

BOOK REVIEWS

A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thainess in Thai-Burmese Relations.
By Pavin Chachavalponpun. New York: University Press of America,
2005. Softcover: 188pp.

This is a rather interesting book in that it examines the impact of distorted nationalism on an important bilateral relationship in Southeast Asia. Whereas there is an element of abstract imagination that accompanies all attempts to define nationalism and embellish it as an artifact worthy of inspiration and preservation, this study is unique in its argument that Thai nationalism has an important component that is defined in contradistinction to its proximate and important neighbour, Myanmar. In fact, the author argues that there are two important aspects to the construction of the virtuous self and the stereotypical other. Myanmar falls within the latter category as do countries broadly associated with the West. Both these negative images are then distilled into two important indigenous concepts called *khwampenthai*, meaning Thainess or being Thai, and *tam kon farang*, that literally translates into tailing the rear end of Westerners. The central argument of the author is that both these concepts have been variously manipulated by Thai elite to justify self-serving policies towards Myanmar. Self-serving in this instance is to be understood as the personal interests of the power elite rather than the national interest. In fact, the author is steadfast in his argument that Thai nationalism has traditionally involved a cobbling together of elite interests vaguely justified in terms of *khwampenthai*.

Following a brief introduction, the book is divided into 6 chapters. The first two of these chapters place the discussion of nationalism within a theoretical and then Thai historical context. The next three chapters apply the twin concepts of *khwampenthai* and *tam kon farang* to three case studies — Thai policy towards ethnic insurgencies along the Thai-Myanmar border, the narcotics trade and the admission

of Myanmar into ASEAN in 1997. The conclusion then reiterates the importance of the negative other in elite justification of policies delivered as being in the national interest and its reflection in turn of a certain hollowness to Thai nationalism.

According to the author, the term *khwampenthai* lends itself to extraordinary manipulation while conferring political legitimacy. And when this identifiable aspect of nationalism is not useful, the converse *tam kon farang* is utilized to indicate behaviour that is un-Thai. In other words, when necessary, virtuous behaviour is defined via negatio. Alongside these amorphous concepts are a number of lesser contextual cultural terms/norms to provide added justification to foreign policy output. These include *nam chai/khwammi nam chai* [goodwill/generosity], *chaibun* [meritorious heart], *songkhro/songsan* ([assistance to unfortunate/compassion], *khaorop* [respect], *krengchai* [obeisance and proper behaviour] and *khwampakdi* [loyalty]. Many of these cultural norms are drawn from clientelistic and hierarchical interactions rather than more abstract and core universal norms like *khwamyutitham* [justice], *khwamsuesat* [honesty] and *khwamsamoephak* [equality]. The core norms that are often in stark contrast to the cultural norms are intentionally suppressed in order to portray a situation as complimentary to elite power interests (p. 18). Additionally, the author argues that the Thai power elite have tremendous latitude in defining *khwampenthai* and the cultural norm of choice. The propagation and socialization of *khwampenthai* through schools, the media and other instruments of state propaganda has made the concept powerful and sacred (p. 23). The rule of Phibun, Sarit and Thanom in the post-War era identified Myanmar, communism and drugs as issues extrinsic to *khwampenthai*.

In the case of Myanmar, Thai elite use of the terms *khwampenthai* and *tam kon farang* to justify abrupt changes in policy output is clearly attributed to dishonest and corrupt motives. The book essentially examines the concepts as they have been applied to Thai-Myanmar relations since 1988, beginning with the *volte face* policies of Chatichai Choonhavan in 1988 that sought greater accommodation with Myanmar after its violent suppression of the movement demanding political change in 1988. In the first case study on ethnic insurgency, the bilateral relationship is divided into two periods — the first from 1988 to 1997 when Chatichai and Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh were the architects of policy output. They argued for engagement with Myanmar on the basis of economic prosperity that was in turn deemed a requirement for Thailand to be a leading nation (p. 57). In light of this new rationalization to engage Myanmar, Thailand naturally stopped

supporting ethnic insurgents who in the past had fought the Burmese Government but provided Thailand a useful buffer against a perceived traditional enemy. However, during the second phase from 1997 to 2000 when the Democrat Party was in power and Chuan Leekpai, Surin Pitsuwan and Sukhumbhand Paribatra dominated foreign policy output, there was a movement towards more international norms that were sympathetic to the insurgents, a policy that was later again turned around by the Thaksin government. As a result of constantly changing elite definitions of what constituted Thai nationalism and cultural values, ethnic insurgents along the Thai-Myanmar border have paid a heavy price. Competing essentialist notions of Thainess have had a profound impact on ethnic insurgency. According to the author, as a rule, political elite who advocated engagement with Myanmar on the basis of *khwampenthai* or other cultural norms had ulterior business motives. These elite were aided and abetted in turn by ranking military officers and *jao pho* (godfathers).

In the second case study, Pavin argues that whereas the drug problem may be intrinsic to Thailand, it is often externalized as being un-Thai. This designation in turn allows power holders to be involved in the narcotics trade while categorizing it as an essentially foreign and specifically Burmese activity. Consequently, although there is evidence of the large-scale involvement of Thai politicians and members of enforcement agencies in the trade, there is constant denial of the situation. Additionally, cultural norms of generosity and merit-making are often utilized to overlook the involvement of influential persons in the trade. Consequently, most, if not all the blame for drug production and trafficking has been squarely blamed on Myanmar or ethnic insurgents like the Shan, Wa and Kokang along the common border. Pavin alleges that "The government has consistently refused to prosecute cabinet members, famous military men or local figures who were involved in the narcotics trade because this would be too destabilizing for the whole power system" (p. 97). The chapter also provides a list of high-ranking politicians and officials allegedly involved in the narcotics trade. Although only the initials of the accused are provided, observers of Thai politics are easily able to ascertain their identities on the basis of the accompanying personal information.

And finally, the third case study examines the Thai support for Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997. At the time of Myanmar's admission, Thailand justified its support on the basis of an ongoing engagement policy that had yielded significant economic benefits. More importantly, it was a way of asserting *khwampenthai* as breaking with

farang policies. Similarly, ASEAN itself rebuffed Western criticisms by arguing for a regional grouping based on an established footprint and asserting latitude away from Western positions on Myanmar and what constituted good government. Additionally, following Myanmar's admission, ASEAN's cherished principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states provided Myanmar convenient cover and legitimacy for its handling of the political opposition and insurgencies (p. 141). In this regard, Pavin considers ASEAN as guilty as Thailand in consolidating an unhealthy norm in the region.

The author concludes the book by restating the thesis that Thai-Myanmar relations has traditionally been determined and manipulated by Thai power elite, often for very selfish reasons. In this regard, Thailand's bilateral relations with Myanmar have vacillated from an extreme characterization as enemy to one that regards it as a friend. Consequently, the bilateral relationship is prone to significant fluctuation as a result of Thai elite manipulation of national identity and cultural norms. Selective utilization of cultural norms and false negative identifications in turn allow the political elite to appropriate wealth and create new opportunities for corruption.

In many ways this is an interesting book presenting a fresh perspective on Thai-Myanmar relations that should attract wide readership from scholars who work on Thailand and Myanmar. Presumably the plasticity in the title of the book refers to how Thai elites are able to mould powerful condensation symbols at will to serve their own narrow and often immoral and illegal interests. Clearly, this book is a damning condemnation of Thai political culture and elite manipulation of it.

However, inasmuch as Pavin has displayed great courage in publishing this book, there are a number of questions that his thesis leaves unanswered. How do the conclusions in the book relate to the "policy corruption" that the Thaksin government was accused of by many Thai academics? And in the area of foreign policy, how does it interface with the unprincipled "willow diplomacy" that Thailand is often accused of pursuing? And finally, how different is cultural plasticity from the argument that regime transition and constitutionalism in Thailand have traditionally been related to gaining a share of the national spoils?

N. GANESAN is Professor of Southeast Asian Politics at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima City University, Japan.