

Barend Jan Terwiel

“Siam”

Ten Ways to Look at Thailand’s Past



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Introduction

A first version of this booklet was published in Bangkok in 1989 entitled *A Window on Thai History* (published by Duang Kamol). It was written with a particular readership in mind: namely for people possessing little or no prior knowledge of Thai history, who wished to be informed on what happened in Thailand's past.

Too often authors of general guidebooks, not having a sufficient proficiency in Thai and depending upon sources that are out of date, perpetuate historical myths. This unpretentious volume is written by someone who has relied mainly upon primary sources and who is able to critically appraise theories that are no longer tenable.

At the same time this work is intended in a modest way as a contribution to Thai history itself, particularly in its presentation of Thai history according to a set of themes. There are two advantages of this thematic approach. In the first place it avoids the hotchpotch of kings, Buddhism, rice and revolution that characterises much historical writing on Thailand. Secondly, each chapter can be read as an entity in itself. Finally, the short reading and reference list at the end of each chapter can be the basis for further study.

The first edition was sold out within two years, and a second, revised edition appeared in 1991. I thank Richard Lair for going through the text with a fine comb and for suggesting a number of improvements. Twenty years later, having become acquainted with the OSTASIEN Verlag, the thought arose that this little work, enlarged and brought up-to-date, would fit in well in their Series "Gelbe Erde".

Methodology

History is a discipline in which the past is recalled by selecting documentary evidence and interpreting it. Thai history differs from, say, Chinese, Persian or European history in that relatively few documents have survived from before the late-nineteenth century. This paucity of sources has encouraged the writing of history books that attempt to tell all in a single breath (I myself am not beyond reproach in this respect). Especially in books that deal with the earlier periods, it is not uncommon to find in a single short paragraph pronouncements on administration, economics and social matters, all jumbled up and linking it with the exploits of a single individual. Historical narratives, with a perpetually-shifting focus, may make for easy reading, but they do little to assist analysis and understanding, and readers who rely on such sources for an initial picture of Thai history will find little to stimulate their critical sensibilities.

In order to overcome this haphazardness, in this booklet I have presented ten different perspectives, most of them a summary of some seven hundred years of history. Not intending to be more than overviews, none of these chapters aim to be authoritative studies. They are simply intended to reflect views widely held among specialists in various disciplines, and to provide visitors to Thailand with a quick survey of the state of current knowledge and thinking. For readers wishing to explore Thai history more in depth, some of the seminal works that have been published in English have been listed at the end of each chapter. Readers who wish to have direct access to vibrant historical debate, and who want to know the latest arguments among historians, should be aware that such debate takes place in scholarly journals and that most of it is conducted in the Thai language.

The ten perspectives in this book are by no means exhaustive; one could have added the histories of Thai visual art, of communi-

cations, of diplomacy, of the chronicles, of taxation systems, of traditional music, of the legal system, of rural areas, of oral history, or of Thai literature. Maybe a second volume, covering such further topics, would be a feasible project in the future.

The order of the ten chapters was not wholly arbitrary. The first chapter is not as innocuous as would seem: it was decided to tackle rather here, among others, two controversial matters. The location of the home-land of the earliest Thais has been debated vigorously for almost a hundred years and the crucial role of the eleventh-century chief Nong Zhi-gao, as represented has yet to be universally accepted. Also the name of the country remains a matter on which not everybody agrees.

As for the second chapter, one need not be a dogmatic Marxist to realise the importance of economic forces in shaping a country's history. Control over the forces of production are to a large extent responsible for both the form and the direction of a state system. To give a rather obvious example: the exciting ceramic output of Sukhothai kilns was made possible by the state's control over the trade route towards the far south and the profits that accrued from each successful marketing.

The interplay between military conquest and the administrative order, the theme of the third chapter, is pertinent in the case of the Thais, who conquered the Chao Phraya basin by force. The need to keep up a military credibility – to be seen as to be able to mobilise, feed and transport huge armies at short notice – was one of the driving forces leading to the development of a large-scale effective system of administration. It should be noted that the Thais were very inventive in devising measures for controlling the citizenry, such as the tattooing of virtually the whole male population.

The theme of the heroic ruler also is more important in the Thai case than it is in many other societies. Absolute rulers, at least in theory, had the right to act as they thought fit. The prominence

accorded to certain Thai kings has been seized upon in older history writing to such an extent that some histories of Thailand ended up being little more than hagiographies. In Chapter Four, I attempted to temper that trend without losing sight of the fact that certain visionary individuals do indeed seem to have had direct and disproportionate impact upon the course of Thai history.

From the absolute monarch and the worship of the Thai kings, moving to the Buddhist religion is but a small step. The chapter on Buddhism differs from the others in that it necessarily delves much deeper into the past, beginning with references to the founder of Buddhism himself, and explaining the long Buddhist tradition in the region prior to the arrival of the Thai people. The role of the reform movement in the Thai Buddhist church is given a prominent role in this chapter, because it shows the adaptability and resilience of the Thai Sangha when confronted with a major intellectual challenge. Some new sectarian developments have been included, for they seem more able to respond to the needs of modern Thais than the traditional monasteries.

Buddhist monasteries have been present throughout historical times. They represent a cultural good that is easily accessible, and this prompted the author to give them a short chapter on their own. It is hoped that thereby, visitors to Thailand will be encouraged to enter the premises, enjoy the artistic display and engage in conversation with those monks who take the initiative to communicate with them.

The theme of Chapter Seven, education, is again a natural progression, for the Buddhist monks historically have played a crucial role in this. It has been the aim in this chapter to show that the education, as offered by the monks, was quite efficient. The development towards a secular education system, and its spectacular recent developments, notably in the field of tertiary education, conclude this rapid overview.

Chapter Eight, Thai internal politics, represents a theme that has become increasingly important to many educated Thais during the last hundred years. It is hoped that the reader will obtain an inkling of the rich local debate that has ranged over the whole political spectrum: freeing themselves from an absolute monarch was preceded by fundamental debate. It was followed by military rule, provoked by a formal proposal to adopt a socialist system. Fascist ideology gained the upper hand for about five years, after which democracy and military rule succeeded each other in regular rhythm. Eventually, however, in the twenty-first century the Thai political scene seems to have matured and people realise that an election gives them a chance to express their opinion.

External politics, the topic of Chapter Nine, was chosen in preference to other topics because it is assumed that the readers of this booklet will be foreign to Thailand. By taking note of Thai experiences with other nations, foreigners may gain empathy with Thai attitudes to the wider world. A theme of this chapter has also been that the Thai experience with the wider world has been controversial. Fascinated by new ideas and technologies that came from outside its borders on the one side, afraid of colonial greed on the other: the Thai leadership was divided in its assessment of how to react.

In the final chapter the historical background to Thai identity is explored. The key role of Rama VI is stressed and some of the more popular, but none the less blatantly untrue legends are exposed. It is hoped that the reader will be guided here to separate fact from fancy and at the same time have sympathy with the wish of many Thais to present themselves as people who are proud of their achievements and their past.

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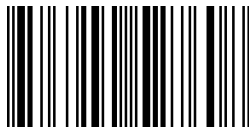
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Barend Jan Terwiel was born in 1941 in the Netherlands. He gained his PhD degree at the Australian National University (ANU) with a study of Religion in Rural Central Thailand, which inspired him to write *Monks and Magic*, now in its fourth edition. From 1992 until his retirement in 2007 he was Professor for Thai and Lao Languages and Literatures at Hamburg University. He writes extensively on the Ethnography of Tai peoples as well as on the history of the Thai.

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