

Foreword

Craig J. Reynolds

In this volume of literary studies, Thak Chaloemtiarana pretends with disarming modesty to be little more than an enthusiastic reader in search of a good story. His tastes are broad and include early Thai novels that masqueraded as translations from European languages. Of Sino-Thai heritage, he has an enviable command of fiction and memoirs about Sino-Thai identity, and he enjoys crime fiction, literary biography, salacious stories and lowbrow, trashy pocketbook autobiographies. Huffing academics might raise an eyebrow at his tastes, but, in these essays, Thak exploits his reading habits to unobtrusively challenge the conventional boundaries of more than one academic discipline.

Professor Thak, a political scientist, is best known for his study of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat that began life as a PhD thesis and became a prize-winning book. It was reprinted many times and reissued with a new postscript in 2007.¹ As he explains in his introduction to this volume, he wandered into Thai literary studies through force of circumstance. For a dozen years after he left the Dean's Office at Cornell University in 1998, he was Director of the Southeast Asia Program, a position that also required him to teach. Impatient with the current trends in comparative politics, he decided to branch out, exploit the eclectic reading habits that had absorbed him in his spare time, and offer a graduate seminar in Thai political literature. Subsequent seminars included readings in New Historicism, translation, and postcolonial theory. He looked at literature not for its formal properties as art, but for its insights into the struggles of literary artists to express emergent nationalism and Thai identity as the country faced the challenges of Western imperialism and colonialism.

1 Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition).

His first publication in this unfamiliar field appeared in a 2003 festschrift for the late Benedict Anderson, his thesis supervisor, confrère and occasional squash opponent. Anderson must have been as pleased with Thak's study of one of the early military government's most popular authors and nationalist ideologues as he was at beating Thak at squash, which he did consistently. Thak had plenty of work to do, because, when he began his venture into the exciting period between 1900 and 1928, there were few serious studies of Thai literature. Several English essays followed, the fruit of conferences and other academic gatherings.

To celebrate Thak's 70th birthday, Thai colleagues translated the essays and published them in 2015 in a single volume with an extensive introduction. The impetus for the Thai volume was to encourage university students of politics and other disciplines to take literature seriously and learn what it could teach them about modern Thai political culture. The essays have never appeared together in English, and the Asian Studies Editorial Board of ANU Press, seeing the value of Thak's scholarship and iconoclastic approach to Thailand's modern literary history, has seized an opportunity and issued the collection in English. The essays as originally published have been edited to suit their place in a single volume.

Thak's self-directed travel through 20th-century Thai literary history is not as improvised and accidental as it might at first appear. 'Making New Space in the Thai Literary Canon', an article he published midway through this journey, captures perfectly what he came to realise was his project. He would rediscover Thai literary works pushed to the margins and rehabilitate them, and he would explore in popular literature the dilemmas and contradictions of Thai modernity, nationalism and Sino-Thai identity. Bilingual in Thai and English, he began his academic career as an insider teaching politics in a Thai university in the mid-1970s. After he left Thailand for the United States, he became an outsider looking in. He had never taught literature in a Thai university, and he had never paid much heed to what the Thai academy regarded as the literary canon. He had not been schooled in the way literature was taught in Thailand, so he was not obliged to analyse literary works for their aesthetic value. He was not expected to use disciplinary concepts and theories, and he did not have to puzzle out the formal structure of novels and short stories in terms of plot, character, setting and language.

Thak is not the first Thai scholar to question the Thai literary canon and challenge its cultural authority. In the early 1980s, the historian Nidhi Eoseewong disrupted the Thai literary establishment with a bold study

of early Bangkok literature, proposing that it demonstrated a liveliness and an ability to evolve new forms in the changing environment. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the literary traditions of the court and the people began to diverge. The liveliness and creativity of the earlier period soon faded as royal absolutism exerted its authority to define what constituted literary excellence, a process that stifled the study and enjoyment of Thai literature and left behind ‘a lifeless corpse’ in Thai textbooks. As Nidhi put it:

Early Bangkok’s upper class literature of such power, liveliness, and intellectual creativity met its final death. It turned into a pretentious, derivative literature for half a century and then disappeared from this world, leaving behind a lifeless corpse in textbooks which the Ministry of Education has to force students to study with great reluctance.²

Late in the absolute monarchy, the Thai literary canon became fixed when the sixth Bangkok king, Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), gave his blessing to the Royal Society of Literature established in 1914. The society identified works in various literary genres produced in court circles that would stand as exemplars of Thai literary excellence. A seal was awarded to certify this excellence. In this endeavour the king was aided by his uncle, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, who, from 1915, directed the Wachirayan Library and reclassified all the books and manuscripts in the collection into three categories: history, literature, and textbooks and treatises. In the years that followed, other writers, editors and publishers further refined the meaning of literature, which, according to one author, should be polite, serious and possessed of a clear moral compass. According to such strictures, literature should not and could not be vulgar, backward or useless. The Royal Society of Literature was dissolved when King Vajiravudh died in 1925, but successor institutes of one sort or another that passed judgement on what constituted good literature continued into the civilian and military periods well through the early 1940s. A Thai critic of the way the aristocracy wielded its cultural authority refers to ‘the discourse of genius’ that has forever beset discussions of the royal elite and its accomplishments.³

2 Nidhi Eosewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015), 146.

3 Thanapol Limapichart, ‘The Royal Society of Literature, or, the birth of modern cultural authority in Thailand’ in *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures*, ed. Rachel V. Harrison (London: Rowan & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2014), 37–62; Thosaeng Chaochuti, ‘Through the literary lens: Vajiravudh’s writings and Siam’s negotiations with the Imperial West’ in Harrison, *Disturbing conventions*, 77.

Thak's pioneering forays into Thai literary studies have already spurred new research into the works he brought to light. Rachel Harrison re-examined the early Thai novels of Khru Liam and showed how they 'disturbed the literary conventions of the day, rendering the author a victim of "dismissive criticism" and expelling his works to a long-term position at the margins of cultural acceptance'.⁴ The Thai literary scholar Phrae Chittiphalangsri has also taken the study of Khru Liam's *The divine nymphs* one step further by demonstrating how translation injected dynamism into the canon as the Thai literary repertoire evolved.⁵ I would hope that literary scholars will take up Thak's observation about 'nascent feminist ideals' in this early literature and the ethical, strong and smart women portrayed in Luang Wichit's *Sea of love, chasm of death*, discussed in Chapter 3, and in the novels of M. L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan, discussed in Chapter 4.

What strikes me about these essays is what they reveal about their author, Thak Chaloeontiarana, and his hobbies. Sad to say, he has not been able to work his love of fly fishing and guitar playing into his literary studies, but in Chapter 2, 'Racing and the construction of Thai nationalism', he does draw on his knowledge of high-performance auto racing. He sports a few trophies from his victories at Watkins Glen in upstate New York and other racing venues, and he continues to be a high-performance driving instructor in the Porsche Club of America. His essay on the racing princes, Birabongse Bhanudej and Chulachakrabongse, celebrates their escapades on the world racing circuits when Thailand was a little-known country thought to be somewhere between India and China. The princes' mastery of Western machinery was a singular accomplishment, because in the 1930s Thais did not build motor cars, let alone high-performance racing machines. Prince Bira won the undercard race of cars with small displacement engines in the 1936 Monaco Grand Prix. The Thai flag was flown and the national anthem played for the first time at an international sporting event. Bira went on to win the coveted Road Racing Gold Star awarded by the British Race Drivers' Club in 1936, 1937, and 1938. The successes of the racing princes showed that Thailand had mastered Western machinery and was equal to the West on the racing circuits.

4 Rachel V. Harrison, 'Mummies, sex and sand: Bangkok gothic and the adventure fiction of "Victorian" Siam' in her edited volume, *Disturbing conventions*, 82.

5 Phrae Chittiphalangsri, 'The emerging literariness: Translation, dynamic canonicity and the problematic verisimilitude in early Thai prose fictions' in *Translation and global Asia: Relocating networks of cultural production*, ed. Kwan Uganda Sze-pui and Wong Lawrence Wang-chi (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2014), 207–40.

In observing from afar Thailand's tumultuous politics, inequalities and censorious laws against political dissent, Thak Chaloemtiarana can be no less sure of his footing as an insider outside than are his compatriots and fellow scholars, both Thai and foreign, living inside the country. So it is that he wrote affectingly of his fellow graduate student, Dr Boonsanong Punyodyana, who, in the midst of the increasingly violent politics of the mid-1970s, was felled by an assassin's bullet in the lead-up to the massacre at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976. Thak has memorialised his friendship with Boonsanong and paid tribute to his bravery for embracing socialism in conservative Thailand, thus betraying the interests of his own class. Boonsanong's death saddened all his friends. As Thak wrote:

It had a sobering effect but it also galvanized our resolve to do what is right. I was among his many friends, admirers, and students who attended his over-flowing cremation ceremony. Boonsanong's death was a life changing lesson for those of us he left behind. We may not be as brave or as daring as Boonsanong, but in a small way, we have learnt to be true to our convictions. Many of us tried to affect meaningful social and political change from within the government. I tried that but only briefly. Frustrated by that experience, I opted for the easy way out and decided to spend the rest of my career within the safe confines of the academy. I gave up my position at Thammasat and the Prem government to return to Cornell to teach students about convictions and how to seek truth ... The convictions I still hold about social justice and human dignity inspired by Boonsanong are renewed every time I use one of the melamine plates or that one bowl he had left me. After these many years, I still think of him, his smile and his booming voice.⁶

Thak knew Boonsanong when they were both young and the future before them looked bright and promising, but Thak, unlike Boonsanong, never had a liking for Thai party politics. His passion is for understanding Thai political culture.⁷

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6 Thak Chaloemtiarana, 'Ramlukthung bunsanong bunyothayan [In Memory of Boonsanong Punyodyana]', *Matichon weekly*, 30(1541) (26 Feb.–4 Mar. 2010): 32–3.

7 In writing this foreword, I have benefited from comments by the Thai literary scholar, Chusak Pattarakulvanit, in his introduction to Thak Chaloemtiarana, *An jon taek wannakam khwamthansamai lae khwampenthai [Read till it shatters: Literature, modernity and being Thai]* (Bangkok: Aan Publications, 2015), [21–41] and from Nicholas Farrelly's 'Interview with Thak Chaloemtiarana', *New mandala*, 19 October 2007, accessed 19 February 2018, www.newmandala.org/interview-with-thak-chaloemtiarana/.

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