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### **A HISTORY OF THAILAND, 2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION**

BY CHRIS BAKER AND PASUK PHONGPAICHIT

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

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Reviewed by Timothy Hoare

“History was invented for the nation-state. It has the tendency to imagine the false unity of a self-same national subject evolving through time.” In this opening sentence of *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge, 2009), authors Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit identify what is often amiss in our overall assumptions about political entities, i.e., that somehow they have always been there, that naming them and drawing lines around them was simply a formality, and that history itself is but an indication of the progressive path that the given “nation” has been treading all along. In other words, “history” is what nations write to reassure themselves that they did not waste their day doing nothing.

*Thailand* challenges this popular misconception by presenting the evolutionary career of the nation-state of Siam (Thailand) as an eighteenth century idea that was intended to unite a collection of individual kingdoms and diverse ethnicities into a singular consciousness, not only by creating names and drawing lines, but through the carefully choreographed construction of a new monarchy whose legitimacy was tied not to bloodline (that ended with the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767), but to an ancient idea—the paternal king who ruled by an innate Buddhist virtue, born in thirteenth century Sukhothai and reborn in the new Bangkok Era that began in 1782. Most fascinating is the treatment of the colorful career of Chulalongkorn (the son of Mongkut, of Anna Leonowens fame), whose reign (1868–1910) spanned that globally pivotal “age of the nation-state”, in which Siam became *siwilai* (civilized), not unlike Meiji-era Japan, in an almost obsessive quest for all things Western, all things modern. Paternal or not, Buddhist virtue took something of a backseat to that late nineteenth century idea of monarch-as-heroic-history-maker, at least until the reign of the current king (1946- ), in whom the Sukhothai persona was truly resurrected.

The overall methodology is effective. By shifting back and forth between macro and micro lenses (albeit roughly at times), the authors present the historical events that took place juxtaposed against a more intimate examination of social forces that gave rise to them. The nation-state of Siam was built around an

essentially passive population composed of whoever happened to be living there at the time; but throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these discrete social forces became the history-makers. Particular focus is given to the Chinese who migrated into Siam as part of the early rice market. Creating the modern Siamese market economy almost singlehandedly, many arrived with nothing, and through connection, opportunity, intermarriage, and pure effort grew into some of the most powerful third-and-fourth generation business entities in Southeast Asia. How often do such social realities get lost in our quest for a singularly imagined and romanticized Sukhothai-era “Thai-ness” of the Thai? Chinese, Hmong, Lao, Malay, Indian, Tai (who themselves migrated from Southern China)—*all* of these are Thailand.

“Thai-ness” vs. social diversity—this is, I believe, another way of stating the authors’ thesis: is a nation-state a construct that imposes control and homogeneity on its population from the top down, or is a nation best defined from the bottom up—by the diversity and growth of its social components? The Kingdom of Thailand has been wrestling with this question for over two centuries.

If there is any singular criticism to bring to the table, it is directed not at the authors but at the ominous forces behind the Royal Institute System of English transliteration that is applied to the several Thai language words in this and numerous other texts. As one who has been Thai-literate for twenty-plus years, I have never encountered a more treacherously misleading treatment of pronunciation and spelling for Western non-speakers. There must be a better way. The sheer depth and scope of *A History of Thailand* would likely prove impractical for the high school and/or undergraduate student; nevertheless, an instructional methodology can benefit greatly from the authors’ overall treatment of the cultural construct of “nation-state,” be it the Kingdom of Thailand or elsewhere. Beyond the homogenous idea of the nation-state, beyond modern Thailand’s nine monarchs and the seemingly generic blur of her myriad twentieth century prime ministers, the underlying heterogeneous social forces that have shaped and continue to shape this remarkable culture are surprisingly universal as well as locally Thai. After all, if a history—anyone’s history—does not reveal to us something about ourselves as world citizens, then why recount it? *A History of Thailand* is history worth recounting and worth reading.

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