

The silence of Thai history

*Thongchai Winichakul**

Professor Winichakul, you are a Thai historian. In your new book, *Moments of Silence*,¹ you draw on your experience in the 6 October 1976 massacre in Bangkok. Were you a student at the time?

Yes, a second-year student.

‘We beg you, please stop shooting!’ This is what you reportedly said to Thai police on the day of the Thammasat University massacre in 1976, which you witnessed. What happened on that day which is still surrounded by silence?

Thousands of people gathered at Thammasat campus to protest the return of a former dictator, which, we believed, was part of the plot for the return of military rule. All institutions of the establishment—military, police, media, and the palace—conspired to effect a brutal suppression with deadly force. Forty were killed in a few hours, thousands arrested. Many corpses were desecrated by hanging, burning, dragging their bodies around on the ground, and nailing sticks into their chest as if they were demons. A female corpse was sexually desecrated. The brutality and the desecrations that morning were beyond comprehension.

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I explain in my book the reasons for the silence of different parties involved in the tragedy. These reasons also changed depending on changing political contexts during the forty years since the massacre.

In the book, you mention a friend of yours who was beaten and killed by police, whose autopsy you later found, confirming the fact and conditions of his death. From your research, are any other victims still unaccounted for?

We don't know if there were more. Among the forty bodies, three males were unidentified and four burnt beyond recognition. There was no investigation whatsoever, right after the incident or until now. The Thai state wants its crimes to be forgotten. Some groups of people tried to find out about the victims. But without cooperation, it is very hard, probably impossible. And without regime change—from a royalist state to a democracy—a serious investigation is unlikely.

After the Bangkok massacre, you came to study at the University of Sydney in the 1980s, where you earned your master's and doctoral degrees. What are your memories of your time in Sydney? Have you been back since?

I was fortunate to get a scholarship from the University of Sydney in 1982. Sydney was my first experience outside Thailand. I didn't have opportunity to travel to learn much about vast Australia. My interest was elsewhere anyway. For me, reading and writing English was tough. It took tremendous efforts and time to adjust. Above all, my Sydney years were the time I looked back, to come to terms with the tragedy, to find the purpose, to move on without ever forgetting. For me, libraries, books, and time for introspection helped me to get through.

Luckily, I was able to write an alternative history of Thailand as a way to fight back against the cruel massacre.

Given my work in the U.S. Midwest for most of my career, it is very far to travel to Sydney. I went back only once in 2014. It was

quite a different city from the one I knew in the 1980s. But the apartment where I used to stay was still there and unchanged. I also visited the libraries where I spent most of the time during my life in Sydney.

In 1988, you completed your PhD on the topic of the history of maps of Siam or Thailand. At the time, you wrote one essay introducing Orwell's *1984* to Thai readers, and another in 2008. Is the book popular in modern Thailand?

Orwell's *1984* was not part of my study. It was a small part in the process to make sense of the horrible Thailand. But it is quite powerful for readers who live in a subtle authoritarian condition as in Thailand. The book was translated for the first time in 1982 (not by me) when democratisation in Thailand was under way. I don't think it was known beyond a small intellectual circle. The translation was reprinted in 2008 in a quite different environment, that is, in the repressive political and cultural conditions after the 2006 coup. Since then, *1984* has been read widely and is known, mostly by the younger generations. Reading the book in public has also become a form of protest that individuals can engage in at any time and in any place. I don't know how many times it has been reprinted.

Does Thailand have a George Orwell, an essayist, philosopher, or other polemicist whom you could recommend to readers unfamiliar with Thai literature or who can't read Thai but would gladly pick up a translation?

Intriguing question.

There are, of course, writers of many kinds including columnists. But I understand the meaning of an essayist and its difference from other kinds of writers, say a columnist. Only a few Thai writers, in my opinion, are thoughtful, sophisticated, and write beautiful essays that show the power of prose like an essayist does. I wonder if there is the essayist tradition in the Thai language, similar to the one in English.

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If there is none, the question is why? I don't think Thais are less sophisticated nor the Thai language less powerful than English. Perhaps it has to do with cultural conservatism that controls words and establishes the regime of proper expressions from childhood to higher education. Perhaps it has to do with the lack of freedom beyond the realm of proper politics but indeed in the tradition of writing, thus the under-appreciation and under-realisation of the power of prose. Perhaps it has to do with the supremacy of conservative Buddhism that stifles imagination, thinking outside the box, and thoughtfulness. I have never thought about this question.

Thailand has a unique history as the only Southeast Asian country never colonised by Europeans. Does its intellectual history, philosophy or general culture reflect the idea of Thailand having a special historical mission?

The misunderstood “unique history” has been the basis of the royalist historical ideology that can turn as cruel as it did in 1976. Thailand's history is unique in the sense that every history is particular, thus not unique in this sense. But its colonial history is far from unique if we look further afield to Persia, Turkey, and other semi-colonies, or if we take the “colonial” not merely as the direct rule by a foreign power, but a condition of subjugation—directly or otherwise, formally or not, varied in degrees and forms—by an imperial power. In the case of Siam, it was both semi-colonised and itself was an imperial power too. Its colonial relations with European powers, that is the West, on the one hand, and its subordinates on the other were the actual condition of Siam's peculiar modernity. The notion of “never colonised” is either naïve or ideological (a piece of propaganda) or a touristic history for easy consumption.

Its ideologically “unique history” is a crucial component of the protectionist, provincial mentality of Thailand, by which I mean the pride in its unique past, philosophy, and culture which nobody else could fully understand, and the sense of transcendental fulfilment despite (indeed because of) this provincialism. If there is a historical mission, it is to unlearn and unravel this supposedly unique history,

and to recognise its semi-colonial and semi-imperial conditions. This is quite crucial to fighting the oppressive intellectual culture, to unlock the potential of history, philosophy, and general culture from the domination of the state's ideology and the state's Buddhism. To set free imagination.

Britain had Herbert Butterfield's Whig view of history and E.H. Carr's famous *What is History?* (1961). Germany had Leopold von Ranke and Hegel. Is there a Thai tradition of historiography or philosophy of history?

Thailand is not yet a "nation-state" in the classic sense. It is a modern royal-nation, not an archaic kingdom but an imagined national community of royal subjects. Its historiography is still predominantly royal-nationalistic. In my view, the philosophy of this history is simplistic and derivative, nothing original or interesting. It is quite powerful, nonetheless, perhaps thanks to its simplicity. Fortunately, alternative historiographies have begun to emerge in recent decades and gained traction.

In a *New Mandala* interview,² you said that you have thought about the 1976 massacre every day for the past 40 years. The massacre's perpetrators were amnestied in the end. What would you like to see in order to feel a sense of justice?

I hope one day there would be as thorough an investigation as there could be, even though it might be late. I hope that dignity would be restored to every death—to their names and their bodies—and to their families too. I hope the wrongdoing in all forms and the perpetrators at all levels would be spelled out in public. They deserve appropriate punishment no matter how late, and their names and honour repudiated no matter how majestic they were or are. No vengeance, but justice and morality must be restored. The disgusting impunity must end so the rule of law can begin.

If all this could be achieved before the end of my life, however, I am not sure how I would feel. I myself don't need such closure anymore in order to move on. Besides, it is already too late for me

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to appreciate the sense of justice, and not to feel how cruel history can be.

Memory work takes many forms, from truth commissions as in Rwanda and South Africa, to joint history textbooks as in Europe, to documentaries like *The Act of Killing* in Indonesia. Are such processes underway in Thailand?

As I write in the book, in recent years the silence surrounding the massacre has been broken. Information about the tragedy has gradually been openly and widely circulated. Despite that, limits to what can be said about the tragedy remain. The who and why remain unspeakable. These memory works are the result of intellectual works (articles, books, memoirs, *etc.*) and commemorative activities by the survivors over the past twenty years, and in the past few years by political activists of the younger generations. I would say the process has been underway by citizens who care. The memory movement remains small, but it is noisy and very loud, influencing the memories of other atrocities in this land. The state has remained in total silence as ever, as if the massacre never occurred.

Notes

- 1 Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).
- 2 See 'Thongchai Winichakul and his book on the Thamassat University massacre', in *New Mandala*, 2 November 2021, available at: <<https://www.newmandala.org/nbseas-thongchai-winichakul-and-his-book-on-the-thamassat-university-massacre/>>.