As we suggested in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (co-edited with Peter A. Jackson, 2010), the study of Siam/Thailand has remained largely isolated from critical analysis inflected by postcolonial theory. Only a handful of Thai scholars have been drawn to this field of inquiry in recent years, among them the late Nopphorn Prachakul, professor of French literature at Bangkok’s Thammasat University. Nopphorn warned his readers in an introductory text on postcolonialism for Thai MA students against the standard knee-jerk reaction: “That’s not relevant to us. We Thai have never been anyone’s colony.” (Nopphorn, n.d., 156, quoted in Jackson, 2010, 38).

Rachel V. Harrison

**Disturbing Conventions**

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Left and right: Red Shirt demonstrators, Bangkok, April-May 2010. Photographs courtesy of authors.

From my own perspective of engagement with contemporary Thai cultural studies and comparative literature, there are several key projects which suggest themselves as a logical progression from the ground laid by *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*. One is the task, currently near completion, of bringing to the fore new frames of theoretically engaged analysis in the discussion of Thai literature – both traditional and modern. See *Disturbing Conventions: New Frames of Analysis in Thai Literary Studies* (forthcoming). This edited collection draws together the work of a younger generation of Thai scholars, for the most part trained abroad in English or comparative literature, who have returned to work in the Thai academy and to consider Thai literary texts in ways more commonly defined as inflected by “Western” theory. See, for example, Suradech Chotudompant on cosmopolitanism and its limits; Janit Feangfu on the negotiation of rural and urban identities; Soroon Sukolok on deconstruction and paratexts; Lakkhana Punwecha’s exploration of deliberately subversive feminist analytical perspectives; and Chusak Pattarakulvanit’s feminist reading of persecution in a modern literary classic *The Judgement*. Their chapters deliberately “read literature against the grain”, to quote a phrase (in Thai, em ma on neuro) made popular by the collection’s most acclaimed Thai literary analyst, Chusak Pattarakulvanit, from his book of the same title, published in 2002. These contributions effectively move beyond the traditionalist, conservative concerns of the academy of the sort cautioned against by Nopphorn Prachakul in his promotion of postcolonial analytical frameworks: concerns which have, until relatively recently, foreclosed the use of “Western” theory in the study of Thai literature.

In order to move this argument along, the concept and definition of theory as “Western” requires critical analysis. As with the Ambiguous Allure project, *Disturbing Conventions* queries what is fully implied by the term “Western” theory in the cultural studies context. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, “Western” theory is itself neither static nor uncontested. It is also not beyond being able to deconstruct its own premises, as Bhabha’s work on the limitations of Western thinkers to engage meaningfully with cultural Otherness keenly communicates in “The Commitment to Theory” (2004, 46). And given the hybrid nature of all cultural identities which postcolonial critics such as Bhabha and Said (1993) highlight so effectively, how can “Western” theory fail to be in some sense relevant to the study of cultural production in Siam/Thailand given the country’s semi-colonial relations with the West?

The impact of such cultural hybrids is clearly exemplified by the intense links between the development of modern Thai prose fiction in the early years of the twentieth century and the popularity of Victorian literature among Siamese authors and readers in a context where translation, reproduction and reinvention were intensively and textically intertwined in the production of the earliest examples of Thai novels and short stories. Thisaeng Chaithut’s chapter on Siamese literary entanglements with the imperial West in *Disturbing Conventions* discusses this crucial cultural trait.
Wherefore postcolonial theory in contemporary Thai cultural studies?

Much work remains to be done in subsequent conference papers, articles, and future books (and urgently so) to perform the necessary incisive analysis of Thailand’s recent protest movements, from the angle of their engagement with popular cultural forms. Here is the theoretical input of Mikhail Bakhtin on campervan, Bhavija on “the location of culture” and the complete edition of Derrida’s seminars and lectures recently made available in English translation by Geoffrey Bennington (2009 and 2011), provide fertile inspiration as a starting point from which to develop deeper understandings of the postcolonial significance of popular protest in contemporary Thailand.

Perhaps this is an intellectual project for which Nopphorn Prachakul—whom the edited collection Disturbing Conventions is dedicated—might have had some sympathy. Nopphorn’s piece in the volume, posthumously translated into English, deals with issues of ethnic culture in the modern novel Luk Iuan (A Child of the North East), by Khamphun Buthawat. Nopphorn’s is a timely reminder of the complexity of the relationship between the Iban (North Eastern) regional identity and its relevant others, be they Chinese, Vietnamese or (Bangkok) Thai.

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Notes
1 As veteran Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri has recently reminded us, the concept of Thai uniqueness, with its origins in all areas of academia in Thailand, from political science to law, sociology, history, linguistics, literature and in the field of Thai Studies in particular, where it has been deployed as an almost foolproof means of preserving the status quo and legitimacy of resistance to reform. See Charnvit Kasetsiri, ‘Khwam phlai ton kwai khun’ uniqueness of Thailand?’, in Mitchell Online, 13 December 2011. http://tinyurl.com/77obk3c (accessed 5-1-2012).

References


Thak Chaloemtiarana. 2009b. “Khru Liam’s Khwam moi phypoebat (1915) and the problems of Thai modernity”, Southeast Asia Research, 17 (3):


as does Thanapol Limpiyarat’s on semi-coloniality, print capitalism and the reconfiguration of cultural authority. And my own contribution draws on Thak Chaloemtiarana’s several published articles on the work of early Thai novelist Khru Liam (2007, 2009a and 2009b) to highlight similar features in its discussion of the relationship between Khru Liam’s: 1916 novel The Divine Nymphs (Nang Neramit) and Victorian gothic adventure fiction such as that penned by Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle, Marie Corelli and others: a relationship colored by fantasy, desire, anxiety, mimicry and, above all, power.

It is this critical prevalence of power that further makes relevant a deployment of the postcolonial lens through which to scrutinize contemporary Thai cultural studies, beyond that of its intense historical connections with Victoriana. Historians such as Kasian Tejapira (2001), Thongchai (1994, 2000a and 2000b, and 2010) and Loos (2006 and 2010) have demonstrated the extent to which the Bangkok elite adopted and adapted aspects of British and French colonial policy as an effective strategy for the assertion of control over the peripheries of the Siamese state. This project of power continues to manifest itself in the contemporary politics-cultural context via the dominance of urban elite discourses over the rural provinces.

The raw political struggles that have played out in Bangkok’s street protests over the past five years reveal how demonstrators from Thailand’s rural North and North Eastern regions express their sense of disenfranchisement through distinct cultural forms.