

THE STATE OF THAI STUDIES:  
A CRITICAL SURVEY

This research project is supported by the Thailand Research Fund

October 1998

# **THE STATE OF THAI STUDIES: A CRITICAL SURVEY**

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## **The Editorial Committee**

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**Sunchai WUN' GAEO**

**Chaiyan RAJCHAGOOI**

**Kanya ULLALAI**

**Singorn YODFAMONSAT**

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# **The State of Thai Studies: A Critical Survey**

**The Editorial Committee**

"The State of Thai Studies: A Critical Survey" is a research project that attempts to survey the development of Thai studies over the last three decades. It explores the body of knowledge, theories and the application of these theories in the studies of Thai society. In addition, this project discusses research problems and makes methodological proposals for further studies. Of the seven articles in this volume, six were presented at Panel 8: The State of Thai Studies at the Sixth International Conference on Thai Studies held during 14-20 October 1996 in Chiang Mai. The other study by Thongchai Winichakul offers a historical perspective significant to Thai studies.

Earlier, Thai studies were conducted from the perspectives of western scholars who had lived in Thailand. In the last century, Thailand, known then as Siam, was regarded as a small and backward country vulnerable to the threat of western colonialism. Such a threat prompted the ruling class to launch the reform necessary for national unity. Education was not an exception. The studies of Thai society had been conducted from the perspective of the upper classes. Royal academics built up the domain of Thai studies by rewriting history, giving new explanations on Buddhism and Thai literature. Those views remain influential even today.

After World War II, Thai studies, under American influence, was divided into two groups: the conservative and the progressive. The first group, led by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, concentrated more on traditional rituals and the dissemination of court culture to

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the public.

Ever since, Thai studies conducted by members of the middle class have adopted a more liberal point of view. Under western influences, Thai studies have focused on economic progress, capitalism, the role of the middle class in the Thai society, cultural dimensions, Thai literature under the western influence as well as the modern concept of beauty. These studies tend to be critical of Thai bureaucracy and political dictatorship. It is an attempt to break away from the conservative framework by replacing it with a capitalistic paradigm.

Liberalism in Thai studies has long proved popular among academics. However, the application of western social theories to Thai society has been problematic in two respects: First, Thai scholars have had only a superficial knowledge of western social theories. Hence, their understanding of Thai society was incomplete. Second, Thai academics lacked a profound understanding of their own culture. Many studies were conducted in order to serve state and capitalistic ideologies.

Before the student uprising on Oct 14, 1973, Thai academics had already been debating on the reality and nature of Thai society. With greater freedom of expression, Thai scholars had increasingly adopted the point of view of the masses. Following the Oct 14, 1973 event, academics became more interested in local knowledge as well as oral history and literature. However, in its extreme form, the attempt by Thai studies to emancipate itself from foreign influence only led to nationalism and racism. It had also barred itself from the full import of technological advancement.

But gradually such Thai studies have developed themselves into a credible 'science'. Local knowledge has become a subject of interest among thinkers and social activists in the last two decades. The words "Thai intellectual history" and "local knowledge" have become acceptable terms in academic circles. A number of Thai thinkers who should be honored for their contributions in these areas are Puay Ungpakorn, Sulak Sivaraksa, Prawase Wasi, Sneh Chamarik, Ekkawit na Thalang, Nipoj Tianwiham, Seri Pongpit, Kanchana Kaewthep, Bamrung Boonpanya, Apichart Thongyoo and Suthipong Pongpaiboon, among others.

Hence, apart from the studies of state and capital, local knowledge has also become another major field of Thai studies. Both areas have been studied from different

perspectives that somehow reinforce one another. At the beginning, only western academics and a few Thai scholars participated in Thai studies. More recently, Thai studies have gone beyond the concerns of academic circles.

The first article in this volume, "The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand since 1973" by Thongchai Winichakul, is a reading of Nithi Aewsriwong's concept which challenged the traditional historical view of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. Nithi has expanded his historical studies by including a history of the middle class as well as local knowledge. Furthermore, his new interpretation of Thai history is based on his readings in economics, society and literature. According to Thongchai, Nithi's views mark the beginning of a new intellectual era, making it necessary to reevaluate traditional concepts in history. Thongchai then calls attention to the "Political Economy group" which is led by the Chatthip school of thought. They have studied local history systematically with a strong determination to enable communities to fight for their identities and ideologies. Thongchai also proposes the ideas of Srisak Wallipodom and Thida Saraya in regional history. Their studies are based on archeological evidence but have gradually turned to myth and local beliefs and rituals. According to Thongchai, Srisak, unlike Chatthip, does not deny the significance of the state.

Sompong Witayasakpan, unlike Thongchai, focuses his studies on Tai communities scattered across Thailand and Laos and along the borders of China, India, Burma and Vietnam. His article, "Three Decades of Tai Studies and Thai Studies: A Comparative Study of Tai Societies and Cultures", traces the history of Tai tribes before they became the modern Siamese and Thai. His studies have been concerned with three aspects: tradition, anthropology and culture.

First, the traditional aspect has been under the influence of more traditional historical approaches in which the origin of the Thai race has been emphasized. Some of their studies are ethnic in character. Second, the anthropological aspect disregards the question of the origin of the Tai race. Scholars in this field are interested in multi-cultural differences of the Tai communities in different regions. They study Srisak Wallipodom's archaeological works and Thida Saraya's multi-historical approach via folklore, myths and rituals. The works of Anant Kanchanapan emphasizes social

development by introducing ideas from various disciplines and social analyses. Shikeharu Tanabe, meanwhile, has taken up this approach with the hope of finding a universal understanding of human nature. Third, the community culture aspect regards regional community as the essence of culture because traditions of the "good old days" still remain intact upcountry. A proper combination of old traditions and modern values would make the public aware of the importance of cultural development. This is why scholars are interested in comparative studies of different culture and the study of the origin of Tai culture inside and outside the country.

The works of Sompong and Thongchai reinforce one another. Sompong's analyses have strengthened Thongchai's critique of traditional history. Thongchai's article introduces the diversity and vitality of contemporary intellectual history. Both works suggest that Thai studies are in their infancy and have a lot more work to do.

Jamaree Pitackwong Chiengthong in her article, "Studies in Social Relations and Thai Studies" explored the social relations in Thailand and divided them into three stages. First, from 1937 to the October 14, 1973 uprising is a period when Thai studies were dominated by western thinking. According to Jamaree, the "traditional" Thai society was then under the influence of "modern" western culture. Consequently, Thailand had to develop and modernize itself while at the same time trying to preserve its sense of "Thai" identity after Oct 14, 1973. Jamaree suggests that during this period, social conflicts had been widely debated among the Marxists (Jitr Pumisak and Chatthip Nartsupha). Moreover, those academics who were under the influence of Max Weber, namely, Nithi Aewsriwong, attempted to merge various theories along with Buddhist philosophy. Third is the current period of globalization in which information has greatly changed people's way of thinking. The Marxists shift their focus from a concern for relations of production to a concern for ideologies. This is also an age when consumerism and the "artificial community" are interrelated. An increasing number of academics have communicated with the public through the media, while those outside the academic circles have also contributed their comments on the social structure.

Jamaree describes the middle class as being rootless and lacking a proper understanding of contemporary society. This has made Sompong's article on the root of the Thai society more outstanding. Four decades ago, Kajorn Sukpanich, a prominent

historian, presented his profound studies on the lower classes and their involvement in the social production during the 1932 revolution which brought an end to the absolute monarchy. Before the Oct 14, 1973 uprising, certain writings had an influence over the student movement, among them "The Social Mechanism" by Pattaya Saihu and other works by the social critic Sulak Sivaraksa and the literary critic Suchart Sawadsri. As former editors of the monthly magazine Social Science Review, Sulak and Suchart had disseminated various political, social and philosophical perspectives from other countries. These ideas have affected the people's way of thinking in different parts of the country according to Jamaree.

Jamaree's question about the role of money in consumerism has been analyzed by Pasuk Phongpaichit in the latter's article entitled "Among Dragons, Geese, and Tigers: The Thai Economy in Global and Local Perspectives". Pasuk points out why the social relation of Thai feudalism proceeded in a confused manner. She also explores the relation of Thai capitalist society to the international investment community and the World Bank. Pasuk has questioned the World Bank's economic policies. In her article, she points out the differences of ideas between Thai and foreign economists.

The Bank of Thailand acts as a representative of the World Bank in organizing the Thai economic system. The Bank of Thailand has produced several specialists for high-ranking administrative positions in the state government as well as university lecturers. These specialists with their shared background in neoclassicism tend to regard economic growth and stability as the first priority for economic prosperity. In their opinion, income distribution and quality of life are the outcome of economic growth. These economists joined with other neoclassical economists from the Thailand Development and Research Institute (TDRI) to obtain financial aid from the World Bank. Moreover, some senior executives of the Bank of Thailand have also been members of the TDRI administrative committee. Therefore, it is not surprising that they tend to favor the Bank of Thailand's and the World Bank's policies in their economic views. However, some of them think that Thailand's economic prosperity would be in jeopardy if the national economy depends too much on the global economic system. With this fact in mind, they support the idea of income distribution by promoting agricultural research and investment. Among the prominent economists in this group are Methee Krongkaew



and Rangsan Tanapornpan. Although aware of the significance of industrial development, they have proposed the idea of a limited open economic system to prevent a bubble economy. Furthermore, they proposed that the country's financial situation is sound enough for Thailand to become a 'welfare state'. The "Political Economy Group", unlike others, bases their critical studies of the Thai society on political and economic development. The economic problems in the last decade, including the national deficit, the widening income gap, the deterioration of the ecological system and the depletion of natural resources, have been the results of the country's industrialization policies set under the World Bank's influence. The last group, the non-government organizations, has aimed at developing rural areas so that the people upcountry can become more self-reliant. The group also gives full support to the setting up of community organizations to oversee the management of local resources.

Pasuk has solved the problem raised by Jamaree by disclosing the ideas of two groups of economists. The first group is satisfied with the current national economic development which depends on the global economy, while the second group is against such a trend. Pasuk explains that both groups of economists have eventually realized that politics and the economy are inseparable. They agree that a political reform for democracy is necessary for economic prosperity.

Meanwhile, Somkiat Wanthana discusses problems connected to political and legal issues in his essay, "Thai Studies in Politics and Law". Somkiat has done numerous researches in these areas. He categorizes scholars of Thai studies on politics and legal system into three groups.

First, the "Political Culture Study Group". It is widely agreed that democracy is essential to the development of democratic culture. However political structures would not be possible unless there is a correlation between democratic development and political culture. At this point, Somkiat has suggested in his essays that there are several conclusions in correlation to different political criteria. Furthermore, there are other differences, for instance, the time frame and the socio-economic conditions of the representative sample of the population. Moreover, the studies show that many people may say they want democracy, but their actions contradict their statements.

Second, the "Political System Study Group". This is the group which has become

increasingly popular as a result of social pressure for political reform. With political reform in mind, a group of academics has launched substantial research on politics and law. Nevertheless, those researches, which are based on western standards, often conclude that Thai political and legal systems are flawed. The constitution and other political factors, for instance, the electoral and political party systems, the checks and balances, and the citizens' rights and freedoms, have been regarded as below western standards.

Third, the "Power Structure Study Group". This field of Thai study has become more popular recently, Somkiat has surveyed the works of several academics including Sneh Chammarik, Sujit Boonbongkam, Nithi Aewsriwong, Chaianand Samutvanijaya, Somkiat Wanthana, Rangsan Thanapompan, Theerayoot Boonmee, Sombat Chantomwong, Ammar Siamwala, Krit Poemtanjit, Chatthip Nartsupha, Anek Laothammathat and Pitthaya Wongkul. These academics have studied the relation of power in broad scope. Each operates from different perspectives. The majority base their analyses of power structure on historical development. Somkiat values all three fields of Thai studies and encourages Thai academics from each of these fields to incorporate their strong points and learn from their counterparts.

The social process has played a direct role in the development of Thai studies in the area of law and politics. Shortly after the political bloodshed of May 1992, social critic Dr Prawase Wasi, who had earlier written on religion and society, proposed that state power be reduced and public communities be strengthened so as to bring about changes in the social structure necessary for a peaceful society. Following the May 1992 political crisis, Prawase wrote an important essay entitled "Lessons from the May 18, 1992 Political Tragedy and the Political Revival". When political activist Chalad Worachat started his hunger strike, calling for amendments to the Constitution, Prawase published more political writings: "Democratic Development and Political Reform" and "Political Reform: An Answer to Thailand's Political Crisis". He has also taken part in pushing for the constitutional amendments.

Thai studies and the social change have been closely related as suggested by the article entitled "State of Thai Studies on State of the Environment: Property Rights Perspectives", written by Suthawan Sathirathai and colleagues, Pinkaew Luangaramsri,

Sutharin Khunphol and Chusak Wittayapak. The article points out three dimensional relations between the people's political awareness, the growth of community organizations and the depletion of the environmental and natural resources, leading to the realization of the rights to resources.

This particular article consists of three parts. Pinkaew and Sutharin acknowledge that the ideas of resource management and public rights mentioned in Thai academic researches have attempted to base their theoretical work on actual events. Hence there are two main directions in which multi-disciplinary studies have been developed. First, the concept of ecological culture, which is an effort to raise local knowledge to a science; Second, the concept of ecological politics which calls for public attention to the unfair management of natural resources by those in power. There have been proposals to reform the state's power in dealing with national forests by endorsing local communities' rights to manage their forests. Non-government organizations have been campaigning for public awareness of this issue.

Chusak Wittayapak has developed the idea of ecological politics by studying three groups: First, the political economy group, which consists of two trends, the Community Culture as mentioned earlier and the Green Economics led by Preecha Piampongsam. The latter has introduced the ecological and Buddhist aspects into economic studies. Moreover, Preecha is interested in campaigning for public awareness of environmental problems upcountry and expects to see a middle-class political party being formed around a determination to preserve the environment; Second, a group of researchers led by Chirmsak Pinthong studying the way local people have settled in national forest reserves across the country; and third, the Chiang Mai University social scientists who have earlier studied a number of local communities. Later, some of them have jointly conducted research on the problem of encroachment on the national forest reserves. This is the stepping-stone on the path to a research workshop concerning the topic of community forests in Thailand.

Finally, Suthawan Sathirathai proposed the idea of ecological economics with an emphasis in the relation of the economy and economic institutions. Furthermore, she discusses the significance of the public rights in natural resources and the management of natural resources in order to solve environmental problems.

The works of Pinkaew and Chusak show a new methodology in Thai studies by using anthropological tactics in gathering empirical data for their researches. This method is totally different from previous researches which usually rely on oral evidence and folklore. The new way of research is to study from real life as researchers are required to live in respective communities for a period of time. This method is a useful supplement to academic research and generate further disciplinary studies which would be more appealing to both the academic circle and the general public.

The works of Suthawan and her colleagues suggest that Thai studies are closely related to an understanding of the foundation of Thai society. Western influence, particularly capitalism, has had a tremendous impact on the management of the once rich natural resources in Thailand. The environmental and ecological systems have been affected as the natural resources have diminished and been transformed into capital. Even though Thailand's economic growth has rapidly transformed the country into an economic tiger in Asia, such growth is by no means a proportional economic expansion because the income gap has widened further. The change in the ecological system has resulted in the shortage of natural resources in several regions, leading to the question of how the natural resources should be managed and shared among the respective local communities.

Apart from political and social impact, the social change has also affected the spiritual and creative dimensions of Thai lives. Trisilpa Boonkhachorn, in the article "The Development and Trends of Literary Studies in Thailand", has analyzed certain aspects of Thai literature and aesthetics in the last three decades. This article indicates that the development of Thai art had been independent of western influence before the 19th century European colonial period. But this period did bring about the imposition of western artistic values on Thai art.

Trisilpa's article points out the differences between Thai literary studies before and after 1932 (2475 B.E.) – the end of absolute monarchy. Following the 1932 revolution in Thailand, Thai literature was influenced by western methodologies. Their efforts to systematize Thai literature occurred as Thai academics had become interested in literary criticism. Since 1947 (2490 B.E.), a number of Thai novelists and poets wrote under the influence of Marxism. Their writings became very influential after the October

14, 1973 student uprising. The Marxist trend eventually held sway over literary studies in several institutions of higher learning. At the same time, an interest in regional literature and folklore has gained strength to the point of being considered a “science” after 1976 (2519 B.E.). This led to the establishment of various Thai cultural centers in many provinces. Scholars were eager to study regional literature and had to conduct field work.

At this point, we can see that Thai studies in the last three decades have offered two major speculations on the future of Thai society. Many scholars have realized that certain branches of Thai studies would come to a dead end if they do not look beyond the limits of their own regional studies. As a result, several scholars have recently based their researches on interdisciplinary studies. It seems that Thai studies are now in transition. Importantly, they have to be able to develop their interdisciplinary research to the level of a science in order to internationalize Thai studies.

Despite its various approaches, this volume lacks a research on Buddhist perspectives in Thai studies such as the works of the late Buddhadasa Bhikku and Phra Dharmabhidok. Buddhism in Thailand has yet to adjust itself to western influences. Apart from religion, philosophy has yet to be taken seriously in Thai studies. Philosophy is concerned with critical thinking and is independent from religion. How would Thai studies respond to philosophical questions? Likewise, despite the importance of language to thought and culture, linguistic approaches to Thai studies have also remained undeveloped. Studies of the Thai language in different ages and regions inside and outside Thailand would lead us to a better understanding of Thai intellectual history. With critical researches in the field of linguistics, Thai studies would become more solid. With the progress of information technology, our basic communications still rely on language. New terminology in the telecommunication circles and internet users are also based on ordinary languages. A Thai study in linguistics would therefore help enrich our academic pursuits.

In conclusion, all seven articles in this volume represent various perspectives from diverse fields of scholarship. Although independent from one another, various features of the eight articles reinforce each other. Collecting them in the same volume has made them distinctive and interesting. Hopefully this collection will broaden the

scope of Thai studies and stir young scholars to be interested in the field.

**THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE PAST:  
NEW HISTORIES IN THAILAND SINCE 1973**

**BY**

**Thongchai WINICHAKUL**

**University of Wisconsin  
Madison, The United States of America**

# THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE PAST: NEW HISTORIES IN THAILAND SINCE 1973<sup>\*</sup>

Thongchai WINICHAKUL

## INTRODUCTION

Historical studies in Thailand have been closely related to the formation of the nation since the late nineteenth century, and until recently the pattern of the past in this elitist craft changed but little. It presented a royal/national chronicle, a historiography modern in character but based upon traditional perceptions of the past and traditional materials. It was a collection of stories by and for the national elite celebrating their successful mission of building and protecting the country despite great difficulties, and promising a prosperous future. The plot and meaning of this melodramatic past have become a paradigm of historical discourse,<sup>1</sup> making history an ideological weapon and a source of legitimization of the state.

The popular uprising led by the student movement against the military dictatorship in 1973, a political as well as an intellectual revolution, shook this historical paradigm.<sup>2</sup> Historical studies became a centre of intellectual interest from all disciplines as well as an arena of ideological struggles, with dramatic affect. The conventional knowledge of the past was challenged and negated. A new past was needed.

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<sup>\*</sup> The research for this article was supported by the American Philosophical Society and the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1992/93.

<sup>1</sup> See Charnvit Kasetsiri, "Thai Historiography from Ancient Times to the Modern Period," Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann Education Books, 1979), pp. 156-70, for history and nation; and Thongchai Winichakul, Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), chap. 8 for the plot and paradigm of Thai historical discourse.

<sup>2</sup> For the 1973-1976 politics though not its cultural impact, see David Morell and Chal-anan Samudavanija, Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution (Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981).



In this context, fresh currents of historical studies have emerged. The effects are so significant that we may say the landscape of the Thai past has been reshaped. This article will primarily discuss four major currents: a critical reaction to the conventional historiography, a school of Marxist economic history, a non-linear early history, and a phenomenal rise of local history throughout the country.

The historical scholarship in Thailand is not isolated, and reflects the influence of the Anglo-American historical tradition. Yet, so far the factors behind the new histories are primarily domestic, although there has been some localization of ideas and methods from without. Based upon and operating within the local political economy of Thai scholarship, various kinds of Marxism, social science theories, and Western critical theories, for example, have been adopted and adapted to serve domestic interests.

Although this article is intended to serve as an exposition of Thai scholarship for scholars outside the country, it will not attempt an exhaustive review of Thai historical scholarship, or its bibliography. The article will discuss only those intellectual currents that have been constructing the new identity of the Thai past.

## THAI HISTORY AND 1973

The 1973 revolution created an impact throughout Thai intellectual community, especially among historians. In a recent study on the state of historical research in Thailand, it is obvious that there was a major surge of interest after 1973 that lasted until the late 1980s. Research and writing in history proliferated.<sup>3</sup> The number of graduate students in history between 1973-1983 increased tenfold over the preceding decade. In fact the number remained high until 1987.<sup>4</sup> The subjects of interest became significantly

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<sup>3</sup> Thamsuk Numnonda et al, "Sathanaphap ngan wichai sakha prawattisat nai prathethai rawang ph.s. 2503-2535" (The status of research in history in Thailand 1960-1992), a report to the National Research Council, (Bangkok, 1993), pp. 11-13, 18-19, 29, 31-35, 52, 59-60, 79-82. The study considers only "formal" research works undertaken for degrees, those funded by research institutions, and articles in academic journals. The study only looks at works from 1960-1992, regarded as the period in which history became a profession.

<sup>4</sup> Thamsuk et al, "[Status of research]," p. 80; Chalong Suntharawani, "Sathanaphap kansuksa prawattisat: raingan kansamruat buanglon" [The state of historical studies: a preliminary report], paper presented at the conference "Thai Studies in the Next Decade" (in Thai), (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1990), pp. 4-6.

diversified.<sup>5</sup> Chamvit Kasetsiri has had to modify his Prawattisat historiography, his term for the modern histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as opposed to Tamnan (folk tales) and Phongsawadan (dynastic chronicles). In an article entitled "Thai Historiography from Ancient Times" published in 1979 Chamvit divided Prawattisat historiography into Damrong and Luang Wichit schools, representing a modern history based on documents and an intensely nationalist history respectively. Chamvit has since added four additional groups which developed after 1973: the nationalist revival, the Marxist, the Historicist, and the Asiatic society schools.<sup>6</sup>

The nation-wide mass uprising was unprecedented in Thai politics. This was a successful movement against a military regime which had been in power for sixteen years. Suddenly, it seemed at the time, the old world crumbled beneath people's feet. The change was so abrupt. The sense of excitement and joy was overwhelming. But the sense of uncertainty was also prevalent. A new age was coming, yet it was uncharted. The swift changes needed to be comprehended and controlled. There was a need to understand what had gone wrong, and why. And people did not wish to let the future be charted by the establishment. The future needed some sensible directions. The revolution seemed political, but in fact a cultural and intellectual revolution was underway and lasted longer.

It is not surprising that under these circumstances history was called into service. To know is to restore and assure some sense of certainty. But the conventional history was the spirit and soul of the *ancien regime*, and could not but be implicated in its now discredited agenda. A new history that served people was urgently needed for

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<sup>5</sup> .Chalong, "[State of historical studies]", pp. 7-11. Chalong only looks at students' theses between 1970-1989 as indicators. Political history remains most popular but declines. Intellectual and social history, as he defines them, developed substantially from negligible levels before 1974. Interest in economic history sharply increased between 1975 and 1984, and remains strong. The modern Bangkok period since Chulalongkorn remains most popular, but studies of every other period increase.

<sup>6</sup> Chamvit Kasetsiri, "Sakun prawattisat" [Schools of Thai historical studies], *Sinlapa wathanatham*, 6.1 (Nov. 1984): 36-44. The first two are Damrong and Luang Wichit schools, which he proposed in his "Thai Historiography," pp. 164-67. They remain the most influential. Since 1973 new challenges have come from, as he puts in English, the nationalist revival, the Marxist, the Historicist, and the Asiatic society schools.

the new epoch. The 1973 revolution contributed to the emergence of new histories in various ways. First, it put the entire establishment, including historical knowledge, on trial, and raised the curtain for alternatives, some of which had begun before 1973 but whose potential was only realized in the post-1973 context. Second, the 1973 revolution shook the structure of relations of power in Thai society. The "masses", be they the middle class, students, workers or organized peasants, emerged as powerful political actors; the military was relatively weakened and the monarchy strengthened. The new histories reflected the new power relations of historical agencies. Thirdly, the 1973 revolution itself was a result of the dramatic socio-economic changes in Thailand since the late 1950s. The new histories emerged within this new Thai state and society, and had to confront it.

The urgent demand for a new history provided an opportunity for the revival of the Thai Marxist literature of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> It became the locus where the radicalism of young Thais and the attempt of the Thai communist party to reassert its influence in the urban areas converged. The historic event that was identified was unarguably the publication of Jit Phoumisak's Chomna sakdina thai [The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today].<sup>8</sup> It offered a new past, an oppressive and exploitative one, entirely opposite from the royal/national one. Though the text is not finished, reading it intertextually with the Marxist literature popular at the time provided an inspiration for the change of history, in all senses of the word. The impact was at least twofold: first, it dealt a serious blow to the authority and credibility of the conventional national history; and second, it created a demand for more Marxist history.

## THE PAST BEYOND THE DAMRONG SCHOOL

<sup>7</sup> The best account of the Thai Marxist literature in the 1950s is Kasian Tejapira, "Commodifying Marxism: the Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958" Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> See Craig Reynolds, Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1987), chap. 2 for the translation of Jit's book. Reynolds' book is a study of the adoption of Marxism by Thais and of the way Marxist thought became influential in Thai political and historical discourse.

The increasing interest in history included a reconsideration of the fundamentals of history: its crafts, methods, meanings, values, and varieties.<sup>9</sup> The publication of two collections of articles in 1975-76, one on the values and meanings of history and the other on various historical schools and methodologies -- both Western and Thai -- indicated that discourse about the field was growing, and implied a critical evaluation of the old past and the old craft, and a call within the profession for new kinds of history.<sup>10</sup>

Attacks on the historical establishment began. The harsh criticism against Luang Wichitwathakan and his nationalist history was rather welcome.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Wichit, the regime he served (the pro-fascist Phibun), and the military had never been pleasing to the intellectuals, even though they may be the products of Wichit's culture more than they realize. The more majestic target which drew fire was the so-called "Damrong school", the historiography of Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, "the Father of Thai History."<sup>12</sup> It started with an article in 1974, but the severest criticism was the keynote lecture by Nithi Aewsriwongse at the annual conference of the Historical Society in early 1979, just over two years after the period of radical politics ended with the massacre of students in

<sup>9</sup> The annual meeting of the Historical Society has been a forum for this. See, for example, Historical Society, *Sathana khong wicha prawattisat nai patchuban* [The state of historical studies today] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1980) from the meeting in 1978. In subsequent years, the themes were the varieties of history, the state of economic history, of Southeast Asian history in Thai, of local history, and history and other sciences, for instance.

<sup>10</sup> Chamvit Kasetsiri and Suchat Sawatsri eds. *Pratya prawattisat* [Philosophy of history] (Bangkok: the Social Science Association of Thailand, 1975); and by the same editors, *Prawattisat lae nak prawattisat thai* [History and Thai historians] (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Kobkua Suwannathat-phian, "Kankhian prawattisat baep chatniyom: phicharana luang wichitwathakan" [The nationalist historiography: considering Luang Wichitwathakan], *Warasan Thammasat* 6,1 (Jun-Sep 1976): 149-180; and Aicharephon Kamutphitsamai, "Naao kankhian prawattisat khong luang wichit wathakan" [Luang Wichitwathakan's approach of history] in [History and Thai Historians], ed. Chamvit and Suchat, pp. 262-90. About this nationalist ideologue see Scott Barne, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> For the works of Damrong in English see Kennon Breazeale, "A Transition in Historical Writing: the Works of Prince Damrong Rajanubhap," *Journal of the Siam Society* 59, pt.2 (Jul. 1971): 25-49.

October 1976, and a few months after the extreme right wing royalist government was toppled by the military.<sup>13</sup>

The Damrong school, Nithi pointed out, originated among the elite who were responsible for the creation of the modern Thai state when Siam was under the colonial threat. It combined the legacy of the royal chronicle with history as written in the West during the nineteenth century, creating a royal/national history to serve the modern Thai state under the absolute monarchy. This history had served its purpose, Nithi argued. The time had come to end it.

To write a history to serve the nation-state and the monarchy, which are new institutions and constantly change, would make the historical analysis distorted and superficial....The extreme patriots should realize that the Thai nation-state is now strong enough and needs no 'manufacture' of history to support it.

At one time, historical knowledge was in the curriculum to nurture a uniform past of the Thai people. Now we no longer see any virtue or necessity for history to serve 'the nation' any more. Thai history as seen from the national [perspective]...distorted the truth.<sup>14</sup>

The distortions Nithi specified were the linear "centrist" history of the Thai capitals, the absence of local history, and the fact that Thai history is nothing but a political chronicle of the royal/national great men (and a few women). Even the state, the organized institution and mechanism, has no development in the Damrong school's accounts. The purpose of serving the modern state had become constraints and limitations of the old history. Nithi called for a more serious investigation of evidence, more critical methods

<sup>13</sup> Kobkua Suwannathat-phian, "Kankhian prawattisat khong sakun damrong rachanuphap" [The historiography of the Damrong Rajanubhap school], *Aksonsatphichan* 2,6 (Nov.1974), reprinted in Chamvit and Suchat eds. [History and Thai historians]. For Nithi's lecture, see "Kansuksa prawattisat thai: a-dit lae a-nakhot" [Thai historical studies: past and future], *Ruam botkhwam prawattisat* [Collected articles in history], no. 1 (Bangkok: the Historical Society, 1980): 1-22.

<sup>14</sup> Nithi, *ibid.*, pp. 12 and 17.

and for a "total history," the extension of historical inquiries to a variety of subjects, areas and times.

The reactions were subtle rather than overt, such as simply ignoring Nithi's views.<sup>15</sup> Nithi marched on. He published a textbook on the critical methods of history. But his major contribution was a series of research projects to exemplify how a critical and better history should be done and implicitly point to the failures of conventional history. Shortly before the Historical Society lecture Nithi had delivered a severe blow to the royal/national history in his meticulous analysis of a history of Bangkok in the royal chronicles of Ayudhya. Strange as this sounded -- since Bangkok (founded 1782) succeeded Ayudhya (1350-1767), not vice versa -- Nithi demonstrated convincingly how the royal chronicles of Ayudhya, which had been the authoritative treasure for historians since Damrong, had been thoroughly purified or cleaned (*chamra*) by the Bangkok regime to legitimize the new (and present) dynasty.<sup>16</sup> The chronicles remain valuable primary sources, but perhaps of early Bangkok more than of Ayudhya. Nithi's history can be read in many ways: as a study of late eighteenth century Ayudhya and early Bangkok history, of the intellectual climate after the fall of Ayudhya in 1767, of the world view of the new elite -- many of whom were petty traders and provincial authorities under Ayudhya, or of the Machiavellian politics of manufactured history used to justify the new dynasty. Each reading generated further arguments. But what was really at stake was the credibility of the old school. A genuine reaction from them focused on whether the royal chronicles were really unreliable.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, that hit the bulls eye.

<sup>15</sup> The overt one is from Sulak Sivaraksa, a Damrong loyalist but not less critical of Thai history. He defended Damrong at the expense of many other historians of later generations who, he accused, have tarnished the Prince's reputation. There was no "Damrong school," he contended. Those spoilers were in fact a "Wichitwathakan school". See Sulak Sivaraksa, "Somdet kromphraya damrong kap sakun damrong rachanuphap" [Prince Damrong and the Damrong School], in [Collected Articles in History] no. 1 (1980): 23- 52.

<sup>16</sup> Nithi Aeusrivongse, Prawattisat rattanakosin nai phraratcha phongsawadan Ayutthaya [A history of Bangkok in the royal chronicles of Ayudhya] (Bangkok: Bannakit, 1980). It was first presented in 1978.

<sup>17</sup> See Wimol Phongphiphat, "Phraratchaphongsawadan - chua dai rue mai?" [Are the royal chronicles reliable?], Warasan Aksornsat (Chulalongkorn University) 14, 2 (Jul.1982): 16-33.

From 1979 through 1982 Nithi produced a series of works about the early Bangkok period (late eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century). He took literary works as evidence of a changing world view or mentality brought about by the changing socio-economic conditions of early Bangkok. The series culminated in the now-classic work, Watthanatham kradumphi kap wannakam samai ton rattanakosin [The bourgeois culture and literature in the early Bangkok period] first presented in 1982.<sup>18</sup> Nithi's Bangkok was anything but the continuation of the grandeur of Ayudhya. It was a city of the pre-capitalist bourgeoisie from the bottom, the Chinese, to the top, the Chakri dynasty, where the mentality was more rational, realist, and humanist than in the old capital.<sup>19</sup> Could this combination of social, economic and literary history be achieved within the old paradigm of royal/national history? The political implications of the study aside, Watthanatham kradumphi was revisionist simply from the point of view of historical methodology.

Nithi's revisionism also extended into the arena which was the preserve of conventional history, that is, political history. His decision to study two "Great Kings" of Thai history, Narai (1656-1688) and Taksin (1767-1782), was, I believe, not accidental. In his narrative, the ruler Thais today call "King Narai the Great" is depicted as just a political animal like everybody else. His patriotism, which features prominently in conventional history, is here debunked. The French presence at his court was not to balance the influence of the Dutch, but rather to counter increasing pressure on the king from Thai nobles. The great diplomat king is shown to be a diplomat of his own interest. In the same light, the 1688 "revolution" was neither a patriotic movement against the

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<sup>18</sup> The works in this series, on Sunthon Phu (a poet), Lady Nopphamat (a fictional character), the Phetchaburi version of the Vessantara Jataka, and the classic "bourgeois culture" are collected in the volume Pakkai lae bairua [Quill and Sail], (Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> The works in this series, especially the "bourgeois culture," have never received adequate criticism. The issues and evidence Nithi brought into his discussion are complex. Yet his basic concepts of the relationship between the society's economic base, the social conditions of historical actors, their views, and the manifestations of all of them in literary works are problematic. Nithi is not a true follower of any particular theory. His concept is that of not an orthodox Marxist. Some of his point sound Weberian. Many are basic economic historical concepts. The characteristics of the bourgeois mentality, that it was "more rational, realist, and humanist," is also problematic, though this criticism is not intended to lessen Nithi's contribution as explained so far.

French nor a betrayal of a great king. It was merely another court struggle for power.<sup>20</sup> The story of King Taksin is a controversial subject because of Taksin's unusual biography and his mysterious fall, which has implications for the legitimacy of the founder of the present dynasty. Nithi engaged these issues, yet avoided all the controversies. His work is an analysis of political systems and political forces at the end of the Ayudhya period and during the rise and fall of Taksin. This approach does not feed the controversy; nor does it satisfy either side. Nevertheless, the popular interest in the issue allowed Nithi to use it to exemplify how political history can be written, and he did the job superbly. His critical historical methods in the handling of highly complex evidence and his cogent arguments proceeded as if there was no theory behind the construction of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> The biography of Taksin is now put in a proper socio-political context. The work is a masterpiece. Ironically, it generated little argument; the authority of the author and the work made it too definitive.

#### THE PAST ACCORDING TO THE ACADEMIC LEFT

While Nithi mounted a one man challenge to conventional historiography, typical of historians, a more systematic critique came from Thai economists. The Marxist history of the 1950s had inspired a group of scholars to continue work on a leftist economic history to challenge the royal/national political one. The works of this "Political Economy" group have already been discussed elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> I will discuss only their contribution to the shaping of a new past.

<sup>20</sup> Nithi Aeusrivongse, Kanmuang thai samai j. ira narai [Thai politics in the reign of King Narai] (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Nithi Aeusrivongse, Kanmuang thai samai phrachao krung thonburi (Bangkok: Sinlapa watthanatham Publishing, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> In English see Craig Reynolds and Lysa Hong, "Marxism in Thai Historical Studies," Journal of Asian Studies 43, 1 (Nov.1983): 77-104; and Lysa Hong, "Warasan Setthasat Kanmuang: Critical Scholarship in Post-1976 Thailand," in Thai Constructions of Knowledge ed. Andrew Turton and Manas Chitakasem (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991), pp. 99-118. In Thai see Napapom Atiwanitchayaphong, Phatthanakan khwamkhit setthasat kanmuang thai tangtae 2475-patchuban [The development of the Thai political economy ideas from 1932 to the present] (Bangkok: the Political Economy Group, 1988).



The key puzzle tackled by these scholars was why Thailand remained underdeveloped. This question led to the study of why traditional society, especially the *sakdina* or Thai feudal system had hindered development.<sup>23</sup> Conventional history was not helpful for this inquiry. At the heart of the effort was an analysis of Thai social formations. Was Thailand a semi-colonial/ semi-feudal society, or a dependent capitalism, or a semi-feudal/semi-capitalist society, or an Oriental society?<sup>24</sup> The issue was not a trivial conflict over terminology. It was a serious business, since the words were believed to represent the reality of Thai social formations, hence, class relations, the nature of the Thai state, and the strategies and tactics of social change, or of revolution. The failure to grasp the reality, in terms of identifying the correct analytical category that fit Thailand, was not just academic.

The Political Economy group at the time was comprised of scholars whose diverse interests spanned at least three or four related areas.<sup>25</sup> Works by Chatthip Natsupha and his students made an instant impact in 1979-1980 at a few crucial conferences on economic history. They proposed that the *sakdina* social formation of traditional Thai society changed little even after 1855 when Siam agreed to open up its market, because the monopoly of major commodities by the state and its control over key economic factors had precluded the possibility for the independent bourgeoisie. The local bourgeoisie, mostly the Chinese, either served as the functionaries of the state or as part of Western capitalism. In the view of the "Chatthip school" this anomaly of class relations was the key to the underdevelopment of Thai capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Jit Phoumisak, Chatthip Natsupha, and Chai-anan Samudavanija have this question and presupposition in common. See Jit Phoumisak, [Thai feudalism]; Chatthip Natsupha, Watthanatham thai kap khabuankan plianplaeng sangkhom [Thai culture and the movements for social change], (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University press, 1991), p.33; and Chai-anan's Sakdina kap phatthanakan sangkhom thai [Thai feudalism and the development of Thai society], (Bangkok: Namakson kanphim, 1976), introduction.

<sup>24</sup> See the summary of the debate in Reynolds and Hong, "Marxism."

<sup>25</sup> Napaporn Atiwanchayaphong, [Thai political economy ideas], pp.52-54.

<sup>26</sup> Chatthip Natsupha and Suthy Prasartset (eds.), The Political Economy of Siam, 1851-1910 and The Political Economy of Siam, 1910-1932 (both Bangkok: the Social Science Association of Thailand, 1981). The best commentary

In contrast to the royal/national political history, the Chatthip school plunged into the field of history by examining new subjects, and used methods that went beyond Jit's Thai Feudalism. Moreover, while Jit's work was polemical and overtly political, the Chatthip school was systematic and seriously academic, though by no means apolitical. Suddenly the Thai past was a story of productions, economic classes, tax-farmers, bourgeoisie, capitalists, land tenure systems, and so on. The heroic monarchical state turned out to be monopolistic, rent-seeking, parasitic, and an obstacle to development. The royal chronicles gave way to otherwise neglected archival materials about business, taxes, shipments and commodities. The dynastic and royal periodization of the past was not just modified but abandoned in favour of a periodization based on modes of production and forms of socio-economic system. The repetitive episodes of glorious kings were dumped together indifferently as the stagnant pre-1855 feudal or Asiatic society. Most importantly, the past and the Thai state were no longer glorious, nothing to eulogize. They were exploitative, obstructive, and the origin of social ills in the present.

Unlike Nithi, the Chatthip school took the heat almost right away. Interestingly, the point of contention was methodology rather than historical subversion. Should the past and historical research be conceived by "theory" or revealed by evidence and "empirical reality"? To be fair, nobody stood for the extremes and the questions were academically legitimate. But the implication of the criticism was also obvious. The Chatthip school, in my view, was guilty of relying much too heavily on Marxist schemes and the Asiatic mode of production theory. But that may be a strength, not weakness. As Reynolds has pointed out,

a new generation of historians uses Marxist socio-analysis as a lever to pry the chronicles and archives away from royalist and nationalist myth-making concerns....Society is increasingly seen as an entity, a system....[Thai historians have] attacked the 'great man' theory of

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on Chatthip in Thai is Somsak Jeamtheerasakul, "Sangkhomithai chak sakdina su thunniyom" [Thai society: from feudalism to capitalism], *Warasen Thammasat* 11.2 (Jun 1982) 128-64.

history...in favor of more complex historical causation rooted in the country's political economy.<sup>27</sup>

Western theories adapted to the Thai milieu enabled these scholars to chart a new past, and to change the language of Thai historical discourse.<sup>28</sup> In response to criticism of his use of theory, Chatthip reaffirmed the value of this approach, and encouraged historians to use more theory.<sup>29</sup>

The challenge to Chatthip's Asiatic past came from an alternative Marxist analysis and from Nithi, not from conventional history. The former successfully denied the semi-feudal/semicolonial concept which was also implied by Chatthip and others.<sup>30</sup> Nithi's "bourgeois culture" was also a debate with Chatthip. In a nutshell, the argument was that Bangkok and the central plain were highly dynamic before 1855. The pre-capitalist bourgeoisie was already in place and developed, and 1855 only altered the possible course of the Thai bourgeoisie. These two challenges cast doubts on Chatthip's Asiatic society, but the kind of history he did was there to stay.

Another issue raised by the academic left was the nature of the Thai state. As Nithi remarked in connection with the Damrong school, conventional history saw no evolution of the state until the late nineteenth century. However, according to the Marxist discourse the Thai state had by this time already gone through many stages based on changing modes of production.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes, too, the political character of the state determined the social formation.<sup>32</sup> Given the disagreement over social formations since

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<sup>27</sup> Reynolds and Hong, "Marxism" p.96.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.91.

<sup>29</sup> Chatthip Natsupha, "Muban kap rat nai krabuankan phatthana" [Villages and the state in the development process], *Setthasat parithat* 8,1 (Sep. 1986): 2, 6, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Songchai Na Yala (pseu.) "Panha kansuksa withikanphalit khong thai nuangmachak thritsadi kung muangkhun kung sakdina" [Problems in the study of Thailand's modes of production concerning the semi-feudal semi-colonial theory], *Warasan Setthasat Kanmuang* 1, 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1981).

<sup>31</sup> San Rangserit, *Wattananakan haeng sangkhom sayam* [The evolution of Thai society] (Bangkok, 1975).

<sup>32</sup> Songchai Na Yala (pseud.), "[Problems]."

1855, the question remained open concerning the nature of the Thai state during this period. While the Marxists concerned themselves with the terminology which could best capture reality, studies on the Thai state grew both inside and outside the Marxist discourse. Since then the interest in this issue has not died. Like the Chatthip school, scholars pursuing this issue brought into Thai historical discourse ideas from standard Western works, such as those by Ernest Laclau, Althusser, Poulantzas, Perry Anderson, and the Frankfurt school. "Somburanayasitthiraj", for example, was the early twentieth century term meaning absolute monarchy. But what does the term mean? The conventional historiography is ahistorical in denoting the entire traditional polity before 1932 as an absolute monarchy. Via Perry Anderson's *Absolutist State*, one historian was able to make it more specific to mean the period in which the Thai *ancien regime* was able to consolidate its control over territory and population without contest from the nobility, that is, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries only.<sup>33</sup> In the past twenty years, the history of the Thai kingdoms at the three capitals had gradually given way to the class-related states, the absolutist state, the Asiatic state, and most recently the three dimensional state.<sup>34</sup>

The debate over the state and social formations intensified in reverse proportion to the strength of the radical movements. Perhaps debate partly contributed to the ideological crisis since the more the debate grew, and the more complex issues became, the less certainty the radicals could feel about their ideas and strategy. The debate ended without any conclusion. Nobody asked for one. What we are witnessing today makes the debate a decade ago look even more absurd. It is patent that with the current economic growth, Thailand is a capitalist social formation. Does this mean Thai capitalism was not hindered by the feudal state and dependent bourgeoisie and the course was not altered by 1855? When were all the "semi" characteristics replaced by

<sup>33</sup> Somkiat Wanthana, "Rat somburanayasit nai sayam," monograph (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1982).

<sup>34</sup> Che-anen Samudavanija, *Rat kap sangkhom: tra lak san rat thai nai phahusangkhom sayam* [The state and society: the three dimensional Thai state in the pluralistic Samese society]. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1990).

true capitalism? How? Indeed, the kind of history the academic left have done is needed more, even though it has become academic and without political mission.

## ALTERING THE PRE-HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

The landscape of the Thai past has literally been changed the most by the work of Srisak Vallibhotama. His studies appeared steadily beginning in 1966, and gradually became influential. His methods and ideas sound unprovocative, but in fact he has been engaged in a confrontation with conventional history for years. His contribution is no less than the alteration of the entire landscape of Siam's past before it became "Thai" in conventional understanding.

In the royal/national discourse, the "Thai" past began at Sukhothai in the thirteenth century, followed by the Ayudhya, Thonburi and Bangkok kingdoms. Before Sukhothai, there were Thai in the kingdom of Nanchao, south of China, and several other kingdoms in the region had yet to realize their sovereignty. In fact conventional history used to believe that the Thai race was in the process of huge migration from southern China, and the pre-Sukhothai past accordingly fell into the domain of pre-history for Thai, or pre-Thai history. Migration was the trope. The post-Sukhothai periods were in the domain of successive Thai kingdoms. Together, the Thai past was a linear movement of a great race from the time and place of Others to the time and place of self-realization as a sovereign race.

Since 1966, Srisak has persistently argued for a history of Sukhothai before the Sukhothai kingdom, of Ayudhya before the Ayudhya kingdom, that is to say, the past of the areas which now make up the geo-body of Thailand before they became part of "proper" Thai history. Denouncing the racial history, Srisak considers people and culture in the land of Siam as much or as little Thai as the Thai today.<sup>35</sup> They were "Siamese," the non-racial term he prefers, regardless of their race. He repeatedly emphasized that his is a history of "*Sayamprathet*" [the Siamese country], as opposed to a "Thai" history, a

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<sup>35</sup> Srisak Vallibhotama, *Kho khatyaeng kieokap prawattisat thai* [Arguments about Thai history] (Bangkok, Muangboran Publishing, 1981) which is a collection of his major articles since 1966.

racially connoted past.<sup>36</sup> He opposes attempts to find the origin of Thai people today in the Tai race, which is a popular subject even up to now. Like every other race, and perhaps even more than most, he argues, the Thai are people of mixed race. To speak of the Tai race is to address a mistaken concept. To try to solve the question of its origin is a waste of time.<sup>37</sup> The peoples and cultures in the present domain of Thailand were the true ancestors of the Thai.

Instead of migration and self-realization, settlement and development are the tropes of the past in Srisak's view. All over the geo-body of Thailand today there were enormous number of early settlements and hundreds of ancient towns before the thirteenth century,<sup>38</sup> and *Isan*, or northeastern Thailand today, an area regarded by most historians as having no history until the last few hundred years, was perhaps the most important site of civilization in the region.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, according to Srisak, Sukhothai, before becoming a Thai kingdom, was founded by people from Vientiane-Sakonnakhon area of Isan before Vientiane became Lan Xang or Laos.<sup>40</sup>

The Siamese past in this view, therefore, was neither the migration of a race from the space and time of Others, nor a linear political succession from Sukhothai to Bangkok. It was an evolutionary process of interaction among human societies, and between human and their environments, from early settlements in pre-historic time, to small communities, cities, political units, and kingdoms, from hunting and gathering to

<sup>36</sup> The title of his latest book which is a comprehensive narrative of history in his view, is *Sayamprathet*. The English title as he provides is *Siam: Thailand's Historical Background From Pre-historic Times to Ayudhya* (Bangkok: Matichon Publications, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>38</sup> See Srisak Vallibhotama, *Borankhadi thai nai thotsawat thi phanma* [Thai archaeology in the past decade] (Bangkok: Muangboran Publications, 1982), and *Muang boran nai a-nachak sukhothai* [Ancient cities in the kingdom of Sukhothai] (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> See Srisak Vallibhotama, *Aeng arayatham isan* (A Northeastern Site of Civilization: New Archaeological evidence to Change the Face of Thai History), (Bangkok: Matichon Publications, 1990). The English title is from the book.

<sup>40</sup> Srisak Vallibhotama, "Chao sayam thi wiangchan lae isannua pen phusang khwaen sukhothai" [The Siamese at Vientiane and upper Isan were the founders of Sukhothai], *Sinlapa wathanatham* 13, 1 (Nov.1991): 220-228.

agriculture and trade, from simple kinship to complex social relations, and this process occurred in hundreds of places simultaneously. The Thai past was pluralistic and diversified from the beginning of history. If we were to imagine the conventional Thai past in a map form, it would be a set of political maps of the Thai geo-body that I have illustrated elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> To imagine the Siamese past in Srisak's view, it would be set of historical-topographical maps showing the coasts, mountain ranges, valleys, plateaus, original and cleared forests, and the walls or moats, rivers, and trading routes. It would be like the aerial photos Srisak always shows to begin his arguments.

As an archaeological anthropologist, Srisak uses methods that are "down to earth." His narratives always begin with geography, physical environment, and the conditions for human settlement. Srisak also was among the first to fight for recognition of *Tamnan*, a traditional genre of legends or myths, as historical evidence. After years of hard press, it appears his efforts have borne fruit. The growing influence of his ideas came about gradually without a provocative moment nor the formation of a distinctive "school."<sup>42</sup>

In fact Srisak has had excellent institutional outlets for his ideas over the long period. He has more infrastructure for dissemination than anybody else. First, he was the founder and editor of one of the two popular magazines in the field of historical studies, Muang boran (founded in 1974). And it is no secret that his view is strongly present in the other, more popular one, Sinlapa watthanatham (founded 1979). Among the articles that have appeared in Muang boran are his study of *Isan*, the writings of his father -- a pioneer and strong proponent of the values of *tamnan*, and innumerable reports of excavations and findings about ancient cities and historical sites throughout the geo-body of Thailand. Among the issues that made Sinlapa watthanatham famous were the provocative assertion that "Sukhothai was

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<sup>41</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, Siam Mapped, pp. 150-56.

<sup>42</sup> Many times Srisak credited Jit Phoumisak for the breakthrough from the linear history of the Thai capitals. I believe Srisak realized that Jit attracted greater public interest than his own credentials.

not the first Thai capital",<sup>43</sup> and the story of Ayudhya before it became a capital. The editor of *Sinlapa watthanatham*, Sujit Wongdes, has worked closely with Srisak since the days when they founded an "Archaeological Travel" club in college, and he is a loyal promoter of Srisak's ideas. Second, the scholars whose intellectual foundation owed very much to Srisak include Dhida Saraya, a well known historian herself whose works are no less influential than Srisak's own. Dhida is a major force behind the rise of the interest in local history, to be discussed below, but the best of her works concern the ancient states or cities in the early history of Southeast Asia.<sup>44</sup> Third, Srisak was one of the first to use travels and tours as a way of learning, before tourism based on historical sites became a successful business. Despite his repeated warning and criticism of the danger that business might cause to the sites and of the government's policy regarding it, Srisak never denies the value of tourism and is perhaps one of the most famous and knowledgeable scholars in the business. If many of his ideas seem unprovocative and not so interesting now, that may be a sign that his views are becoming a new conventional wisdom.

## THE CONTESTED DOMAIN OF LOCAL HISTORY

Increased attention to local history is a logical consequence of Srisak's view of history, a way to construct a polycentric or non-centric, and non-linear but contemporaneous history of Siam. The surge of interest in local history was the most important phenomenon of the historical scholarship in Thailand during the 1980s. According to my incomplete survey, from 1978 to 1991 there were at least forty-six conferences on local history in thirty-two or more of the country's seventy-two provinces.

<sup>45</sup> Scholars from Bangkok always participated, and played prominent roles. Srisak, for

<sup>43</sup> Sujit Wongdes, *Sukhothai maichai raichathan: haengraek khong thai* [Sukhothai was not the first Thai capital]. (Bangkok: Sinlapa watthanatham Publications, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> Dhida Saraya, *Rai boran* [Ancient states]. (Bangkok: Muang boran, 1994), and *Sri lawarawadi: prawattisat yuk lon khong sayamprathet* [Dvaravati: the early history of Siam]. (Bangkok: Muang boran, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> The conferences were independently organized, though a local educational institution had to be involved. The figure here is from a survey involving all teacher's colleges in the country, and from the available conference materials. The



example, spoke at more than twenty conferences, followed by Prasert Na Nagara, Sujit Wongdes, Dhida Saraya, and Nithi. But Srisak was not the sole reason behind the rise of local history. No one individual had such a great influence. As we shall see, the main current in local history fell far short of what Srisak might expect. The rise of local history was a conjuncture of several factors, and its effect went beyond historical scholarship.

The genealogy of local history in Thailand is complex. Chiangmai had a seminar on its own history as early as 1966 in connection with the foundation of a university there. A course on Chiangmai's history has been in the curriculum since then. The events of 1973, nevertheless, created repercussions that led to a rise in local history. First of all, local intellectuals throughout the country have always shown interest in local and regional identities. They continuously produce transliterations and writings on local literature. The country-wide uprising not only aroused political consciousness but also boosted the consciousness of local identities.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Jit Phoumisak's alternative history inspired many scholars writing local history to examine a history of the common people, of the masses, and from below.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the impetus for institutionalized local history came, surprisingly, from the ministry of education as parts of education reform after 1973. The impact of the 1973 uprising hit education harder than many other areas. Not only were there calls to tear down the entire school curriculum, to "burn" the classical literature which allegedly stultified the masses, and to increase student participation, but scholars also pressed hard for a reform of the educational system. One of the key issues was decentralization of the curriculum, and encouragement of the idea that local people should know more about themselves and their history. Although the 1976 massacre and the right wing regime interrupted the reform, and the idea was never put into effect, local studies

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figure does not include a few conferences before 1978, or a number of seminars in Bangkok mostly about the methodology and values of local history, or an overview of it.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with Att Nanthachak, Pranut Sapphayasan, and Thirachai Bunmatham at Srinakharinwirot University (Mahasarakham), 27-28 July 1992; and interview with Anan Kanchanaphan, Chiangmai University, 16 July 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Dhida Saraya, *Tamnan and Tamnan History: A Study of Local History* (Bangkok: The Office of the National Culture Commission, 1982), pp. 94-97.

nevertheless became part of the national educational plan in 1978. New courses and textbooks were created at various school levels, and the ministry of education provided funds for the establishment of provincial cultural centres at the local teacher's colleges or provincial high schools.<sup>48</sup>

Local history was both a bottom-up and top-down initiative, a local and national effort, and a radical alternative as well as a state-sponsored project. Each agenda had its own politics and interests, ideas and methods, and anticipated particular results. A decade later, the current was still high, and received added impetus from tourism, domestic and foreign funding for the nostalgia industry, and attempts by several provincial governors under the Interior Ministry to promote "their" provinces. Local history is a heavily contested domain, where Srisak, Dhida, local intellectuals, the Thai state, and others tried to establish their influence, though no one has succeeded in dominating the field.

An effort to conceptualize and define local history came from Dhida Saraya. She gave political values to local history by tracing the struggles of subordinates to create their own history from the late nineteenth century to Jit Phoumisak in the 1950s. Local history continued this struggle, she argued, since it was an effort to create a history of the masses [*muanchon*]. "Local history is a history of local society in which the masses are actors...a social history which emphasizes the masses."<sup>49</sup> In her words, the masses equal "countryside-local [*chonabol-thongthin*]."<sup>50</sup>

For Dhida, local history challenges the mainstream history, the "centralist historical ideology," which, in her view, appears to epitomize the problems of historical studies: too much political history, a emphasis on great men, a non-dynamic past, a history without context or perspective or process which was narrow in methods and selection of evidence; a false periodization by capitals or regnal years; a history of king,

<sup>48</sup> Chalong Suntharawanit, "Sathana khong kansuksa prawattisat thongthin" [State of studies in local history], *Warasat Setthasat Kanmuang*, 5, 3-4 (Apr.-Sep. 1986), p. 150. Interviews with Renu Wichasilp and Arunrat Wichiankhiao, the Ratchaphat College (former Chiangmai Teacher's College), 14 & 17 July 1992.

<sup>49</sup> Dhida Saraya, *Prawattisat thongthin* [Local history], (Bangkok: Muang boran Publications, 1986), p.25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

state and nation without the common people and their culture.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, her local history is a history from below, using folk materials, focussing on the masses, their thoughts and culture; a history of weeds," of unknown people, rank and file foot soldiers; a "living" history since it is interested in historical perceptions, and the place of history in present-day culture, including the evolution of myths; a history "from the inside," as it is perceived by local people regardless of its truthfulness.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, myths or *Tamnan* are legitimate historical evidence, not only because they give us local perceptions of the past, but in fact they are "core myths" which we could use to ascertain the true past about the settlements.<sup>53</sup> And so on.

Apparently Dhida lined up all the qualities of history that she thought desirable and conferred them upon "local" history. The approach created confusion because it conflated the geographic or spatial (countryside, inside, centre, local) with the social or hierarchical (masses, below, bottom, people). The terms she selected as her target, "centre", "centrist", "centralist" are also both geographic and hierarchical. As a result, "local" is too heavily-loaded a term.

But Dhida's is merely a case in which the definition was overdone. For others, the meaning of "local history" is taken as understood, and encompassing various perspectives, and is accordingly left ambiguous. Ironically, its strength lies in the resulting ambiguity and confusion, in its encompassing claim to a better, more legitimate past in every way. Thus people, including Dhida herself, can play with it, appropriate it in many possible ways, and create different kinds of local history. The works Dhida calls "local history" include, for instance, a history of the settlement at Chiangmai and the evolution of its state.<sup>54</sup> It is a history of the former centre of the Lanna kingdom which is

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 7, 12-14. For an elaboration in English of this historical ideology and the necessity of "local history" see Dhida Saraya, *Tamnan*, chaps. 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> Dhida Saraya, [Local history], pp. 4-5, 29-30, 43-44, 79-82; and Wilailak Mekharat, "Interview: Dr. Dhida Saraya," *Warasan Aksonsat* (Chulalongkorn University), 17, 1 (Jan. 1985): 3-8.

<sup>53</sup> Dhida Saraya, *Tamnan*, chap. 4, esp. p.114. She demonstrates in this small book a history of the settlement of Chiangmai as constructed from *Tamnan*.

<sup>54</sup> See Dhida Saraya, *Tamnan*. The full version of this small booklet is her dissertation at the University of Sydney in 1982.

not quite "local" even now except from the centrist viewpoint. Local history has proliferated, though it has not produced a single study of the peasant society as Srisak had anticipated.<sup>55</sup> Every notion of local history is another living history from the inside. What matters to people who create it is its values.

There is one thing such notions of local history have in common: it would not cause disharmony or disintegration in the country. On the contrary, for Dhida a better understanding of local culture would promote national and social solidarity, would assist government planning, and much more. "All these will make the people realize the importance and be proud of their history, identity and ... will be willing to preserve the old traditions instead of turning to new ones. The consequence will be an improvement of national integration in general."<sup>56</sup> Studies and conferences on local history in Thailand have been carried out in this good spirit.

The geographical units of the conferences on local history were the present day provinces and regions. Only once was the unit a historical town which was not identical with a modern province or region.<sup>57</sup> The proceedings of most of them had a similar pattern. Starting with geography, surrounding environment, and ancient settlements or towns in the area, the conferences then looked at the province in the pre-historic period and historical periods as marked in the national history by capitals or by regnal years. The period may be more specific if the province played a prominent role in the national history of that period. After political history came economic history, local literature, architecture, arts, crafts, local traditions, and a few other subjects unique to the province or region.

In most cases, a province held the conference only once. Given the extensive scope of the conference and the limited number of papers, most provinces got merely a glimpse of their history. Only a few of them, such as Chiangmai, Phitsanulok,

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<sup>55</sup> Dhida Saraya, *[Local history]*, p. 2-3, introduction by Srisak. Many studies of the peasants come from the Chatthip school.

<sup>56</sup> Dhida Saraya, *Tamnan*, pp. 120, 121.

<sup>57</sup> The second conference at Phitsanulok in 1982 partly focussed on Nakhonthai, now a district in the province.

Mahasarakham and Nakhonsithammarat, had a combination of institutional commitment, resources, and tradition to mount a fuller effort.<sup>58</sup>

During the conferences scholarly pursuits had to compromise with tourism and business in shaping the agenda. Some occasions looked more like promotional events for the provinces concerned than academic meetings, and featured discussions of popular "landmarks" of the provinces to glorify their separate identities. The history sessions often contributed to the self-glorification exercises as well, with celebrations of past reigns and local events taking the place of scholarly explorations.

But how was gloriousness determined? The selected past was mostly one in which the province played a prominent role in the national narrative. In this way the pledge of allegiance the "locals" made to the Thai nation was reaffirmed. Earlier generations of intellectuals and "amateur" historians were not reluctant to write about their past from local perspectives. It is the professionals in our generations, both the local and central ones, who face a dilemma in choosing between the autonomous history of a locality and the history of the locality as part of the Thai nation. This dilemma generated confusion from the very first writings on local history.<sup>59</sup> It appeared in Dhida's concept of the decentred-but-integral local history. It can be seen in most conferences. Autonomous identities were celebrated in arts, literature and local traditions, but in history, most provinces primarily valued their contribution to, and participation in, the nation. The periodization of local history remains that of the national one. Thus, local history is a history of the relationship with the centre, a partial history of the national whole.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> All have tertiary institutions. Historically, they were once at least the second rank centres in the kingdom. (Here Mahasarakham represents Isan, not the province.) Chiangmai has had at least seven major conferences; Nakhon five, Ubon and Phitsanulok three, and Isan four.

<sup>59</sup> Somjai Phairothirarat, "Thatsana khong klum nakkhian prawattisat lanna thai" [The views of the Lanna's historical writers] in Chamvit and Suchat eds., [*History and Thai Historians*], pp. 166-207. Here Somjai recognized Lanna as a historical kingdom in its own right. Yet she blamed the Lanna intellectuals who honestly wrote a history as if Lanna was a nation and failed to explain its relationship with the Thai center.

<sup>60</sup> At the same time, we must recognize some who wrote local history focussing on the evolution of its town, state, or dynasty, with the relationship with the Thai centres mentioned occasionally. Unfortunately, the obvious case was Chiangmai-Lanna which used to be a kingdom in its own right, not a local town.

Typically, conferences included Srisak's kind of pre-history or Dhida's recognition of myth/history "from the inside", both calling for a non-centrist local history, but without any stake in local pride. On the other hand, they also included a glorified history of the province and its unity within the nation. These different kinds of local history, sometimes misleadingly seen as reflecting the views of two camps made up of Bangkok scholars and local scholars, coexist intricately and clash occasionally. Regarding one conference, a reporter from Bangkok said that the Bangkok scholars used modern historical methodology, but local scholars still made their local history part of a nationalist plot of Thai history.<sup>61</sup> Typically, few recognized the differences and those who did let the differences subside. In less typical cases, conflicts were revealing. For example, an art historian contended that two famous Buddha images in one province were not, as commonly thought, from India, but were locally made. He was strongly criticized for causing confusion, since the fame of the images, and by extension of the province, was based on the belief that the images were authentic. When the unfortunate historian further suggested that local arts were possibly derived from the Cham tradition, local intellectuals protested again,

Just because they [Champa] had more [art works] than we have, [we think] the items we have also belonged to them....Eventually, ours has no integrity. Nothing is unique to us, to our local tradition. We have no originality; all were borrowed from others. This is a matter of national integrity.<sup>62</sup>

After all, local history remains a dynastic story of the political elite, not a popular and social one. As a critic noted, it has potential to challenge the Thai state, but instead is incorporated into the national narrative. It serves the government politically for

<sup>61</sup> See Wanunee Osathanond's report of the conference on the local history of Suphanburi in *Chunlasan Thai Khadi Suksa* [Bulletin of the Thai Khadi Research Institute], 5.2 (Feb 1988), 135.

<sup>62</sup> "Samman prawetisat suratthani khrangthi 1. 2527" [The first conference on history of Suratthani, 1984], (monograph, Suratthani Teacher's College, 1990) pp. 67-68.

security, economically for tourism, and ideologically to create a cultural-rich Thailand. The misdirection had been pointed out many times, but nobody has listened. Perhaps this is due to the fact that historians, local or otherwise, are bureaucrats, whose lives are so dominated by the royal/national history.<sup>63</sup> It would be more interesting to see a history of a problematic province like Pattani, one member of the audience at a local history conference suggested, and even more so if the separatist view was included.<sup>64</sup>

### NOSTALGIC THAILAND: ANARCHISTIC VILLAGE AND COMMODIFIED PAST

Both Srisak and Chatthip expressed concern that local history was becoming more interested in cultural promotion and less in people and community.<sup>65</sup> Chatthip's discourse on local history is similar to Dhida's, but his ideas are different. Like Dhida, he conflates "local" and the "masses", but it is clear to him that local history must study a village community since it is the only locus where "local" and "people" are unambiguously the same. A study from the inside must offer a grass roots perspective. An account of relationships among the elite, local and central, is an "outside" history. Above all, he is steadfast that local history must examine the socio-economic evolution of the village community if it is to be a study of "living" people.<sup>66</sup> "In the narrowest and most specific definition, [local study] is a study of human relations in local production, of class relations at the local level."<sup>67</sup> The result is an economic history of villages.

Contrary to his earlier proposition, Chatthip now believes that Thai villages had similarities to the Oriental society more than he had thought. They had not changed

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<sup>63</sup> Chalong Sunthrawanit, "[State of studies in local history]" pp.140-144.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.144. The challenge was from the audience.

<sup>65</sup> Chatthip Natsupha, [Thai culture and movements], pp. 4-6. Srisak Vallibhotama, "Phak tawanok kap kansuksa prawattisat thongthin" [The eastern region and local history] in Chonburi: prawattisat lae sinlapa watthanatham [Chonburi: history, arts and culture], (Chonburi: Srinakharinwirot University-Bangsaen, 1989), pp. 1-3. The criticism was also about the lack of focus and coherence in most conferences, and a general lack of progress in local history.

<sup>66</sup> Chatthip Natsupha, "Kansuksa sethakit kanmuang thongthin: khwammai lae khwam samkhan" [A study of local political economy: meanings and significance], Warasan Setthasat Kanmuang 4, 1 (Sep. 1984): 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

much either before or after 1855 because of the intensity of village cohesiveness or the "community culture", the availability of natural resources, and the parasitic but non-penetrating state. The break-up of Thai villages had occurred just over the past thirty years as a consequence of the rapid industrialization, and the extensive penetration of the Thai state into village community.<sup>68</sup> Where Nithi pushed the dynamism of the Bangkok bourgeoisie back to the late eighteenth century, Chatthip postponed the date of late capitalism in Thai villages to the 1960s.

Like many other Thai intellectuals, Chatthip is critical of the economic boom and the course of development Thailand has been experiencing. The growing evils and human cost have enhanced his nostalgic appreciation of the pre-industrial community. He knows it vividly through his academic contemplation. His research confirms the existence of such a village not so long ago and perhaps now, and he has proposed an alternative form of development which recognizes and preserves these villages, and in fact is based on their participation. Undoubtedly, his ideal of the village touches a chord with the intelligentsia, and one scholar has provided evidence for the existence of what Chatthip sees as the "original" village:

Khiriwong is a real village which is identical with the one imagined by villagers...[i.e.] without the penetration from the state and capitalism. We might think that this kind of community existed only in the peasant millennialism in history. Or it might be just a wish of a utopian thinker. But this is real. [The research on Khiriwong] proposed an "anarchist" theory of development, a kind of socialism, focussing on folk ideology and small organizations...to counter the power of the state and capitals cities. In the past, anarchism was not popular in Thailand, even though it is the set of ideas most in line with those of the villagers. It is a folk socialism.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Chatthip Natsupha, Setthakit muban thai nai adit [The economy of Thai villages in the past], (Bangkok: Sangsan, 1985).

<sup>69</sup> Chatthip's introduction in Porphilal Lertwicha, Khiriwong (Bangkok: Muban Publications, 1989).



Regardless of the validity of his theory, methodology, or analysis, Chatthip's local studies have produced an outcome which is absolutely different from those undertaken by the local histories which posit themselves within the framework of the Thai nation. What is more striking than an anarchistic village versus a glorified integral province? Yet they co-exist under the rubric of local history.

Local history could have been seen as jeopardizing national security and the integrity of the state, and its popularity and its recognition and promotion by Thai authorities reflected a significant change in the Thai state. With the end of internal insurgency and of the Cold War in the 1980s, neighbouring states became dependent on Thailand in one way or another. The Thai state was secure. Besides, Thailand emerged economically stronger than before. Not only had the security paranoia which had haunted the Thai elite since the birth of the nation subsided, but Thailand could be aggressive. Within this context the diversity of Thai people and culture was tolerable. The centralized culture and memory began to open more space to the local ones, and the Thai state did not crack. Instead, the process of the state's allowing for greater pluralism initiated another transformation, which remains perhaps THE main agenda today.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly, the proliferation of local identities has been carefully guided and contained. Fundamental to the management of this process is the discourse on the relationship between national and local identities. There is more than one way to put the relationship in its proper place. The most prominent discourse establishes hierarchical, or part/whole relations.

As we all agree, culture is a factor which unifies our nation. In Thailand now we have the main culture [*watthanatham lak*] we all adhere to. But the sub-cultures [*watthanatham yoi*], which are identities of particular

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<sup>70</sup> The surge of local studies is not an isolated phenomenon of this trend, though it began before many other issues. In politics, the issues now include decentralized administration, budgets, and local elections.

localities, continue to exist without being harmful to the harmony of the nation.<sup>71</sup>

The national culture is sophisticated, the local cultures are popular. The national culture states the theme upon which local cultures provide variations. The national culture is genuinely Thai, the local cultures are derivative. Despite the fallacies of this belief, it allows the diversity of local identities and local histories to emerge more easily.<sup>72</sup>

It is not the state alone that supports the proliferation of local history. In fact the state might just be responding to the increasing demand from the civil society for a new kind of past that fits their taste. The rapid industrialization has brought about several social transformations. And the Thai bourgeoisie, the leading force of this economic miracle, still pushes the society ahead at full speed. The impact on urban life and culture has been spectacular. The class of the new rich has expanded in a relatively short period, and suddenly has enormous buying power. After purchasing material culture, the new rich seek the more subtle spiritual culture. Unfortunately, they are not culturally rich, being first to third generation immigrants who have been uprooted from their traditions and homelands either within Thailand or in China not so long ago. The historical roots of Thais of Chinese descent are superficial and ambivalent, since their origins in China are remote and perhaps only preserved in their practice of ancestor worship "at home" in Thailand. Most importantly, immigration history is regarded as an

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<sup>71</sup> The speech by the Governor of Surin, a province in the northeast, at the opening ceremony of a conference on the local culture of the Mun valley, see Surin Cultural Centre, *Watthanatham lummaenam mun: karani khamen, lao, suai surin* [The culture of the Mun valley people: the cases of the Khmer, Lao, and Suai in Surin]. (Bangkok: Sanmuanchon, 1990).

<sup>72</sup> Nithi once questioned how far the state's accommodation of local cultures can go with this discourse since it contains serious limitations. His suggestions are perhaps too radical for the state: either to drop the unifying elements of Thai identity in the past hundred years, such as Buddhism, to be able to accommodate more people into the Thai identity domain, or to abandon the national culture ideology, the unifying, main culture upheld only by the state, since Thailand is not a homogeneous country anyway. Nithi Aeusivongse, "[Two hundred years of Thai historical studies]," pp. 113-115; and "Khwaam lekai khong watthanatham thai: kan thathai mai" [The diversity of Thai culture: a new challenge], in *Su khwaam khaochai watthanatham* [For the understanding of culture]. (Bangkok: the Office of National Culture Commission, 1989).

individual rather than an imagined communal past.<sup>73</sup> The past they identify with is a Thai past, but their Thai identity is a recent acquisition. Their demand for a Thai past has grown rapidly.

On the other hand, the force of rapid change has separated people of Thai descent from rural ways of life and local cultures. Major cities have expanded enormously. Internal migration has brought people from villages or small towns into new urban environments, and they live without roots in the mega-cities. The changes have been so fast, forceful and disruptive that the contrast between the past and present can be felt in every way. One consequence is social nostalgia. Recently several groups of people, mostly urban intellectuals and business people, have been setting up museums, organizing exhibitions of memorabilia, establishing archives of films, music, printed materials and so on, and preserving old architecture. Publications on old Siam or old Bangkok flood the market. The faster Bangkok moves into the future, the greater the appeal of neo-antiquarianism. People are conscious about recollecting the past, though they would not live with it. They want to collect it for their spiritual wealth, to make the flow of life comprehensible.

Most of the participants in the local history projects, especially local intellectuals, are probably this kind of people. For them, local study is not a matter of decentering the national narrative. The revival of local identity may be important, but as part of the communal nostalgia rather than as a reassertion of a separate identity. Local history has the potential to nurture the power of local community that Chatthip and Nithi anticipate, but basically it is part of the nostalgia production currently overwhelming Thailand.

Given the different kinds of demands, the result is the commodification of nostalgia. Now the mode of acquisition of the past is consumption. The past is itemized, objectified and processed in various forms for sale: as packaged stories for media

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<sup>73</sup> There is no authoritative work in Thai on the Chinese overseas in Thailand which can nurture a sense of communal history. The closest of that kind are fictions, such as Botan, Letters from Thailand or a recent famous Lot lai mangkon [Through the dragon motif] by Praphatson Sewikul. Another recent genre is biographies of successful Chinese businessmen (no women yet) in Thailand. The inquiry into the culture of the Chinese society in Thailand has been long overdue. One of the recent critical comments is Kasian Tejapira, Lee lot lai mangkon [Looking through the dragon motif], (Bangkok: Khopfai Publication, 1993).

consumption, as festivals or historical parks for tourist consumption,<sup>74</sup> and as museums or conferences on local history for intellectual consumption. The trends in local studies have lately become more concerned with selected rituals, art works, buildings or cultural artifacts such as textiles. These studies would never be a threat to the state; on the contrary, they only fulfill the nostalgic longing for roots, and make profits.

To consider that the commodification of history brings with it a deterioration of the discipline and the profession may be a noble pretension. Definitely, the authority of professional historians has been reduced, and the field has become more open. Whether or not this means better history, and what is meant by better history, remains to be seen. Among the positive contributions the nostalgia industry has brought about in Thailand is the successful popularization of history, particularly by the magazine *Sinlapa wathanatham* [Arts and culture]. The strategies it uses are no secret. On the one hand, it sensationalizes history by making it provocative or controversial. On the other hand, it makes history an open domain in which people without special expertise can join the debate on topics that interest them. The magazine has placed before the public several scholarly controversies previously only of concern among historians. Issues raised by the new histories since 1973 have been popularized by the magazine. In return, we may say that the magazine, and the commodification of nostalgia, have contributed to the success of Nithi, Srisak, Dhida, Chatthip, and many others in challenging conventional history. In the past fifteen years, the magazine has created unprecedented public curiosity and popular participation in the production of historical knowledge.

One of the consequences of the nostalgia industry is the fact that the production and dissemination of historical knowledge has moved away from academic journals and perhaps classrooms, and become centred in popular magazines, tourism, and the mass media. Even among intellectuals in Thailand, seminars, conferences, and public meetings are the most significant arenas. For better or worse, with excitement and frustration, the interesting new ideas frequently appear in popular magazines and public forums, rather than in the form of serious research. Given the low salary and poor return

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<sup>74</sup> One of the most controversial cases is the preservation of old Sukhothai, which was made into a historical site for tourism.

for research and academic publications, most academic journals in history have been pronounced dead.

This new economy of historical knowledge has selective effects on the field of historical studies. In terms of product, some subjects of study are saleable, some are not. Thus, some issues are more visible than others and more likely to be reproduced while others might be dropped from the inventory. In terms of production process, some subjects need time and methodology that make them difficult for popular consumption, but a number of subjects have been produced without academic baggage. In terms of circulation, historical knowledge is brought down to open market, to public production, participation, and consumption. It is no longer an elitist property.

Unlike the immediate period after 1973, however, the rising consumer demand for nostalgia does not originate from the search for answers to the disruptive moment in the society. The increased flow of commodities does not necessarily lead to a strong infrastructure of research and institutional development. What is demanded is ready-made history for public consumption, not a serious inquiry into the past. Consequently, while commoditized history has increased and history has been popularized, the infrastructure (students, courses, professionals, funding) has shrunk. Is this economy of historical knowledge and the nostalgia industry a kind of "bubble", like the present economy of the country?

## CONCLUSION

There have been several other attempts to write revisionist and new kinds of history, such as struggles to interpret the 1932 revolution and the subsequent regimes, the introduction of post-modernism into Thai historical discourse, and studies on nationalism, although there has been little serious work on the events of 1973 and 1976 themselves. The doubt over the authenticity of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, the inscription number one of Thai history, was crucial for the survival of Sukhothai as the Golden Age of the Thai past. So far, however, both the inscription and the Golden Age have survived the scrutiny, although the doubt is not completely put out.<sup>75</sup> As we have

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<sup>75</sup> See James Chamberlain ed. *The Ramkhamhaeng Controversy* (Bangkok: the Siam Society, 1991).

seen, new ideas from the West have been localized selectively, depending on several factors: compatibility -- whether or not they fit local interests; adaptability -- how to make them Thai and understandable in Thai discourse; and authority -- who imports them and how. Nevertheless, they have generated new historical discourses in the Thai context. Orthodox Marxist concepts, for example, have been imported and transformed for local consumption and have generated particular knowledge on Thai social formations. But the interest in the neo-Marxist ideas came late when the arguments were winding down. They generated a number of works on peasants, millennialism and history of workers -- perhaps the Thai "history from the bottom up," but have had only limited impact on Thai historical discourse.

Nevertheless, the landscape of the Thai past has been fundamentally changed by the new histories we have discussed in this article. From a modern political chronicle of great men, the Thai past has acquired a socio-economic domain alongside the narrative of state development and social relations. Its temporal span is more extensive than that of conventional history, and it is no longer the history of centres.<sup>76</sup> The Thai state and Thai society have proved to be more heterogenous than we had realized. The myth of homogeneity is not sustainable and no longer necessary for the Thai state. The contestation for local history, and between radical and non-radical history, take place within this new discursive landscape. The rise of the nostalgia industry along with a popular, and popularized, history is simultaneously a threat and contribution to the historical enterprise, and to historians. Above all, there are many pasts, and they are not all reconcilable. The master plot of Thai history, a recurring story of struggles for independence, no longer monopolizes the Thai memory. Nor, too, do professional historians.

Perhaps, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the changes in the Thai historical studies originated in, responded to, and made an impact on domestic scholarship and politics. Chatthip and the "Political Economy" group, and many other Thai intellectuals as

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<sup>76</sup> As a matter of fact, the expansive space and time of Srisak's history is similar to the vision of the Siamese historical domain proposed by King Chulalongkorn since 1907 which apparently had been abandoned by later generations of historians in favour of the Thai-centric history. See King Chulalongkorn, "Samakhom supsuwan khong boran nai prathetsayam" [The Antiquarian Society in Siam], *Sinlapakorn* 12, 2 (Jul 1968): 42-46.

well, are engaged in political or social activism. Their works have never been merely academic. This is not to discredit their quality. Rather, there is more in those works than we normally expect of historians. These scholars write to create an impact on politics, development, national integration, or to nurture the new nationalism, or for the future of village, community, province, and the nation. The common concern of Nithi, Chatthip and Srisak is to reclaim history for the people, whether by taking away authority from the establishment, by shaking up the domination of the royal/national history, by proposing the alternative history of class struggles, or history of village, or by making the past of Siam a story of the evolution of people in their land and environments. This is the 1973 spirit. Historians are speaking to the present while they are speaking about the past. Their populist nationalism, and their romanticism of the authentic village, community culture, Thai intellect, whether we like them or not, will be part of Thai historical discourse for decades to come.

Finally, the contribution of these scholars to Thai and Southeast Asian studies outside the country could be enormous, but their work is available only in Thai and has been largely overlooked. Srisak's pre-history of Isan and Dhida's early history of the mainland could provide significant input for historians of early Southeast Asia. Nithi's works, especially on "bourgeois culture," could make a significant contribution to the recent debate on the "Age of Commerce" of Southeast Asia and its impact on the patterns of development or decline of Southeast Asian states in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Chatthip's village is substantial evidence of the spatially uneven development of the Thai state and capitalism. The new interpretations of Thai politics and society surrounding the 1932 revolution, which we do not discuss here, may change the ways we know modern Thai politics. More dialogue is perhaps needed.

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<sup>77</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) and Victor Lieberman, "Local Integration and Eurasian Analogies: Structuring Southeast Asian History, c.1350-c.1830," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 3 (1993): 475-572.

**ABSTRACT****THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE PAST****New Histories in Thailand since 1973****Thongchai Winichakul**

Modern Thai historical discourse had changed little since its inception in the late nineteenth century until the mid 1970s. Despite a growing body of knowledge of the past, its paradigm --stories, plots, meanings and ideological values-- has been persistently serving as a prime discourse for the elitist nationalism. The political and intellectual revolution in 1973 shook such historiographic hegemony, however. History, as knowledge, has become a center of academic interest and an arena of intellectual confrontations more than a decade. In that context, the conventional treatment of the Thai past has been fundamentally challenged by the new histories which, though not formally organized, can be categorized into four major currents: a critical reaction to the conventional historiography, a school of Marxist economic history, a non-linear early history, and a phenomenal rise of local history throughout the country. Even though such a dramatic interest in history has been winding down, a new landscape of the past has been reshaped.



**THREE DECADES OF TAI STUDIES AND THAI STUDIES:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
TAI SOCIETIES AND CULTURES**

**BY**

**Sompong WITAYASAKPAN**

**Faculty of Humanities**

**Chiangmai University, Chiangmai, Thailand**

# THREE DECADES OF TAI STUDIES AND THAI STUDIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TAI SOCIETIES AND CULTURES<sup>1</sup>

Sompong WITAYASAKPAN

## BACKGROUND

Tai ethnic groups live in a very vast area from the south of China, north of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and in Assam of northeastern India. Except Thailand and Laos, the Tai live in the periphery, and are regarded as minorities of China, Myanmar, India, and Vietnam. In the colonial period this area was the target of western power's exploitation of natural resources, and was a gateway to Chinese natural resources and trade routes to south of China.

The expansion of western power to this area for the strategic, economic, and religious benefit in the 19th century has brought about journals, field reports, and books by officials, missionaries on physical landscape, natural resources, indigenous ways of life, languages, cultures and societies of these periphery peoples. This can be regarded as the beginning of Tai studies. All these written materials were later used as historical evidence for the Thai history.

The British invasion on western and northern parts of Thailand, via India and Burma, and the French invasion from Cambodia to Vietnam and to Laos and then to northeastern Thailand had caused an alarm to the Siam government to adjust and reform

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its vassal state administration. Once enjoyed their privilege and sovereignty, now all vassal states became part of Siam, as northern or northeastern provinces, under the supervision of the Siamese nobles directly sent from Bangkok. Indigenous names were to be changed to be called Thai or Siamese signalling that they were Siamese subjects, not independent, thus prevented them from the western takeover as done in Burma and Laos.

Western invasion gave rise to one positive consequence. That is, the writings, field reports, etc., on indigenous peoples was for the first time the evidence for Thai historiographer to write the history of Thailand. The southward migration, and China as the homeland of the Tai were the result of the study of the Tai in this period. This type of history later has been written and taught in educational institutions, especially during the "nation-building" and nationalist era<sup>2</sup>.

Tai studies had come to almost a complete stop after WWI and WWII when western power was driven out of this region. New nation-states were fighting for their own independence, which led to the direct confrontation between the Free world and the Communist one. All trade routes and regular contact were closed down. The region was divided into two parts, one belonged to the Free world and the other to the Communists. So were the Tai.

Nowadays, Tai studies has been revived. The study of Tai cultures and societies has been widely done both inside and outside Thailand, in particular, the study of the Tai in China, Vietnam, Burma, Assam, and in Laos. All the information has been disseminated in the form of articles in journals, newspapers, books, and televisions<sup>3</sup>.

The land which had then been politically closed is now open by the tidal wave of world economy. Roads and airports have been built to shrink the vast area into a small world. Countries that were enemies, fighting and killing each other in any form of war

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Sir James George Scott and John Percy Hardiman (1900), and Dodd (1922), and Luangwichit Watakarn. (2513), etc.

<sup>3</sup> Most journals, newspapers, and magazines have feature articles on Tai peoples, such as Tai Lue, Tai Dam, etc. On television, there are documentary series on Tai peoples by the Pacific Communication Co., and Panorama Documentary Co. Ltd., among others.

now turn to be economic allies. Battle fields has turned to investment sites, tourist attractions, and markets where capitalists aim to make profit as much as possible<sup>4</sup>.

All these changes inevitably have an impact on the Tai ways of life in this peripheral area and on Tai studies. Tai studies is no longer limited to certain academics of one country, but has become a cooperation between institutions of higher education, and between countries in order to develop good foreign and economic relations. This has rendered better body of knowledge in Tai studies than before.

The objectives of this article are to look at the development of Tai studies in the past three decades in order to make a critical assessment on the study of Tai peoples, its theoretical frameworks, different ideological or social contexts which might have an impact on Tai studies, the comparative Tai societies and cultures, impacts of Tai studies on Thai studies, and the future directions or trends of Tai studies.

## TAI STUDIES IN THE PAST THREE DECADES

In order to have a clear picture of the movement of Tai studies in the past 30 years, it will be divided into 4 periods using political or economic criteria as follows.

### 1) Under the Nationalism and Dictatorship Rule Period (1957-1973)

The nationalist policy of this period was that all peoples who lived in Thailand would be called Northern Thai, Southern Thai, Central Thai, and Northeastern Thai. All had to learn the standard Thai as their national language, Tai and Thai dialects were prohibited to be taught in schools. The Thai history on the Thai migration due to Chinese invasion was written and promoted as textbooks and songs. Following American foreign policy in fighting against all communist governments in Asia, Thailand had all but enemies along its borders. Tai studies and academic atmosphere were quite gloomy.

Two interesting books of this period are Saranarth's *Visiting Tai Ahom Our Siblings*, which was published around 1957 and *Kaa Le Man Tai* (Visiting the Home of Tai Ahom) by Banchob Bandhamedha. Even though both are about Tai Ahom in Assam where both writers visited, the contents of the two books differ greatly from each other. Saranarth emphasized on the close relationship between Thai and Tai Ahom, the history

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<sup>4</sup> Roads are constructed from Thailand through Burma and Laos to Sipsongpanna, and airports have also been built to facilitate the Quadrangle Economy.

of the rise and fall of the Tai Ahom kingdom mainly translated from books, and his own personal feelings after meeting with Tai Ahom in Assam, while Banchob's work is focused on language and literature and various aspects of Tai Ahom ways of life<sup>5</sup>.

Seminal works on Tai ethnic groups in other ethnic peoples inside and outside Thailand were those of Boonchaay Srisawasdi who traveled extensively into Burma, and Sipsongpanna of China. The 4 books are *Thirty Ethnic Groups in Chiangrai*, *Tai in Sipsongpanna*, *Lue: the Tai in China*, and *the Tai in Burma*. The books contain interesting information on indigenous cultures, lores, traditions, ways of life, languages, etc., of various ethnic people, Tai and non-Tai.

Also, this period was the starting point of American anthropologists doing their field work in central, northern and northeastern Thailand. Michael Moerman did his research at a Tai Lue village in Chiangkham. His wellknown article was "*Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who are the Lue?*" which questioned for the first time the ethnic identity.

## 2) Searching for Answers at the Village Period (1974-1982)

After the students's uprising on October 14, 1973, some students went to villages to study and learn village life, and to disseminate democratic ideology. Villagers began to be aware of their own rights, thus led to protest and demonstration against injustice. The Farmers' Association was founded to help protect the rights of farmers and to have dialogue with the government and capitalists, among other activities.

At the same time, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj the prime minister had revived diplomatic relations with China. He with his entourage was invited to visit Sipsongpanna, the land of the Lue minorities. That was the first time that the Lue have been formally widely known by the Thai public. Later many groups of academics and tourists also had chances to visit Sipsongpanna and came back with articles, reports about the trip, and of course about the Tai Lue language and culture<sup>6</sup>. Under the democratic government during this period, there began to be more articles, M.A theses, on minorities in

<sup>5</sup> For different view on the Tai Ahom language and culture, see Chatthip and Renou (2538: 38).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sumitr (2525), Kumut (2521-2522), Decho (3834), among others who had chance to visit Sipsongpanna in this period.

Thailand<sup>7</sup>. This showed that the state could be able to tolerate differences in languages and cultures in this Thai society.

The village has been the center of interest since 1979, the year students came back from the jungle. Some of them went on working with villagers together with the non-governmental agencies which began to play an important role in rural development. The main theme of development at the time was that people and their villages were the most important factor in development. Development workers had to understand the village community, its history, culture, villagers' way of life, and moreover, villagers had to understand themselves, their culture, and to be able to see the good side of their own culture, their own strength and power, and together they could negotiate with merchants and government. That was the birth of the "community culture" approach to development. In addition, this was the first time that the history of village community came to be written with all information from the village. In the past, the history was owned by, and written about royal families, nobles, and high government officials. Villagers had no place in that kind of history. Or if there was, it would be only small, or supporting part of the history<sup>8</sup>.

This period can be counted as the beginning of Tai studies under democracy. Thai public learned more about the Tai outside Thailand and more about indigenous cultures in various places inside Thailand<sup>9</sup>. It was the beginning of the change of focus from the aristocratic history and culture to the community history and culture.

All these happened in the mid of the changing face of Thailand from the country that had in the past imported a lot of merchandise, technology, and others, to the country that became the centre of industry, factories, mainly for export. The country and the government had been more stable than ever. Tourist industry began to boom, which resulting in more local or regional studies.

### 3) The Quadrangle Economy: Globalization Period (1983-1987)

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<sup>7</sup> See Charuwan (2522), Plenge (2519), Thawat (2522), Visrut (2524), etc.

<sup>8</sup> For more details, the reader is referred to Chatthip (2537:171-216).

<sup>9</sup> See Dhida Saraya (1983), who used indigenous chronicles for historical evidence.

The following four years turned out to be a productive and crucial to the development of Tai studies. It was partly an impact from the proclamation of the United Nations as the Decade of Minorities. In Thailand there was a series of local and regional culture campaigns as part of the promotion of Thai tourist industry. There were more articles in journals, daily newspapers, and M.A. theses on indigenous cultures of Thailand, and on Tai cultures and literatures outside Thailand<sup>10</sup>.

The Art and Culture journal had become the academic and non-academic forum for debate on Thai/Tai history. The central issue was, "where are the Tai from?", and changed to "who are the Tai?" Mr. Sujit Wongdes, the editor, had himself played the central role in the debate. He not only wrote articles on the issue himself, but also published books on the Tai, for example, *the Homeland of the Tai*, by Kamchanee Laongsri.

Meanwhile, Chinese information on the Thai/Tai history began to play an integral part in the new direction of the Thai history. The Thai History Research from Chinese Documents Committee, the Office of the Prime Minister Secretary published two books on the *History of the Tai*, translated from Chinese, and another from Chalermit Publishing Co., the *Tai Race in China*, also a Chinese translation.

The Sino-Thai relations was improving very well and fast before and after the opening of the Quadrangle Economy, which in part due to the impact of the world economy, or better known as globalization. China was very receptive to Thai investors, academics and tourists. The "Dai" lands were now open for foreigners, tourists and academics to visit and also to do research. For example, There were research projects on Tai language, culture and art between Chulalongkorn University, Silpakorn University and Payap University and the Nationalities University of Kwangsi, the academic exchange program between Chiangmai University and the Yunnan Institute of the Nationalities, and the Yunnan University. All these had opened a new horizon of Tai studies. From then on Chinese scholars were always invited to the international or national conference on Tai studies. In 1986, the first international conference on *the*

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<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Kingkaew (2528), Charoen (2529), etc.

*Lanna and Sipsongpanna Cultures: the Continuation and the Change* was held at Chiangmai University.

The Chinese government not only opened its country to the Thai public, but also had invited the sister of His Majesty the King, Her Royal Highness Princess Galayaniwatana, to visit China. Her Royal Highness with a group of academics visited two Tai communities, one in Sipsongpanna, the Tai Lue community, and the other in Dehong, the Tai Mao community. The consequence of the trip was a book on Tai history, languages and cultures, titled *Yunnan*.

In India, Assam where a lot of Tai Ahom, Phake, Aiton, etc., live, was also another centre of interest in Tai studies. Indigenous scholars have been writing and publishing articles and books on their own history, society and culture. There was also an attempt to revive the Tai Ahom language and culture by a group of Tai Ahom scholars. The Ahom land was now open for foreigners to visit but in limited time and place. Vietnam and Laos both open their countries for tourists, academic, and researchers to visit Tai communities, and even Burma also allowed visitors to go to Chiangtung, the city of Tai Khuen and Muang Yong, the Tai Lue city.

Tai studies was enhanced by the opening of graduate study program in Lanna Language and Literature, and the set-up of the Promotion of Art and Culture Project, at Chiangmai University. Transliteration of indigenous literatures and chronicles, etc. had been going on, for example, the Chronicle of Chiangtung, the Chronicle of Sipsongpanna, the Chronicle of Yong City, etc., and also the indigenous language textbooks like the Dehong Tai textbook, the Tai Yai (Shan) textbook, the Tai Khuen textbook, etc.<sup>11</sup>.

The increase of interest in Tai studies could also be seen in international conferences where more papers on Tai studies were presented. Scholars and students of Tai studies have more chances to meet each other to exchange ideas and information. All these did not occur by themselves but from consequences of globalization, and in

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<sup>11</sup> Trips led by Pra Maha Khuenkham, the abbot of Wat Phrabat Takpha in Lampoon have been made to the Yong town in Burma, accompanied by academics and students from Chiangmai University. For details, see Sawaeng (2538) and Sompong (2537). Thawi Sawangpanyankul and Roger Peltier can be regarded as the main contribution to this transliteration and Tai textbooks.



particular, the Quadrangle Economy, where language and culture play a connecting role, representing good will of each country.

#### 4) The Adjusting of Paradigm of Tai Studies Period (1988-present)

Tai studies covers all aspects of Tai culture, namely, ways of live, history, folklore, folktales, beliefs, language, literature, art, architecture, including dress, and ornaments. At present, Tai studies has become very popular, and a "commodity" which sells well either in the forms of books, articles, or documentary television series.

Conferences and seminars on Tai studies were always welcome by academic circles and the general public through out the country. Chinese historical documents are being used or referred to more and more. For example, seminar on *the Tai People Outside Thailand: The Knowledge Frontiers* was held in 1989 by Kasetsart University, and the academic conference on the *Tai Race: A Question Everybody Must Help Answer* was held by Chulalongkorn University in 1990. The International Conference on Thai Studies VI at Kunming, Yunnan Province, China was a very important occasion which allowed a lot of Chinese scholars who have been working on Tai studies presented their own works. Many Thai studies scholars and students from Assam, India, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar also joined the conference.

A governmental organization which plays a big part in promoting and supporting the study of the Tai peoples is the Office of National Culture Committee, Ministry of Education. Associate Professor Dr. Chatthip Nartsupha who was appointed as the head of the Tai Culture Studies Project has held an international conference on *the State of Tai Culture Studies and Its Theoretical Approaches* in 1993. Tai scholars around the world were invited to present their ideas and information on the state of Tai studies and to propose or to suggest the appropriate theoretical approaches<sup>12</sup>.

As the head of the project, Chatthip supported a series of conference on Tai studies in the following universities:

1. At Chiangmai University, a conference *on the study of the history, society, and culture of the Shans*. Shan scholars from Myanmar were invited to the conference.

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2. At Silpakom University, an academic conference on *Tai Ahom* was held. Scholars from Assam and China were invited to present papers.
3. At Thammasart University, a conference on *Sip Song Chu Tai*.
4. At Chulalongkorn University, a seminar on *the Dehong Tai* was held. Tai scholars from Dehong, China were invited.
5. Chiangmai University again hosted a conference on *Tai Lue and Their Adaptation in the Changing Current*. Prof. Chao Mom Kham Lue, Prof. Huang Hui Kun, and Prof. Charles F. Keyes were invited.
6. At Mahasarakham University, a seminar on *Tai Studies: Laotians and Zhuang* was held.

There are two interesting articles in this period that have an important impact on the future trends of Tai studies. One is "*Problems and Methodology of the Tai History*" by Dr. Anan Ganjanapan (1989). The other is "*Theoretical Approach to a Study of Tai Culture Project*" by Associate Professor Chatthip Nartsupha (1995). These two papers has induced the new paradigm to Tai studies. This period can then be regarded as the transition period of Tai studies.

## THE CHANGING THEORIES OR PERSPECTIVES OF TAI STUDIES

In this section, we divide the perspectives or theories used in Tai studies into 3 theoretical points of view, namely, the conventional Tai studies, the anthropological Tai studies, and the community cultural Tai studies.

### 1) The Conventional Tai Studies

Tai studies from the beginning in the 19th century can be classified as the conventional one. The approach differs from others in several respects. First, it aims to describe ways of life, cultures, beliefs, etc., of the Tai peoples from personal experience point of view. The writers act like observers, write what they see, how they feel, or what their impression is. This type of writing is widely used even nowadays, and it is called the descriptive ethnography.

In the past, Thai scholars who entered the field of Tai studies aimed to compare differences and similarities of Thai/Tai cultures and societies to fulfil their curiosity, and to trace for answer or explanation from this Tai knowledge or information. For instance, in

the work of Banchob, and Professor Dr. Prasert Na Nagra (2538)<sup>13</sup>, both would use the Tai languages and literature to explain old words, phrases in Thai inscriptions of Sukhothai, or old literature of early Ayuthaya. Besides, the Ahom Buranji, or various chronicles of the Tai states could shed light on the study of ancient Thai society.

Since the travelling across the nation-state boundaries to visit Tai communities was almost quite impossible and no one was encouraged to do so, to get the information of Tai studies was then done through western documents, books, and articles. By depending on western materials and point of view, the Tai cultures written seemed to be powerless, non-dynamic, and very distant from the Thai culture in Thailand.

Language was always the main criterion for classification of ethnic groups because language was viewed as the unique characteristic of each ethnic group, without language would result in the loss of the ethnic identity.

One of the most important issue of conventional Tai studies was the question of the homeland and the origin of the Tai. It was assumed that those Tai in the periphery had older culture and still kept the original identity of Tai culture.

## 2) Anthropological Tai Studies

The spread of anthropological research in Thailand in the past three decades affected Tai studies from the very start. This type of research aimed to study the social structure of Thai rural community, minorities, the lowland and the highland, in the north of Thailand. Reseachers went to the target village community to closely observe and participate in village activities. The aim was to try to understand the meaning, structure or system behind those activities and behaviors, to see what the ideology of the village is, and how it influenced on ways of life, thinking and community. The study was mainly focussed on indigenous beliefs, rituals, social behaviors, social organization, and relationships between the state and the village community.

This approach differed almost totally from the previous one. Strating from the basic assumption that there was no such thing as "pure" culture, or in other words, the "pure Tai", since ways of life, culture, beliefs, etc., were always either borrowed or changed, or mixed with other ethnic groups. The study of the Tai ethnic group had to be

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<sup>13</sup> See, also, Boonyong (2532).

done with the concept that the Tai live among many ethnic groups other than Tai, and had borrowed their neighboring cultures, beliefs, ways of life, art, etc. To understand the Tai society and culture, the geographical, political, social and cultural contexts were to be taken into account. Such perspective could be seen in the works of Anan Ganjanapan, Suthep Sunthomphesat, Michael Moerman, Charles F. Keyes, Gehan Wijeyewardene, Shigeharu Tanabe, and George Condominas, among others.

Srisak Vallibhodom, a Thai archeologist once bluntly stated that he never believed that the Thai people in Thailand were from the same ancestors who were generally assumed that they were from the south of China. He further stated that the ancestors of the present day Thai were from many ethnic groups, a consequence of the mix among races, and their homeland could not be pinpointed<sup>14</sup>.

In fact, Edmund Leach had done some research on the adaptation of The Shans and the Kachins in the 50's in Burma confirming that the change of ethnicity was possible and had happened in the case of the Shans and the Kachins. This also led to the questions of "who are the Lue?," "who are the Tai," by Moerman, Keyes (2538), and others, and other questions alike.

With no interest in the origin or homeland of the Tai, this approach focussed on the development of the society in order to see and understand the assimilation, borrowing, adaptation processes of the target society and to see how power was exercised and changed hands, or the strength or power that pushed the community forward. The study was done through the study of rituals, lore, traditions, conventions, and ways of life in order to understand the process, the thinking and the existence and changes of all those cultures in the past and now. To understand this, the study was then to be done from the point of view of villagers, the owners of the culture and society. This was also able to be done through the analytical study of oral history, chronicles, legends and myths.

Two articles which suggested the anthropological framework to Tai studies belonged to Anan Ganjanapan (1988) and (1995) *"Problems and Methodology in the Study of Tai History,"* and the *"State of Research on the Shans: Their Social and*

<sup>14</sup> Srisak (2534), and Nidhi (2533).

*Cultural Development*" respectively. Anan proposed theoretical approaches to Tai studies as follows:

The first approach was that it had to study the history of cultural assimilation, amalgamation of cultures. The Tai live among various different ethnic groups, borrowing, amalgamating, adapting, of neighboring were not uncommon. Anan said that the idea of race had to be thrown away, and focussed more on the study of culture. This, he inserted, would allowed more academics from different fields to take part, and would open the new dimension in Tai studies.

The second one was that we could study history from rituals, and beliefs by looking at indigenous beliefs, legends, chronicles in order to understand their thinking, changing process of the society because beliefs and rituals were the basic ideology of the society to bond people together to set up political organization of some sort. This was regarded as the driving force of the community that made the village exist and develop from then to now.

The third way to Tai studies was the study of the history of the development of the society. Anan asserted that this was a very important point because it was the "heart" of the study that helped understand the social driving forces which had complex and varying development.

Anan concluded that to study the Tai history, cooperation among academics from different fields were needed, and the approach had to be multidisciplinary so that the complex issues of Tai society which had been developing for thousand of years could be tackled efficiently. The study must not be only for the body of knowledge, but it should also be able to see the trend of the society in the future.

### **3) The Community Cultural Tai Studies**

The community culture approach was normally used in the community development program. It aimed to understand the community, and allowed the community to take part in developing its own community. The idea of this approach was to emphasize the importance of community participation, community independence, self-sufficient economy, generosity, mutual help, etc. This could be regarded as consequences of state invasion, wrong development plan and action, and the capitalist exploitation which is now widely spread.

Having seen from his own study on the economic history of villages that this type of cultural study has not been done systematically, and impressed with villagers' ways of life, culture, Chatthip Nartsupha began his work on the cultural history of village community. He arrived at a conclusion that the history of the study of Thai culture was mainly written about court, or state culture, but not commoners' one, if the commoner's culture was seriously studied, it would lead to the understanding of the driving force and power of culture which could be brought to guide the country development.

Chatthip viewed that the city society had been influenced by western culture, causing changes of Thai culture. The upper class and middle class culture had much changed, retaining less Thai, and became a hybrid culture. The real Thai culture, however, still existed but in villages, or village community in the form of indigeous culture, or community culture. The study of village or community, in other words, was the study of the root of Thai culture. When looking back to the Thai social history, it could be seen that Thai villages still maintained a lot of original Thai culture. Chatthip was further assured having met Tai Ahom scholars from Assam at the 1st International Conference on Thai Studies in Delhi, India, and from the trip to Assam<sup>15</sup>.

A futher study on the Tai Ahom kingdom from its rise to its fall led Chatthip to the idea that in order to implement the community culture concept to develop Thailand, the study of the origin of the Tai culture had to be carried out, and this could be done by going to study Tai communities outside Thailand, where they still preserved indigenous culture, traditions and conventions. The more we understood Tai cultures in various areas, the more we would understand our culture, the more we would also appreciated Tai rituals, and ceremonies. Some of Tai cultures had been frozen in the forms of local history, legend, chronicles, etc., we were to conduct analytical study of these written materials and manuscripts in order to understand those "frozen" cultures, and some of them could be revived for the benefit of developing the country.

From the study of Tai Ahom, Chatthip pointed out 3 important aspects as follows:

First, The Tai Ahom did not make much contact with other Tai groups for quite some time, written materials were pretty much old, probably older than other Tai's. The

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<sup>15</sup> See Anan (2539) for details.



study of Tai Ahom's society and culture would enable us to trace back to the root and the formation of Tai society and culture.

Second, The Tai Ahom kingdom could be one of the biggest Tai kingdom besides Ayuthaya. The kingdom lasted for 600 years, therefore, there were a lot of written materials, ancient sites, rituals, religious places when the kingdom flourished. All these written materials were invaluable, and the treasure of knowledge of ancient Tai society and culture.

And the third one was that the Tai Ahom and other Tai ethnic groups in Assam were now seriously strating to learn about their own history and language. Linguistic and historical research was not only academically meaningful, but also was the foundation of new Tai society and culture for all the Tai living there.

When worked with the Office of National Culture Committee as the head of the Tai Culture Studies Project, Chatthip explained the value of the project as follows:

Fisrt, this project was of theoretical value in conducting a comparative study if Tai cultures in various areas in order to understand the original general Tai identities and the particular identity of each Tai ethnic group.

Second, the study would enable us to have a better understanding of rural Thai culture, which was similar to Tai cultures outside Thailand.

Third, the Tai culture studies was meaningful to rural development and the development of the country with the community culture approach since the study of Tai history of each Tai group could lead us to find the origin and identity of ancient Tai culture, and if revived, this would help improve the consciousness, and ethnic identity, and would be the driving force which would move Thai villagers to a better quality of life.

Fourth, the project was meaningful for the existence, revival, and development of Tai culture in the future, especially for the Tai who are minorities, where the existence of Tai culture is the heart of cooperation, solidarity, to fight against exploitation, and to maintain their cultural and political independence for a certain extent. Upon knowing that there are flourishing Tai cultures in some place would spiritually help them to maintain their own cultural identity.

Experience in socio-economic history research had led Chatthip to a view that Thai studies in the past was done from the point of view of the ruling class, of aristocrats,

and of bureaucracy. The study from the commoners' point of view started after the October, 14, 1973 Students' Uprising. This period can be regarded as the study of the real Thai society since the study focusses on villages, communities of the majorities in order to create the so-called "community culture".

Chatthip sees that the future of Thai studies would be in the line of what he calls *"the Cultural History School,"* which assumes that Thailand has to incorporate the progressive part of world cultures to the roots of Tai culture. Two ways for the future development following the Cultural History School of Thought should be (Chatthip 1994:126-127):

- "1) In order to strengthen the community culture and add to its dynamism, Western culture should be added and instilled deeply in Thai culture, especially parts concerning technology and liberty. Thai scholars should study a history of the process of industrialization and democratic transformation of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan in order to understand these key processes. Then we will be able to adapt and internalize those progressive parts of Western technology, social institutions and culture for the purpose of Thai development.
- 2) We have to search the realm of the mind, feeling and morality of Tai communities. At this stage, we should consider Tai communities outside Thailand--Tai Ahom, Shan, Lu, Lao, Black Tai, White Tai, and Zhuang--which have preserved much ancient Tai culture in manuscripts, rituals and everyday life. The aim is to search for the basic elements of the formation of the Tai societies and cultures such as love for freedom, kind-heartedness, and a willingness to help other people, the importance of the institution of the family and of the village community, etc. These archetypes of Tai culture, once rediscovered, can be revived and utilized to support the strength of the spirit of the community."

This community culture approach differs in various respects from the previous two approaches. The aims and ideology are quite different, and even the methodology.

This approach uses historical, and hisotical-comparative method, holistic study of culture, and transformational process. Besides written materials, this approach encourages the participation of indigenous scholars in conducting research and in writing their own history so that they understand their own culture and their own ethnic ideology. Since it is a historical and comparative method, cooperation from various indigenous scholars--Lue, Shan, Black Tai, Ahom, etc., are needed. All have to be helping hands in developing the Tai culture and can thus maintain their own cultures even though they are minorities.

One of the main differences which is quite crucial is that the community culture approach believes that the root of Tai culture could be found having studied and compared various Tai cultures.

#### **A COMPARATIVE TAI SOCIETIES AND CULTURES: A CHALLENGING FUTURE**

The fall of Soviet Union, the end of the cold war, and the spread of the world economy resulting the globalizaton process recently have made it possible for scholars of Tai studies to carry on their projects in regions where the Tai live. All countries in mainland Southeast Asia are opening doors for their neighbors to visit and invest. Indigenous cultures are used to attract tourists, investors, etc. Academic cooperation among institutions of higher education are supported by government of each country. This never happens before in the past.

Infrastructures have been contructed recently. Airports, highways, electricity generators, piers, etc. are built to facilitate industry, factories, and tourist industry. Within an hour by airplane, the destination could be reached in the near future. Chiangtung, Chiangrung, Muang Mao, Muang Thaeng, Luang Prabang, for instance, all these Tai cities are close and connected to each other by modern technology.

This, in turn, will help the comparative study of Tai societies and cultures. Tai scholars still conduct their research on Tai studies in their country, and have their own Tai studies centre. And at the same time, they have chances to exchange their information with other Tai scholars in other countries via modern technology. The modern comparative study will focus on the reseach and study done by indigenous scholars. Indigenous manuscripts will be read and studied in order to understand Tai societies

and cultures. It will be the study from the awareness of the owners of the culture for the sake of their own culture and community development. The community will be proud of its own history and culture, and can be able to maintain its ethnic identity, and to be culturally independent.

The study does not promote the Pan-Tai/Thai ideology. In contrast, the study encourage the Tai cultural networks among various Tai groups in the areas, strengthening their community and culture and mutual help. Each community should understand themselves, their history. They would not be forced to accept other cultures.

This age can be considered as the age of comparative study of Tai societies and cultures. The study will not focus only on Tai history, societies, and cultures in Tai manuscripts, legends, folktales, etc., but indigenous scholars who know Burmese, Assamese, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc., can be a lot of help in conducting research by using other languages' manuscripts, i.e., state's official language. This would render more insight of the Tai history, society and culture from information or sources written by non-Tai scholars in different periods.

A big obstacles to Tai studies has been the language, spoken and written, of each Tai group, and the languages of the nation-states to which these Tai groups belong. The cooperation and participation of Tai scholars of various Tai groups will automatically solve the problem. Theoretical framework can be shared, exchanged, and learned from each other. The comparative study then could be done efficiently.

It seems that the real comparative Tai studies is now starting, and spreading into various academic fields. Indigenous manuscripts, oral history, traditions, and all other aspects of Tai cultures and societies are being collected and studies. The true age of Tai studies, a comparative Tai studies in particular, just now begins.

## **IMPACTS OF TAI STUDIES ON THAI STUDIES**

Modern technology has shrunk the vast areas of Tai settlements into a small world. Thai studies has not been the same as before. The world economy, the regional economic cooperation in Asia and Southeast Asia has turned Thai studies into a new phase. Tai studies has become the connecting point, good will each country would like to express. Tai cultures are part of tourist attractions that draws investors and tourists to

these countries. Thai studies has included the study of all Tai ethnic groups in the region.

Tai studies helps strengthen indigenous cultures in various regions upon learning the existence of other Tai cultures. This, in turn, will help the Tai communities to develop their own cultures and communities with self-understanding and self-awareness of their long history.

To understand Thailand and Thai society and culture, Tai studies will be crucial in providing answers about ethnic identity, root of Tai cultures, development and transformation of Tai cultures and societies. An insight of Tai history, society and culture will help understand our own rural culture, which would lead to have a better development plan.

Development of the future form of society, state would play less role, but the community, and local government would become more important, play more important role in determining the future of their own community, society and culture. All Tai communities in the region would increasingly play more active and aggressive roles in politics and economy.

As a consequence, Thai studies will have to broaden its scope to cover all regions outside Thailand and Tai societies and cultures, inside and outside Thailand. This will be a vast cultural areas of the Tai and other ethnic groups that will have more interactions among each others. Thai studies is not then limited within political or nation-state borders, but will be expand to the cultural borders.

## **TAI STUDIES IN THE FUTURE**

Movements of local culture studies, changes in politics and economy of nation-states in mainland Southeast Asia and China, the spread of world economy, and new technology, all make Tai studies more interesting than ever. This will result in the increasing roles of local communities, and cultures. Tai studies will be one of the central, crucial issues of the region that links these nation-states together beside economic cooperation.

Indigenous scholars will play more role in the study and research of Tai societies and cultures. Indigenous information on history, society, culture of the Tai will be shared

among Tai communities, including Thailand. Analytical study may still be in the hands of academics in institutions of higher education, but later will be transferred to those indigenous scholars. Cooperation amongs Tai scholars in the region will sharply increase. This may lead to the foundation of the Tai Studies center in Thailand and in other countries. Joint research projects will also increase.

Two theoretical approaches will be widely practiced, that is, the anthropological and community culture approaches since these approaches allow scholars and researchers to go to Tai communities to study all cultural events, behaviors, beliefs, etc. And more importantly, these appraoches focus on the insight, and from the community's point of view. Results of the study and research will be more meaningful in that they will be used in community development.

## CONCLUSION

Tai studies in the last three decades has changed from western scholars to the hand of Thai scholars, from "outsiders" who are interested in Tai studies to "insiders" who are indigenous scholars themselves. These "insiders" will be encouraged to play more aggressive role in the study of their own society and culture with self-awareness, consciousness with difinite goals, that is, to preserve, to support, and to revive their own culture, and to develop their own community and culture.

Tai studies which started from one's own interest and curiosity, with monodisciplinary approach, from observer's point of view, has later transformed to the interest and benefit of Tai community, from the community's or villagers' point of view, and with multidisciplinary approach or holistic view. Ultimately, it is the study of the community in order to understand the community and to benefit the community themselves.

Social, economic, and political changes in the last three decades give rise to the change of perspectives, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and objectives of Tai studies. Modern technology help support and very much facilitate the study.

It is a good sign that all recent political, economic and social changes have very positive impacts on Tai studies. The vast area becomes small by modern technology. The study and research can be done across national boundaries. Aristocrats' point of

view have been changed to commoners' one, and then the study has been done from observers or outsiders scholars, but now insiders or indigenous scholars are encouraged and supported to do the study of their own community.

All these changes will not only help promote good relations and understanding among various Tai communities, but also help develop their own societies, cultures and communities. Knowing, understanding and being proud one's own history, culture and society will be the best protection from the fall of one's own community.

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