Thailand

A Struggle for the Nation

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Thailand

A Struggle for the Nation

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Foreword

Wang Gungwu

It gives me great pleasure to write this foreword to Charnvit Kasetsiri's volume on the struggle to build the nation called Thailand. Given his long-held view that the country should have retained its name as Siam, he has brought an exceptional perspective to how Thailand approached the idea of modern nationhood—both before and after the age of imperialism. The name change that followed the military coup of 1932 and the end of the historic monarchy had created greater insecurity in a region that was about to be transformed. The uncertainty was compounded by Japanese ambition and the outbreak of the European War that became worldwide. This was followed after the war by a total change in the regional environment when the imperialist powers retreated and new nations gained their independence.

Siam had the difficult experience of remaining sovereign and independent during the nineteenth century when its neighbours were being invaded. The wisdom of its rulers and the skills of its diplomats were the envy of all those who were colonized. Having survived multiple threats with exceptional success, those who were set to build a new kind of nation in 1945 would have assumed that Thailand was free from that particular burden. Indeed, many post-war studies made the process of Thai nationhood appear to be a seamless development that required no special attention. They therefore concentrated on economic, diplomatic and security affairs that enabled the country to play important roles in the region's fresh start as new polities.

It needed someone with Charnvit's historical sensitivity to go behind the country's confident front to discover other dimensions to the special kind of nationhood that the various peoples of Thailand sought to establish. His focus on the long reigns of the royal house as determinants in the country's political architecture is original and illuminating. It does not only emphasize a unique phenomenon but also throws light on how the kings could find the space to strengthen their position under some extremely unstable conditions.

As a historian, he is not satisfied simply to have found an instructive angle from which to explore the mysteries in a modern experimental monarchy. His keen sense of time has filled his narrative with insights that only few people could have identified. To me, that is a mark of one with a fine sense of what the past can mean. I thank him for the chance to see this mature and thoughtful Charnvit at work and commend this book to everyone who wants to understand Thailand better.

I would also like to say why the nation of Thailand has a special significance here. It was at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok at the 14th International Historians of Asia (IAHA) Conference that I first suggested that it was time for historians to write the history of nation-building in Southeast Asia. I was speaking on the history of nationalism in Southeast Asia and complained that the study of the difficult task of building nation had been largely in the hands of political scientists. I felt that, while that task was still work in progress, there had been enough done over the past fifty years for historians to examine what has been achieved so far.

On my return to Singapore, I asked Chan Heng Chee, then Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, for her support to plan a modest Nation-Building Series to produce histories of the five original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. She was most encouraging and provided funding for me to invite outstanding historians of the five countries to meet about the project. Her successors also gave me their warm support. I chose five established historians whose work I knew and who each had lived through the nation-building process in their respective

countries. I gave an account of this in my introduction to the first volume published, that on Malaysia by Cheah Boon Kheng.[1]

When the historians agreed to join the project, ISEAS invited them to spend time there together and use its extensive library. After a few meetings, we were convinced that each country had a very different story to tell. Each one was building its post-war modern nation under exceptional political conditions that were largely shaped by its distinctive demographic, social and cultural components. As we examined these differences, we were made all the more conscious of the need to identify and explain the backgrounds of each country. We realized that this was a necessary corrective to social science approaches that tend to look for generalities. We concluded that we should not seek to find a common framework for the five volumes but should let the country differences dictate the way each volume should be presented.

We also held a workshop attended by other colleagues who were experts in the history of each of the countries. They were asked, after discussing the project with the five authors, to set down their views in a volume of essays, entitled *Nation-building: Five Southeast Asian Nations*. That way, they could each make a contribution to the project while the five books were being planned. As it happened, Craig Reynolds was the one who drew attention to the ideas of nation and state that applied to Thailand and it is fitting that Charnvit has asked him to provide a Prologue to this volume. It is a gesture of deep friendship and understanding on their parts, something I truly appreciate.

Wang Gungwu
National University of Singapore
14 December 2021

NOTE

1. "Introduction", in *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, by Cheah Boon Kheng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002).

Prologue

Craig J. Reynolds

Charnvit Kasetsiri was born in 1941, the eldest of seven siblings, in Ban Pong on the Maeklong River just outside of Bangkok. Having written numerous history books and articles in Thai and English, he has been a prolific author since his first book in English, *The Rise of Ayutthaya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (1976). Through the Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Foundation over which he presides, he has fostered the publication of countless works in Thai, many translated from English and other languages. He has passionately advocated the study of Southeast Asia and its languages. His collaborative networking across the region through the Southeast Asia Regional Exchange Program as well as his scholarly accomplishments earned him in 2014 the Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies Award given by the Association for Asian Studies. In 2012 he won the prestigious Fukuoka Academic Prize for outstanding achievements in the field of Asian Studies.

Charnvit taught history for many years at Thammasat University, founded in 1934 by Pridi Banomyong, one of the architects of the 1932 coup that overthrew the absolute monarchy, and Charnvit has been a tireless campaigner for the integrity of this second-oldest Thai university and for the reputation of Pridi Banomyong who was wronged more than once in the course of Thailand's fractious politics. A Pridi partisan and inveterate international traveller to overseas conferences who has sometimes gone abroad temporarily for strategic reasons, Charnvit does not board a plane without a liberal supply of brochures, pamphlets and T-shirts that

advertise new publications by the Textbook Foundations or promote his latest enthusiasms—"Change Thailand to Siam!", "Democracy Walk for Thammasat, Tha Prachan Campus, and Communities on Rattanakosin Island!". On Facebook, Charnvit has supported student protesters in their demands to reform the monarchy.

In recent years Charnvit's team has been organizing historical tours. Its lead guide is able to speak at length on all topics relevant to what the tourists are about to see as they alight from their buses to visit shrines and temples, ancient monuments and public sculptures. A colleague once referred to Charnvit as the Great Disseminator. He has the capacity to turn everything he sees, hears and touches into observations about the past in the present. He cannot help himself.

I mention these details as background to alert the reader about what follows in Charnvit's contemporary history of Thailand's struggle for the nation: expect the unexpected. What transpires in the following pages is not a straightforward account of how this struggle has evolved into the polarized divisions that have paralysed the country for the past two decades. Instead, we find a non-linear narrative that testifies to the dominance of the Thai monarchy, the pole star, "the centre of the universe for everyone's well-being," as one senior Thai historian has put it.[1] Rather than proceeding chronologically from the reform-minded fifth monarch of the dynasty, Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) through the 1932 event, the decline of the institution after the abdication of the seventh monarch in 1935, and the rehabilitation of the institution under King Bhumibol (r. 1946–2016), Charnvit toggles back and forth between the two longest reigns in Thai history.

The structure of the book takes this form to highlight the parallels, the similarities and the differences between what happened when powerful and forward-thinking kings passed from the scene and were succeeded by figures born to reign and rule but who were less able to govern their realms. For those in academic and activist circles familiar with Charnvit's enthusiasms and causes, his treatment of twentieth- and twenty-first-century history may be surprising. Social movements are not a focus of the

book; this is not history from below. Nationalism is guided nationalism, the product of elite policies, not the expression of the people's will. At a time when young protestors are being imprisoned for violating the *lèse majesté* law, a statute that criminalizes defamation of the Supreme Institution, it may seem unfashionable to put forward an argument that elite and particularly royal talent, accomplishment and energy have been so beneficial to the kingdom.

The second half of the nineteenth century was the watershed period when the Thai ruling elite was forced to respond to the new world of Western imperialism dominated by *farang*, a Thai loan word for white people. Westerners in Bangkok asked questions of Siamese officials about origins of the Thai, and responses to these questions as well as the technology of printing and cartography gradually transformed the Thai world from religious and dynastic to national as Western models of nationhood took hold in the minds of the elite. King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), who was not nearly so interested in governing as his father, articulated in his plays and other writings some of the elite responses to origins and race that have endured in Thai public discourse to the present day.

Vajiravudh's eight years in England epitomizes what had become a hallmark of elite practice: Western education and training. From the middle of the nineteenth century until after the Second World War the world outside Siam was Europe where the first generation of Thais went for their education. Chulalongkorn's travels abroad took him at first to Dutch and British colonies, but in later decades he travelled to Europe where he endeavoured to demonstrate to his hosts in imperial capitals that his ancient kingdom and nascent nation could be as modern as any other. Charnvit describes him as "diminutive and dapper" and through his intuitive grasp of how film and photography could project an international image, as "media-savvy". The social and administrative reforms engineered by Chulalongkorn were as much about lifting Siam's international image in the eyes of Europe as they were about addressing inequities and injustices, although prostration as a sign of subjugation and oppression was a priority reform early in the reign. Left unsaid in Charnvit's account is whether or

not prostration was completely abandoned; it returned with a flourish for royal personages in the second half of the twentieth century during the reign of King Bhumibol.[2]

Well into the twentieth century Europe remained the source of the modern. King Bhumibol's father, Mahidol Adulyadej, Prince of Songkhla, went to America for his medical education where he met and married Sangwan Talapat, a commoner. At that time the United States was an unusual destination for Thais to study abroad. Mahidol died in 1929 leaving Sangwan Talapat to raise their daughter, Galyani Vadhana (b. 1923), and two sons, Ananda (b. 1925) and Bhumibol (b. 1927), the elder of whom had become king in 1935 when King Prajadhipok abdicated. The children were brought up in Switzerland until the end of the war when the family was flown back to Bangkok by the British.

Following the mysterious death of Ananda in June 1946, Bhumibol acceded to the throne. By that time the United States, which replaced the French, Dutch and British colonial powers to become the paramount power in the region, had declared itself an ardent foe of the communist-inspired nationalisms in Asia. Thailand found itself in a world divided into "two halves of the same walnut" and was quickly enlisted as an American ally in the Cold War. Many elite children still went to Europe for their education, but middle-class children, hundreds of them, went to the United States courtesy of American funding.

Coups and prime ministers come and go in this history, much of which will be familiar to those knowledgeable about the country's turbulent politics. The longest reign in Thai history from 1946 to 2016 provides a semblance of stability that is both spiritual and political thanks to King Bhumibol's popularity. The military is a constant presence. When the army took over in the late 1930s and changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand, new lyrics in the national anthem infused Thai identity top-down with race and sacrifice. In 1952 the military government presented King Bhumibol with his own radio station. The king was both announcer and disc jockey and in the daily broadcasts played classical music as well as his own compositions. From 1950 until 1997 he personally attended

graduations and awarded degrees to 470,000 students, thus creating a personal rapport between the exalted figure of the monarch and young Thai people who would remember forever the moment they received their degrees from the king's hand.

Charnvit's history throws up all kinds of surprises. An unfamiliar detail about Sino-Thai heritage, so important in commerce, custom, religion, and popular culture, is tucked away in a footnote. After the death of the Princess Mother in 1995 her eldest child, Princess Galyani, and her granddaughter, Princess Sirindhorn, wore mourning clothes of sack and raw cotton in a performance of Kong Tek, the Chinese mourning rite. General Surayud Chulanont was prime minister from 2006 to 2008 after the 2006 coup against an elected caretaker government. Who could imagine that General Surayud's father, Lieutenant Colonel Payom Chulanont, had joined the Communist Party of Thailand in the late 1950s and rose in the ranks of the People's Liberation Army? The twists and turns in Thailand's history can be dizzying.

Charnvit's birth town Ban Pong, once a busy hub of commerce, was on a river route to the west and south. As I turned the pages of Charnvit's history of Thailand's struggle for the nation I wondered if his forebears in Ban Pong during King Chulalongkorn's time had come out to see the king's vessel pass by on the Maeklong River, or later in the early 1900s when the railroad was finished to see the royal rail carriage stop briefly on its journey. With his siblings Charnvit has written lovingly of his upbringing in Ban Pong and Paknam. The two memoirs, dense with details and photographs of family life, include an episode during the Japanese Occupation in 1944–45 when the Japanese used Ban Pong as a base in their construction of the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi.[3]

In 1990 the History Association and the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy organized an academic conference on "Language and History" at the academy's new campus in Nakorn Nayok where the academy had recently moved. Princess Sirindhorn, known popularly as Phra Thep and patron of the History Association who has given history lectures at the Academy, was in attendance. The most academic of King Bhumibol's four

children, she presented a conference paper on an episode at the end of the Second World War when some ten thousand Japanese soldiers were stationed in the area as they were about to be repatriated to Japan.

In the dining room Princess Sirindhorn sat with senior military officers and seemed quite at ease in their company. At lunch one day the kitchen staff prepared *moji*, a chewy red bean desert dusted with coconut, inspired by a Japanese sweet that had made its way into Thai cuisine during the Japanese period. In conversation with conference delegates Charnvit observed that Thailand must be the only country in the world where a princess, patron of an academic association, shared a meal with military officers and the army cooks would serve a Japanese desert reminiscent of the Occupation. Charnvit is always ready with a quip that can turn an otherwise insignificant detail into a historical observation.

His good nature notwithstanding, Charnvit makes clear in the final pages that he is not very sanguine about the country's future. During Thailand's democratic spring in 1974 the Thai constitution was changed to allow female succession. This apparent loosening of male prerogative had no effect on the reign change in 2016 when the designated male heir, Prince Vajiralongkorn, succeeded without challenge to become the tenth Bangkok king. Communism, long gone as the spectre that once haunted Thailand's political order, has been replaced by another. The spectre now haunting Thailand is authoritarianism.

NOTES

1. Nidhi Eoseewong, "The Culture of the Army, *Matichon* Weekly, 28 May 2010", in *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, edited by Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Aekapol Chongvilaivan (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), p. 12.
2. Patrick Jory, *A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), Ch. 6.
3. Charnvit Kasetsiri et al., *Mae: klap chak banpong thueng paknam* [Mother: Back from Banpong to Paknam], privately printed, 2010; Charnvit-Nimit Kasetsiri, *Banpong kap pho lae mae: khrang nueng nan ma laew* [Mother and Father in Banpong: Once Upon a Time Long Ago], privately printed, 2014.