

## BOOK REVIEW

### **A History of Thailand (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)**

Authors: **Chris Baker** and **Pasuk Phongpaichit**

Cambridge University Press, 2009

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Genre: Non-fiction

By Dr. Absorn Meesing\*

#### **Overview and Background Information**

A History of Thailand 1<sup>st</sup> edition was published in 2005, and it soon attracted public attention and was reprinted twice in the same year. Reprinted once every year thereafter, the book's 2<sup>nd</sup> edition came out in 2009 and 2010, followed by the third edition in June, 2014. The book received numerous positive reviews from both Thai and foreign scholars and publishers. This indicates the phenomenal popularity of the book.

Chris Baker has a Cambridge BA degree with first honors, and a PhD Doctorate degree majoring in Indian History. He has taught Asian History at Cambridge for ten years prior to moving to Thailand and later learned to read and write Thai. He has been living in Thailand for over 30 years. Pasuk Phongpaichit is a professor of economics at Chulalongkorn University. She has produced numerous academic writings in Thai and English on the Thai economy, sex industry, illegal economy, and social movements.

Twenty years ago, the publisher (CUP) asked Chris Baker to write a textbook on the history of Thailand as other countries all have their own history textbook except Thailand. Both authors took five years to study and collect all their information, mainly from libraries in England and the United States. Among key documents were rare books written by Thai scholars at Cornell University and the University of Tokyo. Since it first appeared, it sold well and was reprinted many times. This 2009 2<sup>nd</sup> edition brings Thai history up to the 2006 coup and an elected government in 2008 while the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition added the April 2012 political movement and the recent anti-government political movement in the year 2013.

With the intent to fill in the missing parts of Thai history books available, the book focuses on the contemporary period of Thai history-or the Bangkok era from about 200 years ago to the present with a brief introduction of earlier periods in its first chapter. Unlike conventional history texts taught and learned in Thai schools, this book treats as its main concept, the

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building of a “nation-state”, more thoroughly and comprehensively, depicting the struggle and clashes between different social groups in making and shaping the Thai nation state, not just the ruler’s political will or that of the dominant class which is the case for most school textbooks. The authors present their convincing, evidence-based argument in 9-chapters to be reviewed in the ‘Review’ section:

- Before Bangkok
  - The old order in transition, 1970s to 1980s
  - Reforms, 1980s to 1910s
  - Peasants, merchants, and officials, 1870s to 1930s
  - Nationalisms, 1910s to 1940s
  - The American era and development, 1940s to 1960s
  - Ideologies, 1940 to 1970s
  - Globalization and mass society, 1970s onwards
  - Politics, 1970s onwards
- Postscript: the strong state and the well-being of the people

However, the publisher wanted the book to be readable for the general public, not only for academia and college students, thus without being not overloaded with academic citations and references. Yet readers are given adequate reference to pursue any specific point or historical event of their covered, to satisfy their own interest, in the comprehensive 13-page Notes section which is conveniently divided by chapter.

As a result, the book is widely read and used by diplomats, business people, investors before coming to Thailand; overseas college professors assigned to teach (Southeast) Asian history, and foreign students in Asian history classes; as well as interested individuals. It became so popu-

lar that a Thai version was called for when the Thais heard learnt that the book had become popular with their expatriate colleagues keep referring to the book. The Thai version has also well received from Thai readers who were apparently longing for alternative and/or independent interpretations of Thai history.

## Review

The book is a solid academic work of notable scholars in the field drawing on a wide range of Thai and foreign historical source material mainly primary sources of data which are rarely found in Thai history textbooks and thus make Baker and Phongpaichit’s work exciting and convincing.

As mentioned earlier, the main argument of book is twofold: one is how the nation-state of Thailand was invented, and secondly the dynamic, ongoing evolution of multiple social forces involved in shaping the society.

To support their argument, the authors neatly arrange the book into 9 chapters in chronological order which clearly depict the main characteristics of each period since before Bangkok and the founding of Bangkok just over 200 years ago. In this manner, the authors divide Thai history into two main periods, before Bangkok, and the Bangkok period. They focus on the latter with their argument being that Thailand as it is perceived now was merely invented some 200 years ago, not 600-700 years dating back to the Sukhothai, Ayuthaya, Thonburi, and Ratanakosin (or Bangkok) periods- as taught in main-stream Thai history classes in schools throughout Thailand.

As such, this book poses a challenging

new perspective to the readers, especially Thais.

Each chapter is presented with the summary of key ideas/characteristics of the period then followed by detailed conceptual information backed up with evidence. The first chapter, *Before Bangkok*, describes the formations of communities several centuries ago during their early settlement periods as different ethnic groups moved into the Southeast Asian mainland where Thailand is now situated. People lived in city-states and what held them together was personal ties between the ruler and the ruled who exchanged service for protection. The kingship was strengthened by the lengthy period of warfare from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The power of the ruler/kingship was formed through being the 'great, brave fighter' and buttressed by Brahman ritual, trading profits, and forced labor. The wealth of late Ayuthaya kings, for example, was witnessed by a French visitor who made a remark on entering a royal temple (p.14 line 17) about its power, stating that: "in the Indies there is no state that is more monarchical than Siam" (p.14). But since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this social and political order had begun to decline with the coming of a commercially oriented economy with loosening labor ties, an emerging aristocracy, and the spread of Theravada Buddhism.

This chapter however would be more complete if it shed light on the long argument among Thais scholars over the origins of Thai people. Did they originate in a migration from the south of China or have they been living here since 4,000 years ago.

As the old order transitioned in chapter 2, the major change was in economy where the growth of the market economy began to remake the social structure and change the 'mentality of the elite' (p.26).

In Chapter 3, the ideas of nation and national identity were imposed from the top (p.47), and in Chapter 4 the authors describe Thailand in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a frontier society characterized by peasant smallholders, not by landlords; and urbanization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by Chinese immigrants from southern China who played a dominant role in Bangkok's economic life along with playing a big role in the formation of the society's middle class (p.81).

The concept of centralized nationalism is discussed in chapter 5. Passive acceptance of the absolute power of the ruler was challenged by a new vision formed by interaction with traders from the outside world who proposed that 'progress' be more widely shared (p.105).

Chapter 6 portrays the American influence in Thailand's politics and its economic system during the cold war period and its concurrent anti-communism; the 'development' and emergence of a new elite; and the imposed impact on the Thai rural villages. In *Development and Capital* (p.150), the names of big Thai Chinese business groups were discussed. This chapter also mentions a satire about the gap between government policy and the perception of it by the rural poor embodied in a popular song called 'Headman Li' (p.155). The chapter also describes urbanization and rural migration into Bangkok and other big cities of many rural people looking for work. Finally, it examines some popular country songs which would never be considered legitimate in conventional texts.

Lastly, in the last three chapters, the book draws on more recent events in Thai history. In chapter 7, the nation-state was further strengthened by the concept of "national security" to protect it against com-

munism drawing together three groups of people: the military, businessmen, and royalists. Abuse of power caused a student uprising against the military government in 1976 (p,195). Again, the chapter ends with a song for life, 'Man and buffalo' depicting the democratic ideology and social justice. Chapter 8 discusses the ending of the Cold War in Asia after America's withdrawal from Vietnam, the coming of Japanese investment, and the East Asian 'Tigers' phenomenon, then the emergence of China. Bangkok still dominated Thailand's economy, becoming 40 times bigger than the next largest province (Korat).

In Chapter 9, Thai politics in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the awakening of the masses in terms of political and social participation. There have been two major social forces. On one side are the senior bureaucracy, the palace, and the military which still wish to preserve a passive rural society. On the other side, is big business and a rural-based populism.

In summary, this book did a great job in presenting Thai history from a political and economic perspective. It would be more complete if it added education into its social dimensions. The book hardly talks about how the Thai education system has been influenced and how it has impacted other areas of society.

## Recommendations

The book is well-written and well-organized. It is packed with figures, maps, charts, and notes for further study. I would strongly recommend this book for a text or as a supplementary reader for upper secondary schools in Thailand. In addition, all Thais should read this book, not just history teachers, as it would help them to reflect on their current/conventional beliefs. If thinking rationally is an important goal of education, a text like this book is an essential means to inculcate students with rationale thinking.