor does he have qualms about admitting to adultery. He said that it was the way of life for people like him, and that his wife accepted it. Thep admitted to wanting to have a successful business, but he said that he did not want to be a businessman. The reason was partly that he had no idea about running a business, and the many attempts to start one failed. Like many in the entertainment world, he opened a restaurant but went bankrupt when the clientele he drew was too rowdy or friends would eat and then not pay. Thep also tried his hand at building and selling properties but, without a background in real estate, his buildings cost more than they sold for, and he went bankrupt again. In spite of being a well-known comedian, his background, education and family experience had not prepared him for any success beyond his ability to make people laugh. Nevertheless, as an icon of success for lower-class Thai, he is a model to emulate.

This observation is reinforced by the autobiography of Note Chern-yim, who admitted to emulating the 'success' of Thep and other successful comedians. Note, whose real name is Bamroeh Phong-insi, was born in the middle of a Thai folk opera known as *likae*. The performance was interrupted briefly so the lead actor could cut Note's umbilical cord. His mother was the lead actress of the troupe and his father was its comedian and set painter. He was born in Nong Mon, Siracha Province. The family was poor and became poorer when Note's father left to find work in the South. Note was left to live with his grandmother in a lean-to next to a fence. His grandmother had once been a slave and mistress of an ageing nobleman.

Unfortunately, his grandmother was caught selling drugs and was sent to prison, leaving Note to fend for himself as a street person. His one favourite pastime was to watch public television in front of the municipal building. He liked watching *McHale's navy* starring Earnest Borgnine. As a street urchin, he would steal food to eat and betel to give to his grandmother in prison. He would try to sneak on board buses and passing boats to find his uncle, who had a *likae* troupe in Bangkok. Eventually, he found his uncle and began apprenticing to be a *likae* performer until his uncle escaped from his debtors by ordaining as a monk.

Note continued to perform *likae* but could hardly make ends meet. He made a hut out of some billboards and shared the hut with a fellow actor. At one time, they had but one pair of trousers to share. One had to stay home if the other wanted to go out. Even though he was poor, he eloped with a nice woman he had met. But he admits shamelessly to sleeping with a *likae* fan from Hong Kong who gave him a garland and 5,000 baht (about US\$160) after one of his performances. This woman also showed up unexpectedly at his apartment. Note convinced his poor wife to go hide in the toilet while he and his *likae* fan had sex. After she left, Note found his wife had passed out on the toilet floor.

He later formed his own comedy team that performed at a disco nightclub. The comedy team got lots of laughs because they were different from the clients. The comedians were from a lower class, they spoke in provincial accents, they dressed outlandishly, and they behaved differently. Their jokes were also crass, irreverent and indecent, but people found them funny.

Like his hero Thep Pho-ngarm, Note also performed in movies and became famous. He also opened a restaurant and failed for the same reasons that Thep's business failed. Note, more than Thep, retained his roots in the lower class and was ready to pick fights with his clients and audience when they became disrespectful or rowdy. When he had money, he would gamble and drink with his friends. He tried his hand at starting a company called Comedy Line and made himself managing director. With no background in management or accounting, the company went bankrupt in no time.

Like Thep's autobiography, the language in Note's book is also raw and vulgar. He is not shy about revealing his roots. He even asks his readers to read his book aloud with a country bumpkin's accent for effect. Even though he and other comedians made a name for themselves in the entertainment business, they were never successful as entrepreneurs. All their attempts to start businesses failed.

Conclusion

To be sure, there are other examples of autobiographies that might suggest other iconic success stories. For example, we can imagine the iconic Thai professor, the iconic soldier or the iconic politician, but never the iconic noodle vendor or the iconic street walker. This short review of lowbrow, high-consumption pocketbook autobiographies suggests that, for those who aspire to be rich businessmen, the path to success can be had by emulating the likes of Thaksin, Sonthi and Vikrom. Thais should learn from the experience of the Sino-Thai tycoons whose business success was the result of some indeterminate connection to Chinese culture that emphasises hard work, capital accumulation, good education, internationalism, risk-taking and thinking big. There is also much to be learned by reading Chinese business manuals and war treatises. The autobiographies of rich men are written in the romantic mode which, according to Hayden White, is 'symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it.'¹⁶

16 White, *Metahistory*, 8.

For modern Thai women, the provocative, seductive and empowering autobiographies encourage them to free themselves from stifling social conventions. These autobiographies are written in a comedy mode where there are occasional victories and reconciliations with the forces at play in the social and natural worlds. Thai women can and should exercise new roles to become respectable single mothers and entertainers on the international stage, and to exercise management of their physical assets. The autobiographies also propose that it is alright to be Eurasian, to marry non-Thai men or not to marry at all. In fact, a recent study shows that, among middle-class women of marrying age, an alarming 25 per cent resist marriage. They would rather remain single 'than giving up their autonomy for a patriarchal family life'.¹⁷ For women, fulfilment in life does not depend on the kind of financial success represented by the filthy rich. Filthy rich men want to conquer the world; the women are content to be masters of their lives.

Tragically, the icon for lower-class Thai is the comedian who may have risen above their collective poverty to taste success and a modicum of wealth, but because of their class background, limited education and social upbringing, their participation and success in business and commerce is limited. The narrative mode for these autobiographies is satire, where a person is a captive of the world rather than its master: 'ultimately, human consciousness and will are always inadequate'.¹⁸ Perhaps those from the countryside understand that even though the comedian represents their 'conceivable lives', they and their parochial heroes and icons will never become filthy rich because they are not equipped to master the intricacies of the business world, the global media and the entertainment industry. Their education, family background and horizons restrict and constrain them.

It occurs to me that even though the filthy rich strongly identify themselves as Thai, they learned about business early in life from their Sino-Thai families. The women all seem to share a common characteristic that is not tied to ethnicity. What binds them together is an ideal based on universal standards of beauty that cut across class and race. It is easier to make it in life if they can liberate themselves from social conventions and to manage and

17 Darunee Tantiwiranond and Shashi Ranjan Pandey, 'New opportunities or new inequalities: Development issues and women's lives in Thailand', in *Women, gender relations and development in Thai society*, ed. Virada Somsawasi and Sally Theobald (Bangkok: Women's Studies Center, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiangmai University, 1997), 82.

18 White, *Metahistory*, 9.

improve their physical appearances. The comedians signify the larger mass of lower-class 'ethnic Thai', country bumpkins from the provinces. Their success is limited by their lack of education and experience in business, and class stereotyping. The comedians' continued success depended on how they portrayed themselves as crude but lovable country bumpkins. On the basis of the two autobiographies in my sample, life imitates art and, on this point, Note Chern-yim's autobiography is instructive: *Life is damn funny* [*Chiwit khot talok*].

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