

Thai Constructions of Knowledge. Edited by Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991.

This set of essays, the outcome of a 1988 symposium held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, comprises a timely contribution to the emerging literature on how knowledge about Southeast Asian societies has been socially constructed. In this literature, knowledge is assessed not only for its adequacy in representing a complex reality, but also for how it contributes to making social reality. It also draws attention to the politics of how some concepts and texts became standard in different fields of inquiry, while other concepts and texts were repressed or recovered.

In studies of Thailand, these concerns have been most prominent in history and, to a lesser extent, in anthropology. Historians like Nidhi Aeusrivongse (who has many publications, all in Thai), Craig Reynolds (1987), Jeremy Kemp (1988), and Thongchai Winichakul (1988) have described in detail the construction of historical knowledge in culture, history, anthropology, geography. Kasian Tejapira (1992) has similarly deconstructed William Skinner's (1957) classic anthropology text on the Chinese in Thailand. The essays in *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* extend this project to economic, political, literary, and popular knowledge.

The book includes an introduction by Andrew Turton, followed by nine essays, which can be grouped into three topic areas: three essays concern literature; four are on political economy, development, and environment; and two take up popular knowledge. With the exception of the final two, the essays deal with the public transcripts produced by dominant groups, not knowledge produced by subalterns. This may be because most essays emphasize not only discourse and its construction, but also authors (poets, novelists, economists, social commentators) and their construction, and thus authorized knowledge. This bypasses subalterns, since subaltern knowledge does not easily admit the authority of the author function. Élités hear subaltern speech, as Reynolds writes in his essay, as a dangerous "collective din". At the same time, most of the texts discussed in this collection subverted élite hegemony from within.

As a consequence, these texts were often banned or ignored until the 1970s.

In the first essay Reynolds analyses the reception in nineteenth century Bangkok of a poem describing a somewhat pointless military expedition to the northeast boundary of the emerging national state. The poet was charged with sedition, and the poem banned, apparently because the poet made an “excess” of references to the subaltern world, the conscripts called up for the expedition. He did so in defiance of an authoritative state poetics in which attention was normally drawn to the formal properties of language, imagery, and sound, rather than to the referential property, a poetics which kept subaltern world separate from and unheard by élites. Manas Chitakasem follows with an essay on the origins of Thai poetic conventions, and three poets (Angkhan Kanlayanaphong, Naowarat Phongphaibun, and Khomthuan Khanthanu) who worked within these conventions while challenging them. Manas argues that convention is formed by the combination of “foreign” influences and the poetic nature of Thai language, a dualism he associates with the more natural *Klo’n* verse, oral, and common culture on one hand, and the unnatural *chan* verse, written, and prestigious culture on the other hand. Although this dualistic approach may seem far removed from that of Reynolds at first sight, the difference is partly due to semantics. It is possible to rewrite Manas’ argument using Reynolds’ language: For Manas, the nature of the Thai language constitutes an excess which continually inserts itself into the *chan* form. Manas shows how the three poets draw on the poetic nature of Thai language to reshape conventions, a continuous process of making modern convention. His discussion of how Angkhan juxtaposes various dualisms (high and low, sacred and profane) is especially informative about changes in convention. In an earlier era these juxtapositions would no doubt have been found seditious.

David Smyth completes the group of essays on literature with a discussion on the making and remaking of the reputation of the author Kulap Saipradit, or Siburapha. Although Siburapha’s earlier novels, written during the 1920s and 1930s, have been continually popular, his later political novels, written during the 1940s, had disappeared from sight until their recovery in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Smyth explores how commentaries produced during Siburapha’s recovery during

the 1970s were shaped by a narrative of linear political development and growth. Commentators therefore evaluated his earlier novels as politically less mature, even though it is not difficult to produce contrary interpretations. Smyth has read the novels and provides just such a contrary assessment. This involves producing yet another recovery of Siburapha, now of the earlier novels, with Smyth re-presents as more outspoken than the critics had previously allowed. Linear understandings of history are now less tenable, so that Smyth's alternative recovery is compelling — for the moment.

Ian Brown begins the second group of essays with a discussion of early twentieth-century Thai language writing on political economy. He emphasizes the texts written by Phraya Suriyanuwat, which draw on nationalist theories of protectionism, and Owenite socialism, to criticize free market and comparative advantage theories. These texts were banned, and other than this, very little rigorous political economic critique was produced in Thailand during this period. Brown then asks why political economy did not penetrate Siamese discourse, and why political authorities were so hostile to it. He answers by appealing in a straightforward way to the political and economic interests of the ruling monarchy in the early twentieth century. Brown's essay raises a series of interesting questions on the construction of knowledge which he does not take up explicitly. For example, in both the free trade orthodoxy and the political economy critique, the basic categories (labour, land, and capital as alienable property), the underlying rationality, and notions of (in)justice seem to be those of market society. It would be interesting to follow the process by which these categories, rationalities, and moralities made their way into Bangkok thinking.

Lysa Hong's essay follows historically from Brown's. During the 1970s political economic critique became a vigorous field of knowledge production in Thai academia. Hong analyses the political economy group which emerged after 1976 by a study of the debates in *Warasan Setthasat Kanmu'ang* (Journal of political economy). The group began with the scientific certainties of Marxist class struggle, believing that the theory would seize the masses, but in practice it was resolutely and safely academic. But by mid-1980s theoretical critiques of linear development in Marxist theory and the practical exigencies of a new involvement in

politics had disintegrated the earlier certainties. Hong goes on to outline different responses to the theoretical and strategic uncertainties within the group. These included staying with economic class struggle, recovering a more humanistic Marxism, and turning to an ideological struggle closely tied to ongoing struggles within society. In retrospect, it seems that the latter position anticipated that taken by most progressive intellectuals during the events of 1992: they strategically joined an alliance between the business and middle classes in their struggle against the military.

Chatthip Nartsupha, the former guru of political economy, takes the anti-state position to an anarchist conclusion in the next essay on the community culture school of knowledge. He summarizes the social background and writings of four major authors of this school (Niphot Thianwihan, Bamrung Bunpanya, Apichat Tho'ngyu, and Prawet Wasi). Although there are differences among them, the four agree that the village community has a set of core values that have persisted through many centuries, and that these values should be the basis for rural development. These values include harmony, goodwill, equality, mutual help, self-reliance, and popular and pragmatic knowledge. Chatthip evaluates their theories on the basis of his reading of political and economic history. He argues that *sakdina* relations left village communities alone, and the lack of colonization has minimized external impacts on the village. Thus village communities have been better preserved in Thailand than elsewhere in the Third World. In a final section Chatthip argues that the fundamental political struggle in Thailand is between the state and capitalism on one side, and the village on the other. The struggle of the villagers is less a class struggle than a struggle against central authority. In so far as village discourse is a denial of the state, it is anarchist. Chatthip's style of analysis is similar to that of Manas: despite external encroachment, the core Thai culture persists in popular village culture, even if the villagers are themselves not aware of it. As with many of the other contributors, Chatthip points to how the constraints on the production of knowledge in Thailand have changed. For him, the events of October 1973 were the key event creating an atmosphere which encouraged the study of people's plights and problems, leading to the emergence of the community culture school.

Philip Stott's remarkable examination of cultural trends which led to the cancelling of the Nam Choam dam takes a different perspective on the theme of changing political discourse in Thailand. In traditional cosmology, the *paa thu'an* was that which was wild or full of uncontrollable energy. It was external to the "traditional" Tai *muang* (state), which was the space of merit, order, and predictability. But in modern Thai discourse the *paa thu'an* is becoming integrated within the *muang*. It is being turned into *thammachat*, the tamed, predictable nature of scientific discourse, or its modern converse, the romantic, noble, but unthreatening wilderness. It is perhaps possible to extend Stott's argument, to ask if this rethinking of wilderness/nature is associated with the rethinking of the common people, so that in contrast to the late nineteenth century, they have become incorporated into state poetics. It is now legitimate to scientifically study them and write about them, discovering their true nature so that they can be better preserved or developed.

The final two essays give a glimpse of subaltern knowledge. The local knowledge described by Turton and Tanabe is neither a collective din nor scientific discourse, although it has limits and conventions. It is difficult to describe in academic texts, because its extraordinary, supernatural characteristics makes it non-assimilable to scientific description on its own terms. Unlike elite and middle-class popular culture, subaltern knowledge does not have authors; its authority is derived from non-authorial sources: teachers, ancestor spirits, and collective memory. Andrew Turton describes the forms and conventions which constitute knowledge about invulnerability: "the idea, the palpable or imagined reality of a human being able to resist wounding, especially by animals or other humans, to an extraordinary degree". Invulnerability as a local memory is charged through teachers at the margins of society. This knowledge can be seen as the opposite of intimidation and surveillance. It is rather the memory of past hopes and aspirations. The Phi Meng ritual in northern Thailand described by Shigeharu Tanabe in the final essay is also passed on through collective repetition and memory. According to Tanabe, magical knowledge, supported by Buddhist tradition, represents females as soft-souled and vulnerable, but this is coexistent with a quite different knowledge in which females have an untamed power associated with sexuality and the domestic sphere. Through this ritual,

women's (and animals') untamed power is transformed through two "negations" into the authoritative and transcendental power of ancestor spirits, in a process by which gender itself is transcended.

A somewhat surprising feature of this set of essays is that the category "Thai" in *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* is taken for granted. Thailand, is after all, a recent invention, around which a broad-based historical and literary discourse has emerged, a discourse which is limited and structured by the conventions of nationalist writing. For example, Reynolds associates nineteenth century sedition with lese-majesty in the 1980s. While the similarities may be important, it would also be important to investigate the differences between lese-majesty in the context of a monarch of a national state and lese-majeste in the context of a *sakdina* state. More generally, with the exception of Stott, the contributors do not question why it is now legitimate to write about subalterns through the conventions of scientific discourse. The poem described by Reynolds may have been more than a subversion of a dominant discourse; it may also have indicated a shift in dominant discourse towards one in which subalterns are named, categorized, counted, and argued over as to their real nature. Stott is the exception because he sets his analysis in the context of the transformation in political discourse and cosmology in Thailand. We could add to his analysis that the incorporation of the *paa* into the *muang* is linked to a transformation of the *muang* into a national state which recreates space under its administration as homogeneous administered space.

Turton's introduction makes a number of broad claims for the approach taken in the essays, claims which sometimes do not hold up. For example, he writes that the conference found dualisms unhelpful, including the élite-subaltern dichotomy. He suggests as an alternative the "decentring" of these terms, an instability of positions, and the "cross-hatch of discourses", citing Reynolds' essay. Yet most essayists continued to work within a series of dualisms. For example, Reynolds' nineteenth century "cross-hatch of discourses" takes place within a privileged group clearly set apart from commoners whose speech was not supposed to be represented.

The introduction begins with broad claims for what the book achieves: "It is concerned with what becomes interesting, useful, or proper to know;

with what limits are placed on investigation, experimentation, diffusion, and reception; with how topics and discourses become authorized, constructed, regulated, supervised, and subverted". These ambitious claims characterize some of the essays (those by Reynolds and Smyth) better than others. For example, Chatthip Nartsupha remains focused on the adequacy of representations of village culture for the purpose of doing better development, a rather more modernist approach than the introduction would suggest. This is not a shortcoming, and my comments should not be taken as a criticism of this provocative set of essays. Rather, the variety of approaches caused me to reflect on the reasons for and politics of the differences among the essays. These differences, and the reasons for them, are only briefly mentioned in the introduction. In creative readings they could be used to provoke useful dialogue about politics of the construction of the knowledge in this text.

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