

Author's introduction

Readers who are familiar with my early work may wonder why someone trained to study Thai politics has wandered off to encroach upon as tightly guarded a field as Thai literary criticism. In fact, this intellectual and disciplinary retooling late in life is the result of three rather ordinary circumstances.

First, although I had studied political science, taught it, and written about it during the first part of my professional career, disciplinary advancements overtook the original inclinations of why I wanted to study politics. My training and preferences viewed politics as part and parcel of the give and take of social interactions animated by peculiar cultural influences; and it is also about the interactions of political actors. I was always fascinated by how political science engaged other disciplinary fields that helped us understand how societies structure their 'allocation of values', how they structure authoritative institutions, how political succession or change are achieved, how political legitimacy is achieved, and how conflicts are resolved. Among the disciplines that influenced my own work besides political science were anthropology, language and literature, history, art, and, more recently, cultural studies. But as political science, especially as taught in the United States, moved further and further away from what I would call the substance of politics to try to justify political science as real science by focusing on theory, methods and prediction, I became more and more disenchanted with the discipline.

Second, I have always been partial to literature and how one can learn about the human condition (including politics) through reading literary works. Even during my high school years spent at a boarding school in Hong Kong, I loved reading fiction and in fact had the highest mark in English literature in my senior year. But instead of pursuing literature in college, I, like others, chose a more 'practical' subject to study. I was led to believe that political science and international relations would pave the

way for a career as a diplomat or, at worst, a professor. The American war in Vietnam and my own resistance to that war made me question and eventually reject the idea of representing Thailand as a diplomat. What if I did not agree with my government? How could I carry out my duty as a representative of a government I cannot support? These questions led me to consider my fallback position, that is, teaching at the university where I could express my ideas and opinions protected by the principle of academic freedom. My professors, especially George Kahin, demonstrated how one could 'speak truth to power' freely and without intimidation by the authorities during the Vietnam War years.

Therefore, instead of joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to follow in the footsteps of my father, I became a faculty member at Thammasat University's Faculty of Political Science prepared to 'speak truth to power'. My career at Thammasat coincided with the brief 'open' period between 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976, the Thanin reactionary regime, and the early part of Prem Tinsulanonda government. One of the first courses I taught was the team-taught 'Foundations of Thai Civilization'. This course was taught for years by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. However, many of us newly minted faculty members, led by Charnvit Kasetsiri, decided that it is time to teach that course by challenging Kukrit's royalist conservative view of Thai society. We wanted to make incoming freshmen think critically about what constitutes Thai civilisation, uncoupled from the yoke of historical orthodoxy that all good things flow downwards from the top. In fact, democratic ideas would stand that orthodoxy on its head.

Among our team were Charnvit Kasetsiri, Sombat Chantornwong, Chonthira Klad-yu, Banthorn Ondam and other 'progressive' faculty members. My own contribution to the class was to focus on Thai politics. I chose to give lectures on political legitimacy. To change the old culture of students writing down whatever the professor says in class and to regurgitate them during exams, I forbade anyone in class to take notes. The freshmen students were told to just listen carefully and to write notes after the class was over. Also on purpose, I let my beard and hair grow, wore striped bell-bottom pants and Dr Scholl's wooden clogs, and smoked a cigar when I entered the auditorium where the class was held. I told my bewildered students that they did not have to call me *ajarn* (professor/lecturer) until the class was over and to judge for themselves if I was worthy of that honorific.

Not only was my attire and physical appearance an affront to my senior colleagues at Thammasat, but my instruction to the freshman class to honour their teachers only if they were worthy indirectly undermined the sanctity of the *ajarn*. In those days, male faculty members wore white long-sleeved shirts with a necktie, and proper shoes. I did none of that. For the final exam, I asked students to start thinking about how to answer the question: 'There are many ways to think about Thai history and civilisation. Which version would you prefer and why—Prince Damrong, Luang Wichit, or Jit Phumisak?' Some of my senior colleagues later accused me of creating chaos on campus because the students formed study groups to discuss possible answers and even approached some professors to ask for their opinion. Instead of the usual multiple choice examination questions, I assigned my students to write an essay. Little did I know that reading hundreds of essays would take weeks to mark.

After the 14 October 1973 upheaval, students were free to read the many books that were banned by the Sarit regime. I also took the opportunity to use some of those formerly banned books in class, especially to help teach Thai political history. Textbooks are fine but they are dull and do not fully give a sense of reality. Ironically, prose fiction or novels can help liven up the past. Of particular note, I used Kulap Saipradit, *Lae pai khang na* [*Looking towards the future*], in class when we discussed political change. For this purpose, I did not assign Kukrit Pramoj, *Si phaendin* [*Four reigns*]. Kulap's novel is about the struggle for a democratic form of government, while Kukrit's novel is about the fall of absolute monarchy and the important role played by the Thai kings and nobility. However, academic freedom and the ability to freely 'speak truth to power' were cut short by a military coup and the appointment of the reactionary government of Thanin Kraiwichien that followed the bloody 6 October 1976 incident.

The Thanin government warned us not to speak ill of Thai society or risk being arrested. We were also prohibited from teaching or writing about 'ideologies'. I was teaching a course on Chinese politics and a senior seminar that focused on different paths towards political regimes based on the work of Barrington Moore. I also taught a course on 'Society, the Military and Politics'. This government dictum meant that I could not teach any course at all. Even today, chills go down my back when recalling a faculty meeting where our Rector told us that there was still academic freedom but 'if the police arrest Ajarn Thak for what he says, it is his problem, not Thammasat's'. It is not just professors who need protection

for 'speaking truth to power'; all Thai citizens should have the right to think and to express their opinions freely, especially towards those who are in positions of authority. Sadly, Thai history tends to repeat itself.

The third and final reason why I shifted my disciplinary focus from political science to literature had to do with the shift in my academic career. After leaving Thammasat to return to Cornell in 1981, teaching jobs for Southeast Asian specialists were not readily available. There were jobs in Australia and short-term teaching jobs at small colleges in America, but I did not want to leave Cornell and its excellent Southeast Asia Program. My return to Cornell was funded by a grant from the Social Science Research Council. When that ran out, I was lucky to find a position in the Dean's Office in the College of Arts and Sciences. I started out as an assistant dean and eventually became an associate dean in charge of admissions. My duties included academic advice to students, academic disciplinary action and the language house program. Concurrent with that position, I was given an adjunct appointment in the Department of Asian Studies, which allowed me to teach the area studies course 'Introduction to Southeast Asia'. During my years as associate dean and teaching one course a year, there was no time to do much research or to write. My scholarship was put on hold for most of those 15 years. This situation changed in 1998 when a crisis of faculty leadership occurred in the Cornell Southeast Asia Program.

Universities in America experienced unprecedented expansion during the mid-1960s when abundant federal funds poured into universities for research and for graduate studies. As a result, an unusually large number of new professors were hired during that time. They eventually came to represent the largest cohort of faculty members in American universities. This group of faculty members acted as a bottleneck in the academy, preventing the hiring of the next generation of faculty. For example, only one among my group of graduates in the early 1970s found a teaching job in the United States. Most of us ended up in England, Australia and Asia. By the late 1990s, faculty members hired in the mid-1960s began to retire or had died. Because this group occupied most of the tenured positions available, only a handful of new junior faculty members were hired during those 30-odd years. This meant that departments were top-heavy with senior full professors, a few associate professors and even fewer assistant professors.

The Cornell Southeast Asia Program also faced this same crisis—that is, the senior professors who took turns as director had retired or were about to retire. There were no assistant professors, and only three associate professors who could take over directorship of the Program. Because of this leadership crisis, I was asked to leave the Dean's Office and to assume the directorship of the Southeast Asia Program. Because I had been an associate dean of the college and was familiar with the various department chairs, other senior faculty members and senior members of the university administration, my dean, provost and faculty colleagues felt that I would be in a good position to help negotiate with the various academic departments to replace retiring Southeast Asianists with new hires. This was not easy because, after the Vietnam debacle, few universities wanted to invest in Southeast Asian studies. With the support of the University Provost and the Dean of Arts and Sciences, I was successful in replacing all of the retirements with young faculty members. But it would take many years before the new professors could be tenured and promoted to full professor so they would be in line to take over the directorship. So instead of the two years I had agreed to serve as director, my term lasted 12 years. My retirement in 2010 forced younger colleagues to consider taking over leadership of the Program. Unlike in Thailand where deanships or directorships are seen as plum positions, few faculty members in the United States want to give up their scholarship for administration. Most faculty members view administration as a duty to serve their peers, and are happy to return to teaching, research and writing.

Leaving the Dean's Office also meant that I became a full-time regular member of the Department of Asian Studies. The department focuses on Asian literature, language teaching and religious studies. Area studies courses are also under that department. However, the graduate field of Asian studies is only at the MA level. PhD students have to be in the graduate field of Asian literature, religion and culture. To fit into the intellectual culture of the department, I had to teach myself a new discipline. I had always liked literature and therefore the switch seemed natural. However, as an outsider with no academic training in literary studies, I had to do a lot of reading, to learn a new vocabulary and a new set of theories, and eventually to design new courses to teach.

In short, retooling late in my career was the result of a frustration with modern political science, my love for literature and the need to become intellectually compatible with colleagues in my new department. Although my appointment as Director of the Southeast Asia Program

meant splitting my time between administration and teaching, for career advancement I was still required to produce academically, that is, to write about Thai literature. Teaching and service do not count much towards salary increases or promotions. Research and publications far outweigh all other activities. My last academic appointment before joining the department was associate professor, a position I attained at Thammasat University in 1980. To be promoted as professor in a new field and to be taken seriously by colleagues in Asian Studies, I had to publish. The rule in American research universities is that the faculty members are hired to teach, do research and publish. The split is 50-50. Corny and pretentious as it may sound, faculty members are supposed to conduct 'cutting edge' scholarship that will 'push back the boundaries of ignorance'. Therefore, I must admit that the production of scholarship is partly driven by less-than-noble reasons. Self-preservation, status and money provide incentives, but luckily I actually like working on modern Thai literature.

The first article on Thai literature that I tried my hand at writing was written to honour Ben Anderson on his retirement. The essay was an analysis of Luang Wichit's *Huang rak haew luk* [*Sea of love, chasm of death*] published in James Siegel and Audrey Kahin's edited collection, *Southeast Asia across three generations*.¹ Again, the genesis of that article was serendipitous. The four-volume republication of the novel was a present from Wilasa, a gifted Cornell structural engineering graduate who happens to be the granddaughter of Luang Wichit. I was reading the novel when I was asked to contribute to Ben Anderson's retirement volume. Because it was my first article on Thai literature, I relied on the opinion and assistance of some friends. Gerry Cox, a professor of English literature and a colleague in the Dean's Office, helped to edit the essay and to teach me how to write critically and clearly. The other expert on Thai literature was Rachel Harrison of SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). The two were instrumental in building up my confidence to write about Thai literature.

In fact, Rachel has helped in other ways, especially in the publication of two of my essays that were products of the conference 'Ambiguous Allure of the West', held at Cornell in November 2004. The essays on Khru Liam's *Nang neramit* [*Divine nymphs*] and *Khwam mai phayabat* [*The non-venдетта*] and were first published in *Southeast Asia research*,

1 James Siegel and Audrey Kahin, eds, *Southeast Asia across three generations* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2003).

15(1) (March 2007) and 17(3) (November 2009), respectively.² The third essay of that series, 'Making space in the Thai literary canon', which reflects on how modern Thai prose fiction could help illuminate Thailand's encounter with, and resistance to, colonialism was published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian studies*, 40(1) (February 2009). This article was developed from a keynote address given at the conference on Thai studies in Madison and at Chulalongkorn University in December 2007. I have consolidated and re-edited these three articles into Chapter 1 of this book.

The article on the depiction of the Sino-Thai in Thai literature was written for a conference at Kyoto University in January 2012. Although the English version appears in the *Kyoto journal of Southeast Asian studies* (December 2014), the Thai translation was published first in *Aan*, 5(1), (July–December 2013). The review article of Susan Fulop Kepner's book, *A Civilized Woman: M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan*, was first published on the *New mandala* website, 21 November 2013, and subsequently in *Aan*, 5(3) (May–August 2014). The two other chapters in this volume on Prince Bira and on lowbrow autobiographies were developed out of talks delivered at the Cornell Kahin Center. The article on the racing Thai princes appeared in *Sojourn*, 31(2) (July 2016).

The racing career of Prince Bira has long been an interest of mine. I learned about his exploits from my father. As a young man inspired by the racing successes of Prince Bira in the 1930s, my father and another friend raced an MG at events held in Bangkok. Since then, my father was always interested in fast cars. Naturally, I inherited that interest and have always had a sports car in my garage. In fact, I still have several today. One of these cars has been painted 'Bira blue' and sports the name 'Hanuman' as a tribute to Prince Bira's race car. I am embarrassed to admit that I like to drive fast cars on race tracks and have been doing this for over 25 years. The article on Prince Bira was motivated by my fascination with how the racing achievements of the two Thai princes could be viewed through the lens of modernity, identity, orientalism and nationalism.

Readers will notice that common themes animate my writing. These themes reflect my early training as a political scientist and my recent fascination with literary criticism and postcolonial theory. I am still

2 For the full publication details of all of the author's essays discussed here, see 'Previously published works', this volume.

trying to grasp the full meaning of nationalism, influenced by the work of my graduate school mentor Benedict Anderson, gender, modernity and identity as they relate to our understanding of Thai society, its people(s), culture(s) and nationhood.

Several Thai colleagues began to notice that my articles were encroaching on a rather conservative discipline in the Thai academy and that my untrained foray into that domain was iconoclastic and challenged received wisdom. In particular, Ajarn Thanet Wongyanawa, the editor of *Ratthasatsan* whom I had met at the 'Ambiguous Allure of the West' conference in Ithaca was first to ask permission to translate and publish the three articles that grew out of that conference. These Thai articles appeared in *Ratthasatsan*, 28(2) (May–August 2007); 29(1) (January–April 2008); *Ratthasat 60 pi 2* (2009). It seems ironic that after shunning political science, my articles on literature would appear in a journal about politics, a journal housed at the Thammasat Faculty of Political Science, my academic home from 1968 to 1980.

Importantly, other colleagues encouraged me to continue to write about Thai literature. Among these I would like to thank Suwanna Kriangkraipetch, Chalong Soontravanich, Thongchai Winichakul, Thanapol Limapichart and Michael Montesano. Of the five, only Suwanna is trained as a literary critic, the others are historians. I admit that my approach to studying literature combines those disciplines plus my own training in political science. The adage that 'teaching is learning' is particularly true in my case. Teaching a seminar on modern Thai fiction allowed me to test new ideas, to sharpen my thinking, and to learn from my students. Although they may not realise it, I learned more from them than they from me. For this, I would like to thank my former students, now good colleagues and friends, Tyrell Haberkorn, Richard Ruth, Worrasit Tantinipankul, Alexandra Denes, Samson Lim and Bryce Beemer. I also appreciate the helpful comments for revision by anonymous referees of this volume in English as well as the editing assistance of Maria Myutel and the copyediting and indexing by Beth Battrick. Throughout the production process, Emily Hazlewood and the ANU Press team gave professional advice on a complex manuscript, and I thank the Press for the publication subsidy that made the book possible.

Another serendipitous encounter that led to the publication of my articles in Thai occurred when I met Ida Aroonwong, Chusak Pattarakulvanich and May Ingawanij at a conference at Cornell in October 2012. The three

are active writers for *Aan* journal where Ida is editor. That friendship subsequently led to invitations to publish articles on Thai literature in *Aan* journal. In 2014, Ida convinced me to publish my articles on Thai literature in one volume. Because my work is in English, Ida had my articles translated or retranslated by Phonglert Phongwanan. The title of that book, *Aan jon taek (Read till it shatters)*, published by Aan Publications in 2015, is a reference to the Thai version of literary deconstruction, that is, to break apart the whole in order to understand the individual pieces and how they fit together. Ajarn Chusak Pattarakulvanich also wrote an insightful critical introduction to the Thai volume.

This English volume is the brainchild of Professor Craig Reynolds. He believes that there is value in my writings about Thai literature and that putting them in one volume will facilitate access and use as a text in the classroom. I am very grateful for his confidence, support, friendship, and especially for the generous foreword he has written.

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