

Review

The tangled vines of Thai politics

Chang Noi makes an illuminating trek into globalised Thailand

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JUNGLE BOOK: Thailand's Politics, Moral Panic, and Plunder, 1996-2008 by Chang Noi Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009, 255pp, 550 baht/\$18.95 ISBN 978-974-9511-63-3

While trekking in the thick jungles of the lower Northeast (so-called "Isan Tai") along the Thai-Cambodian border as an anti-government guerrilla 30 years back, I was always on the lookout for elephants' tracks. In those dense and dim surroundings populated by huge trees, closely packed undergrowth, winding creepers, lurking bears, snakes, centipedes, hornets, etc., as well as occasional government troops lying in ambush, one usually saw no farther than five to 10 metres, managed to move only one difficult step at a time, and got lost easily. Hence the advantage of inspecting and following a well-beaten elephant's track on which one could see farther, move faster, find one's bearings and avoid any dangers and enemies more easily. Of course, there was also an additional prospect of a meaty if rather chewy meal for our protein-deficient comrades at the end of the track.

The dozen years or so from 1996 to 2008, during which "Chang Noi" (pseudonym) published almost 400 articles in *The Nation* at the rate of around three per month, 64 of which are selected and included in the aptly-titled *Jungle Book*, have been a

jungle for Thailand indeed. The country has seen a series of unexpected and explosive political and economic upheavals, be it the devastating economic crisis, the promulgation of the political reform constitution, and the ensuing high tide of grass-roots protest movements against resource-transferring state development and corporate investment projects (1997-2001), the spectacular rise and fall of Thaksin's populist, authoritarian democratic regime (2001-2006), the terroristic assassination of nearly a score of grass-roots activists (2001-2005), the resurgence of Patani secessionist insurgency in the deep South (since 2004), the September 19, 2006 coup, the subsequent shocking if transitory return of military dictatorship, and the continuing widespread mobilisation and violent confrontation between the red-shirted supporters of Thaksin and his yellow-shirted opponents that together contributed partly to the removal from office of four prime ministers in a span of three years (2006-2008).

Throughout this chaotic and confusing, disorientating and intoxicating period, socio-economic division, mass politicisation, and class, regional and political polarisation has escalated to an unprecedented extent and degree in recent Thai history. With the themes of Thai politics sliding from "reform, openness and participation" to "authoritarianism, suppression and exclusion", and the ethos of Thai society turning from organisation, assertiveness and togetherness to disunity, violence, irrationality, helplessness and dysfunctionality (Jungle Book, pp 209, 221, 227), Chang Noi's sobering and informative, perceptive and incisive columns have steadily and consistently accompanied their readers to beat an analytical and critical track through the dense jungle that was Thailand under globalisation, mapping its wild and unknown terrain, identifying various snares, dead ends, and possible ways out, surveying and categorising its flora and fauna, tracing their feeding habits and histories, assessing the relative strength of their teeth and claws and the resultant jungle hierarchy, and predicting the change in their patterns of behaviour and chance of survival/domination. Arguably the best commentator in English on Thai society and politics today, Chang Noi provides the reading public with a rare, combined intellectual, moral and political compass, based on certain distinct features of his/her writings.

Firstly, the unique vantage point from which Chang Noi views Thai society and politics is that of a cultural half-breed who straddles two worlds. Being enough of an insider to listen to sympathetically and take seriously the voices of the local people, especially those on the margins of official and mainstream society (see for example, pp 94-101, 106-12, 121-24, 195-97, 220), Chang Noi is none the less also enough of an outsider to feel culturally alienated from, intellectually skeptical and critical of, as well as morally outraged at various aspects and fundamentals of prevailing Thainess. His/her Thai detractors may be tempted to fault Chang Noi on being too farang or not Thai enough to understand, in total disregard of their countless compatriots who have become even more farang than farangs themselves over the years, in both the best and worst senses of the term. I would argue on the contrary that Chang Noi does understand, but simply disagrees. So do many Thais, as a matter of fact.

Secondly, Chang Noi typically brings to bear on the issues discussed with an unusually high degree of historical awareness, perspective and knowledge, hence adroitly

connecting a wide range of seemingly unrelated incidents to an intelligible story line with roots, branches, and context. Basically, this is the story of a country in flux (see "Top piece: The elephant and the crisis"), in which local godfathers are giving way to transnational tycoons ("Fauna" and "Feeding habits"); environmentally-sustainable community ways of life are being replaced by resource-depleting globalised market economy ("Water and trees"); rigid and sterile official nationalist monoculture is being challenged by lively and diverse cultural blending and innovation ("Culture and custom" and "Birds, bees, and beasts"); and a bunch of domestic and international activists, intellectuals, and small ordinary people is valiantly standing up to overbearing government officials, corrupt politicians, armed men in uniform, political thugs, big business, and authoritarian state, in a quest for the rule of law, rights, justice, and power ("Tooth and claw", "Lords of the jungle", and "Tail piece: The great Bangkok novel").

In other words, to paraphrase Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Chang Noi has been bearing witness to solid Thainess that is steadily melting into air, and holy Thainess that is fast becoming profaned. In such a tortuous transition, one would normally hope against hope for an eventual happy ending but the unhappy truth is that none is in the offing. And Chang Noi commendably tells that uncomfortable truth with facts and honesty, commonly substantiated by the latest scholarship and researches in Thai studies.

Thirdly, Chang Noi is often a master of the seductively crisp, fast-paced, breathtaking, aphoristic style, one that is ideal for page-turning journalism and quite unlike an elaborate, convoluted discourse typical of academic treatises. When he/she so wishes, Chang Noi could write in such a manner that the sentences are short and precise; the account is concise and to the point; the metaphors are apt and striking (a dam as "thevada", the government ministers and senior bureaucrats as "Assembly of the Gods"); and the punch-lines are pungent and effective (a Thai-phile minister of culture's own name being Sanskrit-Chinese-Mon; "He thinks he can buy NGOs as easily as MPs"; or simply "Oh dear"). Spellbound by such a smooth-writing style, one can hardly resist the persuasion of Chang Noi's arguments.

And so, most of the times, one follows Chang Noi's beaten track to a wide opening in the jungle that is fully rounded and open-ended, where one can listen to all sides of the conflict, get a panoramic view of the situation and issues under consideration, and reflectively and deliberately ponder about the options, far and away from the narrowly-blinkered or one-eyed madding crowd. Thus, one can only hope that the opposing colour-attired and stick-wielding fanatics who have lost their bearings in the concrete jungle of Bangkok and other provinces lately, and hence laid waste to the Thai polity and economy callously, would for once heed the calls and cries of Chang Noi and find their ways back to sanity and tolerance, compromise and forgiveness, moderation and reform.

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