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Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years

BENEDICT R. O'G. ANDERSON

Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2014, 166p.

Professor Crocodile Who Blocks the Canal

Helpfully compiled and arranged both chronologically and thematically in one volume, the various essays, articles, and reviews that make up this book reflect the wonderful skepticism, relentless questioning, daring iconoclasm, contrarian perspective, critical intelligence, penetrating insight, mordant humor, wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of the country, its people and beyond, and above all, the tender and deeply-felt love and care which Professor Ben Anderson, the world-renowned doyen of nationalism and Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell University, has consistently brought to the study of Siam/Thailand over the past 40 years. Like “*Jorakhe khwang khlong*” or a crocodile who blocks the canal (and thereby obstructing the smooth flow of the canal traffic) in a traditional Thai saying, this body of his work was indeed widely recognized as a paradigmatic watershed in Thai studies that has altered and shifted the hitherto dominant, conservative, elitist, state-centric, royal-nationalist mainstream to an inundation of revisionist counter-streams and sub-streams since the 1990s.

I first encountered *Khruu Ben's* (or Teacher Ben as he likes to be called) path-breaking, seminal literature review essay “Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies” (first published in 1978, Chapter 1 of this volume) shortly after I left the communist-led *maquis* in north-eastern Thailand in the early 1980s when I was asked to translate it into Thai by the editor of *Pajarayasan* Magazine, an independent intellectual periodical under the patronage of Sulak Sivaraksa, a well-known conservative Buddhist intellectual who happened to be one of the two commentators of this essay when it was first publicly presented. Still fresh from the jungle and blinkered by the rigid Maoist ideological frame of reference, I could hardly fathom the ground-shaking impact of its message, which attempted to overhaul in toto the axiomatic foundations of Thai studies as practiced up till then by both Western scholars and their Thai official nationalist counterparts. Argued defiantly, systematically, solidly, and meticulously, the review essay contains

Ben's central revisionist vision of modern Thai history that has proven to be most thought-provoking, stood the test of time, and rendered it an indispensable item in any serious reading list on modern Thai politics in the past four decades. This central vision was subsequently expanded upon and developed further in other writings of his also included in this volume. Let me lay it out point-by-point here as briefly and succinctly as I can for the readers' benefit.

1. In order to properly understand the essence and trajectory of modern Thai history, it is imperative to conceptually separate the Thai nation from its monarchy. Not only are the two non-identical and not only do they have different interests, but in many cases their interests also clash (p. 21).

2. The state built by the Jakri dynasty during the reigns of King Rama V to VII (A.D. 1868–1935) was by no means a modern nation-state but an absolutist dynastic auto-colonial one that carried out modernization in some aspects to a certain degree but delayed and/or obstructed it in others, particularly those that were related to the vested interest and position of the monarchy itself. Hence, the rise of the Siamese absolutist state did not amount to the successful building of a modern nation-state. On the contrary, it hindered the latter alongside the coming of Siamese nationhood (pp. 28, 34).

3. In contrast with erstwhile European absolutist states, the Siamese one was too short-lived (lasting about 40 years from 1892–1932), and the reach and effects of its power were too shallow. Since it had not transformed Thai society and economy widely and profoundly enough, the political reaction that finally came about in the form of a constitutionalist putsch, staged by the self-styled People's Party of junior military officers and government officials, was merely "*the partial, mystified revolt . . . of absolutism's own engine, the functionalized bureaucracy*" (p. 39), with very limited dynamic for revolutionary change. It fell far short of a real popular revolution, with only superficial and intermittent mass mobilization and participation, wholly inadequate for a radical overhaul of the Thai state and society (pp. 39–40).

4. The various well-known symptoms of political and administrative malaise of the Thai bureaucratic polity (à la the late Fred W. Riggs in his *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*, 1966), namely chronic political instability, inefficiency, lack of coordination, corruption, favoritism, factionalism, formalism, unresponsiveness to extra-bureaucratic/popular demands, etc., resulted from the protracted, laggard, and incomplete transition from the not completely extinct absolutist state to the oft-aborted, stillborn popular nation-state (p. 40).

5. The Thai bureaucratic polity was similar to the old absolutist state in the sense that, devoid

of popular representation and political accountability, it also tended to be a *moi*-state i.e. serving the interests of the state and its bureaucratic rulers themselves. And yet, with the supposedly divine absolute monarchs irreversibly replaced by usually profane commoner military strongmen-cum-bureaucrats, the bureaucratic polity fatally lacked the traditional supernatural/sacred legitimacy of the *ancien regime*. Unable to avail themselves of the legal-rational legitimacy of a modern elective democracy “*which corresponds to the facts of effective control*” (to quote Riggs) either, the military-bureaucratic elite had no choice but to seek a symbiotic *modus vivendi* with the surviving monarchy in which the latter served as the national palladium that lent royal-nationalist legitimacy to the former in exchange for armed protection of its security, untouchable status, ideological hegemony, and material interests (pp. 67–69).

6. Hence a frequent and facile lapse of the Thai bureaucratic polity into military absolutist dictatorship such as the one under Field Marshal Sarit-Thanom-Prapart from 1958 to 1973 which was duly blessed by the royal palladium. And with the plentiful military and economic aid, support and investment of the U.S. and its anti-communist allies, plus the technocrat-planned and directed market-led socio-economic development, the said military absolutist dictatorship had indeed achieved what the Jakri absolute monarchy of yore failed to do i.e. a rapid, extensive, and profound wholesale transformation of the Thai economy and society in less than two decades. Most significantly were the continuing migration of millions upon millions of poor and landless peasants into Bangkok and other regional urban centers in search of work, further education, and a better life together with the rise and/or huge expansion of various bourgeois strata in the city and countryside. When it finally emerged in October 1973, the political reaction to the stagnant, corrupt, unchanging, and intransigent military regime took the form of an unprecedented, largely spontaneous, mass uprising of half a million student-led demonstrators in downtown Bangkok, which Ben memorably called “*Siam’s 1789*” (p. 107). It opened the way to the rise of Thailand’s first popular nationalist movement (pp. 47–76).

7. If one looks at it through the optic of the political rise of the Thai bourgeoisie, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the gradual and cumulative consolidation of bourgeois political power through an elective parliament amidst the decline and final collapse of the radical popular movement led by the communist armed rural insurgency on the one hand, and the terminal decay of bureaucratic polity along with the eventual retreat back to the barracks of the military on the other. Ironically, no matter how corrupt and murderous it was, the progress of bourgeois parliamentary regime became an inevitable trend that at long last was turning the page to a new chapter of Thai political history, or so it seemed especially after another successful popular uprising against military dictatorship in May 1992 (pp. 101–127).

It is the above-synopsized central vision of Ben as contained in this book that has inspired, framed, and deeply influenced various subsequent landmarks in Thai studies in the past four decades, ranging from Dr. Seksan Prasertkul's Marxist-revisionist works on the economic dependency of the Siamese absolutist dynastic state and the anti-Western stance of the local immigrant Chinese entrepreneurs, and the current crisis of the Thai nation-state under economic globalization, Professor Thongchai Winichakul's pioneering works on the mapping of Siam and the rise and development of royal-nationalism, to Professor Nidhi Aeusrivongse's works on the Siamese absolutist state and the Thai official imagined community, for instance.

And yet, as the publication dates of his writings in this book indicate, there was a long hiatus of 18 years (from 1993 to 2011) during which Ben, having retired from active teaching at Cornell with no new Thai students under his supervision and engaged in other projects on post-Suharto Indonesia, global anarchism, nationalisms in the East, etc., had not published any serious work that focuses on Thai politics and history per se. Besides, it was a period in which tremendous, far-reaching changes had happened to the country, namely, the apogee and decline of royal hegemony and the network monarchy, the so-called *Tomyamkung* East Asian economic crisis of 1997, the emergence of the middle-income peasant, national majority electorate and local political society in the countryside, the rise and fall of the multi-billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra's elected capitalist authoritarian regime from 2001 to 2006, the resumption of ferocious Muslim secessionist insurgency in the deep South since 2004, the military coup of 2006, and a series of alternate violent mass mobilizations and revolts against the existing governments—the so-called “*color wars*” between the anti-Thaksin royalist Yellow Shirts and the pro-Thaksin democratic Red Shirts—that has oftentimes rendered the country almost ungovernable, cost over a hundred deaths and thousands of injuries so far, and remained intractable if dormant till the present. These new developments, somewhat beyond the scope of Ben's central vision, have been effectively and illuminatingly dealt with by such recent important works as Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker's *Thaksin* (2004), Andrew Walker's *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (2012), People Information Center's *Truth for Justice: The April-May 2010 Crackdown* (in Thai, 2012), and Apichat Satitniramai *et al.*'s, *Re-examining the Political Landscape of Thailand* (in Thai, 2013).

Ben's intellectual return to Thailand (Chapters 6–9 of the book) focuses instead on the contemporary cultural and artistic scene, providing subtle and sensitive, learned and comparative, incisive and eye-opening critical analyses not only of the wonderful works of such world-renowned Thai film directors as Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Anocha Suwichakornpong, but more importantly of the current cultural political mentality of the dominant largely Sino-Thai urban bourgeoisie, who, being culturally and ethnically removed and isolated from both their rural fellow countrymen and the Western intelligentsia, are blindly following and aping the withered octo-and-nonagenarian non-majoritarian royal-nationalist military-bureaucratic elite. It is only with these insights into the consciousness of this class that one can begin to understand the latest, 13th military coup of the

country earlier this year and what future may lie ahead for retrojected Thainess and Thailand.

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Sounding Out Heritage: Cultural Politics and the Social Practice of Quan Họ Folk Song in Northern Vietnam

LAUREN MEEKER

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, 192p.

Sounding Out Heritage is an exceptionally appealing and well-designed book, from its colorful cover to its smoothly presented theoretical arguments and its detailed ethnography of the “modernity” of traditional Vietnamese folk songs. *Quan họ* folk songs come from the Bắc Ninh province of northern Vietnam, and—as the author documents in great detail—they have already been the focus of intense efforts to conserve them, record them, verify their authenticity, and in 2009 to inscribe them as elements of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. But Meeker is the first non-Vietnamese author to take this “soundscape” seriously and to ask how this once remote village-based style of singing has become an important part of modern Vietnamese cultural politics.

Her argument also addresses issues of how cultural heritage is related to material exchange, how it is realized and modified by different forms of performance, and what sentiments it may evoke in its singers and their audience. The new “cultural market” which has emerged in Post-renovation Vietnam has brought reclusive older women singers out onto the public stage, and it has revalorized an intimate form of singing as a “living treasure,” linking the present market economy to a long history of musical connections between the village and the court.

In twenty-first century Hanoi, the nostalgic and romanticized countryside has been repre-