

Time for Thai studies



Last month, a long-time contributor to New Mandala confessed that he has “not been active in writing anything about Thai politics for a while. Part of it is because the situation is stagnant. Everything falls into the same narrative, again and again”.

Since then, I have turned those words in my mind at least one a week. For a while now, a number of Thai studies scholars have expressed to me a certain lethargy. This is not to mention activists and journalists who have, as of two months ago, been operating under the military government for more than four years.

Time, time, time. If I remember correctly, the first New Mandala article I ever read was [a summary](#) Andrew Walker compiled of a Lowy Institute report on the state of Thai studies in Australia way back in 2011. Feeling nostalgic for the site’s beginnings in candid (perhaps sometimes [too candid?](#)) blog-style posts, I thought I might reflect on the fly about *time* as it relates to the production and consumption of academic writing. Evidently, I have much time on my hands.

My musings about time peaked a week-and-a-half ago, when media and pundits leapt [at](#)

[suggestions](#) from General Prayuth Chan-ocha that the coronation could affect the date of the country's next elections—a suggestion that was simultaneously an outrage and utterly unsurprising. Was the junta leader for real? When will elections finally happen?

Of course, we should talk about and document the signals of political elites. But I couldn't help but wonder how much time we who follow Thai politics spend speculating about the future and the stability of the present regime. This is not to say that Thai studies scholars do not examine micropolitical phenomena that take place *tuk wan*, or that they have not productively turned back to the past to uncover seemingly lost information or to consider old stories from new perspectives.

But there is certainly a 'genre' of articles, book chapters—and indeed, New Mandala regularly publishes content in this vein—devoted to dissecting apparent tremors in the current regime (signs of the regime's desperation, cracks in elite pacts, signals that the tide of public opinion is turning etc.). While these tremors are sometimes compelling, I would venture that the threshold for a 'tremor' in Thai studies is a great deal lower than in other mainland-Southeast Asian studies communities. We dissect tides of change and contingent ripples, but also sometimes sparsely-substantiated drops in the pond.

Why are we so consumed with the future? A silly-sounding question, and I immediately sound like a wet-blanket for asking. Much political writing is by convention predictive and we do need to prepare for the future after all. Still, a deeper consideration of *why*—or better yet, *why we should be*—could productively orient the questions we ask.

I would argue that speculating over the regime's future is encouraged by the difficult opaqueness Thai political scholars regularly confront. The political situation in Thailand, not least its cacophony of prohibitive laws on expression, mean there is always much that we cannot know and about which we cannot write. When unexpected events occur—the arrest of Buddha Issara and the sudden reemergence of the death penalty in Thailand are recent examples—we have some evidential bases from which to extrapolate causes and significance, but there is always a degree of uncertainty.

Under the conditions, we cannot help but be faced with questions and make do with rumour. Uncertainty naturally begets hypothesising. Anna Simons has written on the blurring of rumour and knowledge on the brink of political 'turning points' (though, in this case, civil war):

In contrast to the expatriates, the Somalis I knew were usually very precise about couching everything they suspected to be rumour as rumour and not as 'a' (possible) truth or 'the' truth. Rather, information was usually offered as the best possible explanation for making sense of a situation according to whatever a person happened to have heard up until that particular moment. Information was never considered unimpeachable or fixed. On the contrary, information was suspect for at least two reasons: there was no centralised credible news media in Somalia, and far too often the government engaged in the

dissemination of disinformation.

While coverage of *certain issues* in Thai politics can never be as rigorous as we would like, I tend to agree with Simons that rumours are worth scrutinising as political phenomena to be explained in and of themselves, as much as for what they might (or might not) tell us about what is to come. But Simons cautions that the over-conflation of speculation and analysis can spiral, leading itself to political effects:

Even more significant was that most rumours only increased tension as people increasingly tried to determine the roots of the tension assumed to be spawning the rumours. In other words, the search for causes for rumours produced more rumours.

Many Thai studies scholars are acutely aware that writing is bound up in the production of hope. Many of us are activist-scholars, or at least are sympathetic to resistance that takes place against the regime. We may have friends who protest, who have been arrested, or who have been exiled for challenging the status quo. We know that there is a public appetite for arguments that suggest the regime rests on a cliff's edge (one only needs to look at the New Mandala articles that get the most hits).

Many of us recognise that resistance to the status quo is presently dispersed and largely piecemeal, that there is much to suggest that large swaths of the population either accept or are indifferent to military rule, and that much of the population is devoted to the monarchy and implicitly supports lese-majeste. We can see that the NCPO has made strides in entrenching its tutelage via the constitution, and either legislative and institutional means, in ways that will linger whether or not elections happen in February 2019.

But I suspect many of us feel deeply that something important would be lost if we did not emphasise the moments and phenomena that suggest change is not merely possible, but immanent. Sustaining hope is a goal towards which some scholars legitimately orient their work, one which another Anna (Tsing) imparts with passion:

How shall we re-open mystery in our times? Instead of inscribing structures of self-fulfilment, we might immerse ourselves in the drama of uncertainty ... What seems at first a minor skirmish may yet determine history. Since we don't know how things will turn out, it's worth attending to states of emergence—and emergency.

But I wonder if the other side of the coin is lethargy, when we find that we have been tracking apparent tremors and minor skirmishes—"the same narrative, again and again"—for four years and counting. I'm not sure about this one, since to write for long periods about the entrenchment of

military rule is not very enjoyable either (more of "the same narrative, again and again"). Still, I wonder if one effect of Prayuth constantly delaying elections is to leave us distracted in incessant questioning over when elections will take place.

The Thai regime seems to regularly get away with acts comparable to policies enacted in neighbouring countries, but which seem to draw much more attention in those other area studies communities (for example, the drafting of repressive media control laws last year). There are of course many causes for this. One minor but not wholly insignificant reason may be that when the future never seems to come, we are unmoored from a regular experience of time's flow, losing interest in the present—ceasing, sometimes, to write.

How many of us have, at some point or another, found ourselves implicitly awaiting a certain event—whether elections, or the ending of a reign? How can we work to remember that the rest is far more than filler—that there is an urgency in the present worthy of passionate study whatever the future holds?