

Self-Censorship in Thailand: ‘Truth is Pain’

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During the suppression of the Red Shirts in 2010, many Thai people had to unfriend their virtual friends on Facebook. Without any actual and immediate political interests, political conflict in the virtual world shows that political discussion based on opposite beliefs leads to termination of friendship. This occurs not only in the virtual world but also in the private sphere, where parent, father, mother, daughter, son, and friend may be in a state of political enmity. From the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century till the present in the ghost of Carl Schmitt’s “friend and enemy”, “the political” haunts all aspects of Thai society; however, “the spectre of the political” tends to appear globally, i.e., in the “culture wars” evident in the political polarization now taking place in the United States. Meanwhile, conformity is still the ethos of Thai society, so the choice of silencing oneself is very rational. In Thailand, there are three things that Thai people say that should not be discussed: religion, love and politics. All of these topics lead to endless arguments and conflicts, inevitably.

“Saying something profits us only a couple of pennies, keeping silent yields many ounces of gold” is a Thai proverb that is very relevant, especially in the current political situation where political polarization prevails, because introducing a political position or idea to the public may lead to condemnation and conflict. The tactic of “silence is golden” is certainly a choice that avoids confrontation in the present environment of political polarization where risks are very high – economically, politically and socially. Although risk is rather subjective and depends upon social class, emotional disturbance and anxiety can have unpleasant consequences, especially in interpersonal relationships within certain classes, groups, and friends. Even though the decision not to communicate a controversial message or one opposing the establishment and conventional values is voluntary, the social pressure from various groups is very strong. To put it in economic terms, as the Thai language would say, no one wants to break one’s own rice-pot. In Thai society, where most of the Thai elite tend to know each other and are related either by kinship, marriage, alma maters, colleagues, and so forth, the truth of being a black sheep is costly. Like Thai chess, all the figures on the board need to be connected in order to protect one another. Therefore, to gain victory, the figures must move as a bloc. Very few people can be truly by themselves. A person consists of a constellation of selves in networks with others.

As political participation and political belief that “everyone should be allowed to express his or her own voice and opinion”, as well as political mobilization in Thailand, political engagement is another dimension of political confrontation since there is no need for anyone to refrain from confirming his or her political opinion. To present one’s political position by expressing a political opinion is a way to affirm oneself in the emerging proto-liberal culture, as if one confesses to confirm one’s self as well as assessing *the truth of and in one’s self*. Meanwhile, censorship is the practice of the other who prohibits someone from expressing something. To put it differently, without freedom embodied in the notion of the individual, one cannot find the truth in oneself and the truth of oneself. Self-censorship is the practice of the self to affirm itself without reference to the other. In this respect, self-censorship is a form of self-control that emerges from a rational calculation of behavior within the boundaries of one’s own cultural code. However, self-censorship is limited within the space of “telling the truth” much more than “do” and “don’t do” questions, discretion, manners, and so forth. Self-censorship,

therefore, occurs in the condition that one can say something that one believes to be the truth, but for whatever reason, one decides not to express it.

In liberal democratic countries, there is a general belief that dictatorship does not want people spreading and assessing the truth. Dictatorship is afraid of truth. Undoubtedly, the example of the classified documents released by Wikileaks and Julian Assange makes many think about the old fashioned concept of “the Reason of the State” even more. In the tradition of Thai Theravada Buddhism, truth is an eternal or absolute concept. But Thai people tend to twist it satirically instead: “those who speak the truth will die”. The history of truth-telling has thus been a risky business for thousands of years. Whose truth is it anyway? In Thailand, the hard-core truth, particularly the political one, belongs to a certain social class, the top echelon of the society. On March 21, 2012, during a discussion on political reconciliation in Thailand, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who was the leader of the coup in 2006 and later on the President of the Political Reconciliation Committee, when asked by General Sanan Kachornprasart that as the coup leader he had to tell the truth about ‘who was behind the 19 September 2006 coup’, the leader of coup replied that he “had been trained to pay loyalty to the nation, this is not the question that is supposed to be asked”. Then he proceeded to say:

Even after one dies some types of questions, will never be answered.....on certain issues when the time comes the truth will unveil itself. Even if one knows the truth now, that truth may not help the country move forward. And if it is revealed today, will any good come of it? Do we really know that what everyone says is fact. This is not really necessary. At this moment what one wants is to have love and unity. I have one principle and keep on telling the members of the committee that we have to forget about the past, and think about the present in order to construct the future. If we do not organize all this into different boxes, it will be very difficult for us to move forward.

If one *twists* General Sonthi Boonyaratglin’s reply to be more explicit with Buddhist overtones, knowing about the Higgs boson will not lead one to *nirvana*. To put it at the mundane level, the will to truth cannot guide us to happiness. Generally, the statement such as “knowing this is not particularly useful” is rather common in everyday conversation. So this statement is different from what historical deniers in the West might say. It is a statement that obliterate individual and social memory, because Buddhist reincarnation lays down a blank slate of no-memory. Yet an unknown self must be reinvented in every new chapter of life, rather like what happens at the beginning of a new dynasty. No one has the ability to know one’s previous lives, unlike in the Judeo-Christian tradition where original sin impels the individual to seek salvation. Remembering things in the past and the deeds of others so that the retribution can take place in the name of justice is a way to implant guilt and angst on social memory. Violence, guilt and trauma pave the way to the creation of a memory of persecution that will make one strong enough to drive the nation forward. Meanwhile, forgetting and remembering are vital for the logic of the nation-state. One cannot remember without also forgetting.

However, reducing and minimizing the traumatic experience of the suppression by the state makes the whole process of forgetting and remembering of the nation-state become

something paradoxical for the victims and their allies. At the same time, every Thai who grows up with the Thai national anthem in which the last two stanzas signal the demands of the nation-state -- “sacrificing one’s blood for the nation, celebrating the increasingly immense glory in the triumph of the nation, bravo!!!” -- forgets that the highest demand of the nation-state is the sacrifice of life itself. The nation-state always points to everyone, as if to say, “I want your blood, you have to die for me”, otherwise, the nation-state will not survive. In the liberal ethos, no one wants to publicize the notion that his/her state is a sort of vampiric state that can suck the blood of its citizens at the last instance, when a threat has to be eliminated. As the Thai would say, ‘inside information should not be revealed to the outside, and outside information should not be brought inside’.

Similarly, the question addressed to the military coup leader made him uncomfortable, and in fact he thought it was very *improper* to raise such a question especially in public, because he believed that he had done something good for the nation, although many years of political experiences had proved that his military coup and Five Steps Political Plan of the junta and their allies failed to eliminate Thaksin from the Thai political scene. As the general said, he had been trained to be wholeheartedly loyal and to work for the Thai nation-state where transparency and the accessibility of information are not in the vocabulary of professional soldiers and bureaucrats. It is the duty of officers to keep the secrets of the state and the activities of the high ranking officers. Who ordered him, and them, to stage the coup? The answer is un-nameable. The truth about the military coup in 2006 is there, but is there any point for the people to know what was going on? Does truth make Thailand prosper? For the general, truth does not make Thailand progress; in fact truth will put the country in jeopardy . Thus, for the Thai elites and many ordinary citizens, the important question is “how to conduct oneself” and how to manage the forgetting, not “what” had happened.

His answer is nothing new in the actions of Thai elites. On January 23, 2011, the director of Special Branch Police, Lieutenant General Tritos Ronritvichai, who gave an interview to the newspaper *Prachachart Thurakit*, said that those who have the privilege of reading top-secret information of Special Branch Police are only people who have a lot of *bun* (the accumulation of merit). In other words, if one does not belong to the top echelon of Thai society, one cannot have access to this top-secret information. However, these statements do not come from the director himself, but in fact from one of his staff who expresses these revealing ideas to him, which makes him smile and laugh. The statements that were uttered by a junior police officer who was involved in a problem when Special Branch police were accused by journalists of receiving information from journalists or even copying news from journalists. But the police demonstrate that the “information” in the possession of journalists as compared to the Special Branch police are in a completely different league. The information they are handling is only for the top elites of Thai society, not for the masses who do not have much *bun*. How can one who with less *bun* have a claim on the top information? In the cognitive structure of the officer, it is simply impossible. Hierarchy determines the levels of truth-control in Thai politics. Truth is distributed differently to different classes, so truth can be shared only if one comes from certain class.

If one checks the history of the Thai elites that have been involved in high politics, such as military coups, military suppressions, and secret missions, only a few people ever reveal what really happened, even in their memorial cremation books. In fact, in those memorial cremation books there are no ‘hard-core truths’ about what they had done in performing their duty for the nation, because those types of books are reserved mainly for the good deeds of the deceased. These books are really eulogy. Writing in the funeral-book is a way of communicating to others

the memory of how good this person is, never how terrible this person is. The bad is certainly there, but it has been censored. So this kind of publication has nothing to do with the storage of knowledge, especially for historians. To achieve a state of goodness, one has to learn to censor the bad or unpleasant deeds or experiences. To begin with, one has to censor oneself.