

Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj31-2g

Studies in Thai and Southeast Asian Histories. By Charnvit Kasetsiri. With an introduction by Barbara Watson Andaya. Bangkok: Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbook Project, 2015. xiii+601 pp.

One of the first things that one learns if one takes a course in “Southeast Asian Studies” is that this field was artificially created by “outsiders” (i.e., the West) in the period following the Second World War. It was dominated by the academic institutions of the United States and received substantial financial support from American funding bodies, in both cases with Cold War aims in mind. It was believed that a better understanding of Southeast Asia — itself a concept created by the Allies in the Second World War — would help in the fight against the spread of communism in the region. For many years Cornell University was the leading American centre for the study of Southeast Asia.

One of Cornell’s most enduring achievements was to train Southeast Asian scholars in this new field of study. Without a doubt, the most famous product of the “Cornell school” model of Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand was Charnvit Kasetsiri. As a scholar, teacher, administrator, public intellectual and advocate, Charnvit has been a tireless promoter of the study of Southeast Asia in Thailand. Perhaps the greatest of his many accomplishments was the establishment of a Southeast Asian Studies programme at Thammasat University, which the late Benedict Anderson — also a former student and, later, faculty member at Cornell — regarded as “far and away the most lively Southeast Asia Program in the

region” (Anderson 2011, pp. 110–11). The programme has trained many Thai scholars who have gone on to develop the study of Southeast Asia in universities throughout Thailand. Charnvit has also been active in developing links with scholars and academic institutions in other parts of Southeast Asia. A not insignificant achievement was Charnvit’s role in helping organize and fund the translation of major works in Southeast Asian studies into Thai. This normally thankless and unrecognized task gave many Thai students with limited English language ability access to some of the leading scholarly works in the field. As Barbara Watson Andaya remarks in her introduction to this volume, for many years Charnvit has been the most prominent scholarly voice in Thailand urging Thais to see themselves as Southeast Asians, and Thailand as part of Southeast Asia. In today’s era of the “ASEAN Community” this may not seem as groundbreaking as it once was, when Thailand’s relations with its neighbours were haunted by the ideological differences of the Cold War and older, deeper historical enmities.

Studies in Thai and Southeast Asian Histories is a collection of twenty-five of Charnvit’s articles published in English over the four decades of his academic career. The pieces consist of his studies of early Thai history, stemming largely from his doctoral thesis on the “Rise of Ayutthaya”; more recent Thai political history; relations between Indonesia and “Siam” (Charnvit’s preferred name for the country, given its less ethnocentric connotations compared to the official “Thai-land”); and Thailand’s contemporary relations with its Mainland Southeast Asian neighbours — Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

While this collection of essays has a Southeast Asian theme, it should be said that Charnvit’s contributions to the study of Thailand’s political history have also been very significant. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he played an important role in publishing and promoting scholarship on the history of the 1932 “change of government” or “overthrow of the absolute monarchy”; the different terms used for the event depend on one’s political position. This event was then,

as now, highly politically sensitive. Another prominent aspect of Charnvit's historical work over the course of his career has been the way that he has highlighted Thailand's ethnically diverse population, even at a time when a rigid Thai nationalism was heavily promoted by the bureaucracy, the military and the education system.

The volume is introduced by Barbara Watson Andaya, another Cornell graduate, who provides us with a summary of Charnvit's career, from his student days at Cornell during the heady days of protests against the Vietnam War, to his return to Thailand at a time of intense political polarization — beginning with huge protests led by students from Charnvit's own Thammasat University that ousted the military regime in 1973, and culminating in the infamous massacre of students by militant royalist organizations at the same university on 6 October 1976.

It should be said that the volume suffers somewhat from the lack of an explicit statement of what it has set out to do. It would have been helpful if the publishers had explained to the reader the purpose of the volume, which articles were chosen for inclusion, and why. Full reference details to the original publication in which articles first appeared are sometimes lacking.

That said, for a new generation of scholars not familiar with Charnvit's work or proficient in Thai, this volume provides a very good introduction to some of the enduring themes of the scholarship of Thailand's leading Southeast Asianist of the last forty years.

REFERENCE

- Anderson, Benedict R.O'G. "Comparatively Speaking: On Area Studies, Theory, and 'Gentlemanly' Polemics". Interview with Filomeno Aguilar Jr., Caroline Hau, Vicente Rafael and Teresa Tadem. *Philippine Studies* 59, no. 1 (2011): 107–39.

Patrick Jory

School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, Level 3, Forgan Smith Building, St Lucia, Queensland 4072, Australia; email: p.jory@uq.edu.au.