

# Disturbing Conventions

As we suggested in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (co-edited with Peter A. Jackson, 2010), the study of Siam/Thailand has remained largely isolated from critical analysis inflected by postcolonial theory. Only a handful of Thai scholars have been drawn to this field of inquiry in recent years, among them the late Nopphorn Prachakul, professor of French literature at Bangkok's Thammasat University. Nopphorn warned his readers in an introductory text on postcolonialism for Thai MA students against the standard knee-jerk reaction: "That's not relevant to us. We Thai have never been anyone's colony." (Nopphorn, n.d., 156, quoted in Jackson, 2010, 38).

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THIS CHARACTERISTIC THAI RESPONSE comes as a result of the stranglehold which traditionalist/conservative discourses have effected on this particular field of area studies, with its steadfast adherence to a representation of Siam/Thailand as *unique*, both in the wider region and on a global scale. While such a perspective is reliant upon a privileging of the nation's alleged valiant and savvy resistance to Western colonial enterprise, historians such as Thongchai Winichakul (1994, 2000a and 2000b) and Benedict Anderson (1978), among others, have questioned the veracity of this position. Taking inspiration from Udom Sisuwan's seminal 1950 text *Thai keung meuang kheun (Thailand, a Semi-colony)*, they instead demonstrate the extent to which the country was in fact semi-colonial in several respects. And more recently, Tamara Loos has located late nineteenth century Siam "at the crossroads of colonized countries and sovereign, imperial powers, sharing some of the traits of both but reducible to neither." (Loos, 2006, 21)

An evaluation of the politico-cultural relations established by the Bangkok ruling elite with the West in the late nineteenth century, and perpetuated in varying ways up to the present time, therefore lays fertile ground for the analysis of contemporary Thai cultural production through the optic of postcolonial critique. One of the several aims of the *Ambiguous Allure* project was, consequently, to clear an intellectual space from which to draw the study of contemporary Thai culture into broader, comparative landscapes and to allow for its interrogation along exciting lines of theoretically driven enquiry. In order to achieve this ambition it has been essential to effect a shift away from the myth of Thai uniqueness that has dominated the field to date, both in local and in international scholarship, even though – or perhaps precisely because – it is the case that such a move poses an inevitable threat to the existing order of things.<sup>1</sup>

From my own perspective of engagement with contemporary Thai cultural studies and comparative literature, there are several key projects which suggest themselves as a logical progression from the ground laid by *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*. One is the task, currently near completion, of bringing to the fore new frames of theoretically engaged analysis in the discussion of Thai literature – both traditional and modern. See *Disturbing Conventions: New Frames of Analysis in Thai Literary Studies* (forthcoming). This edited collection draws together the work of a younger generation of Thai scholars, for the most part trained abroad in English or comparative literature, who have returned to work in the Thai academy and to consider Thai literary texts in ways more commonly defined as inflected by "Western" theory. See, for example, Suradech Chotiudomtant on cosmopolitanism and its limits; Janit Feangfu on the negotiation of rural and urban identities; Soison Sakolrak on deconstruction and paratexts; Lakkhana Punwichai's exploration of deliberately subversive feminist analytical perspectives; and Chusak Pattarakulvanit's feminist reading of persecution in a modern literary classic *The Judgement*. Their chapters deliberately "read literature against the grain", to quote a phrase (in Thai, *an mai ao reuang*) made popular by the collection's most acclaimed Thai literary analyst, Chusak Pattarakulvanit, from his book of the same title, published in 2002. These contributions effectively move beyond the traditionalist, conservative concerns of the academy of the sort cautioned against by Nopphorn Prachakul in his promotion of postcolonial analytical frameworks: concerns which have, until relatively recently, foreclosed the use of "Western" theory in the study of Thai literature.

In order to move this argument along, the concept and definition of theory as "Western" requires critical analysis. As with the *Ambiguous Allure* project, *Disturbing Conventions* queries what is fully implied by the term "Western" theory in the cultural studies context. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, "Western" theory is itself neither static nor uncontested. It is also not beyond being able to deconstruct its own premises, as Bhabha's work on the limitations of Western thinkers to engage meaningfully with cultural Otherness keenly communicates in "The Commitment to Theory" (2004, 46). And given the hybrid nature of all cultural identities which postcolonial critics such as Bhabha and Said (1993) highlight so effectively, how can "Western" theory fail to be in some sense relevant to the study of cultural production in Siam/Thailand given the country's semi-colonial relations with the West?

The impact of such cultural hybridities is clearly exemplified by the intense links between the development of modern Thai prose fiction in the early years of the twentieth century and the popularity of Victorian literature among Siamese authors and readers in a context where translation, reproduction and reinvention were intensely and inextricably intertwined in the production of the earliest examples of Thai novels and short stories. Thosaeng Chaochuti's chapter on Siam's literary entanglements with the imperial West in *Disturbing Conventions* discusses this crucial cultural trait,



Left and right: Red Shirt demonstrators, Bangkok, April-May 2010. Photographs courtesy of authors.



## Wherefore postcolonial theory in contemporary Thai cultural studies?



as does Thanapol Limapichart's on semi-coloniality, print capitalism and the reconfiguration of cultural authority. And my own contribution draws on Thak Chaloemtiarana's several published articles on the work of early Thai novelist Khru Liam (2007, 2009a and 2009b) to highlight similar features in its discussion of the relationship between Khru Liam's 1916 novel *The Divine Nymphs* (*Nang Neramit*) and Victorian gothic adventure fiction such as that penned by Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle, Marie Corelli and others: a relationship colored by fantasy, desire, anxiety, mimicry and, above all, power.

It is this critical prevalence of power that further makes relevant a deployment of the postcolonial lens through which to scrutinize contemporary Thai cultural studies, beyond that of its intense historical connections with Victoriana. Historians such as Kasian Tejapira (2001), Thongchai (1994, 2000a and 2000b, and 2010) and Loos (2006 and 2010) have demonstrated the extent to which the Bangkok elite adopted and adapted aspects of British and French colonial policy as an effective strategy for the assertion of control over the peripheries of the Siamese state. This project of power continues to manifest itself in the contemporary politico-cultural context via the dominance of urban elite discourses over the rural provinces.

The raw political struggles that have played out in Bangkok's street protests over the past few years reveal how demonstrators from Thailand's rural North and North Eastern regions express their sense of disenfranchisement through distinct cultural forms (as illustrated by the photographs accompanying this article). Local cultural features – often raw, bawdy and sexually provocative – are vigorously deployed as forceful gestures of resistance to mainstream, urban symbols of high-brow consumerism. It was precisely for this reason, in a gesture brimming with “postcolonial” resonance, that the Red Shirt demonstrators set up camp in the heart of Bangkok's shopping district amidst its glitzy malls precincts, at Ratprasong intersection, in April-May 2010.

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Much work remains to be done in subsequent conference papers, articles, and future books (and urgently so) to perform the necessary incisive analysis of Thailand's recent protest movements, from the angle of their engagement with popular cultural forms. Here the theoretical input of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival, Bhabha on “the location of culture” and the complete edition of Derrida's seminars and lectures, recently made available in English translation by Geoffrey Bennington (2009 and 2011), provide fertile inspiration as a starting point from which to develop deeper understandings of the postcolonial significance of popular protest in contemporary Thailand.

Perhaps this is an intellectual project for which Nopporn Prachakul - to whom the edited collection *Disturbing Conventions* is dedicated – might have had some sympathy. Nopporn's piece in the volume, posthumously translated into English, deals with issues of ethnic culture in the modern novel Luk Isan (A Child of the North East), by Khamphun Buthawi. Nopporn's is a timely reminder of the complexity of the relationship between the Isan (North Eastern) regional identity and its relevant others, be they Chinese, Vietnamese or (Bangkok) Thai.

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#### Notes

- 1 As veteran Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri has recently reminded us, the concept of Thai uniqueness, with its origins in US scholarship of the 1960s, soon gained a strong foothold in all areas of academia in Thailand, from political science to law, sociology, history, linguistics, literature and in the field of Thai Studies in particular, where it has been deployed as an almost foolproof means of preserving the status quo and legitimizing resistance to reform. See Charnvit Kasetsiri, “*Khvam phiset lae neung diaw khong ‘khvam pen thai’ uniqueness of Thailand?*” In *Matchon Online*, 13 December 2011. <http://tinyurl.com/77obk3c> (accessed 5-1-2012).