

Preface

The Making of the Book

This book has been one of my life's missions. It is about an atrocity that took place on Wednesday morning, October 6, 1976, in Bangkok, an event that Thailand has tried not to remember but that I cannot forget. Since then, not a single day has passed without my thinking about that morning.

This book took too many years to finish. In many ways, it has been a shadow following my intellectual journey and academic career. As a historian, my dream has always been to tell a "good" story, that is, an engaging or absorbing one that is provocative and imaginative. To me, a good story commemorating my lost friends and dedicated to them must reckon with the cruelty of Thai history as well. Given my involvement in the massacre, I resisted writing a book that focused on an explanation of what happened because some might see such a book as an excuse for my actions (and inaction) on that day. I preferred to let history judge. Instead, I decided to undertake a subtler, more difficult path, one that demanded my best efforts in research, thinking, and imagination. The result was my first book *Siam Mapped* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1994). I still wanted to write about the massacre, though, which I knew would be just as difficult. But I did not know how.

As the years passed by, my hope for truth and justice about the October 6 massacre that I had witnessed faded, and the silence surrounding it increasingly troubled me. Thailand did not seem to care about its past. People tried to bury it. Justice was irrelevant. I strongly believe, however, that the silence about the massacre speaks loudly about Thai society in ways that go beyond the incident itself: about truth and justice, how Thai society copes with conflict and its ugly past, about the ideas of reconciliation, the culture of impunity, and rights, and about the rule of law in the country. All this made me want even more to write about October 6.

The waves of memory studies in the 1990s in relation to commemorations of the Holocaust helped me understand my experience and the memory of the October 6 massacre. Reading other studies helped me personally, too, in coping with the painful past. In 1996, on the twentieth anniversary of the massacre, I initiated a commemoration of the massacre in Bangkok. I wrote an article for the occasion, which was published in English in 2002. To avoid seeming to be an excuse for my past, the article focused on the memories of the event rather than what happened and who did what on that day. Many people encouraged me to turn the article into a book.

After more research and reflection, I realized that the article had covered less than half of the whole story. More stories were there for the telling about the changing memories of the massacre. The more I thought about it, the more it became my life's mission to finish. By 2006, my ideas and research had been largely sorted out. Then Thailand plunged into political crisis. My book project was caught up in the turmoil given that the former radicals of the 1970s played many parts in the downward spiral of democracy. I put the book aside to see how the story of the former radicals would unfold. The unfinished manuscript sat idly on my desk for some years. Sadly, after the dust had settled in 2010 Bangkok had seen more death and yet another massacre. A few years later, I saw the ending of the book. I had a chance to reconceptualize the entire project in early 2015, and found the urge to finish the book too strong to contain. I gradually lost interest in my regular teaching duties because my mission was to write this book. I decided to retire from Wisconsin in 2016 so that I would have the time to get it done.

Although the excitement of the cultural studies of memory has been winding down, my personal mission remains: to leave something in this world to remember my lost friends by and to bring them the justice they deserve no matter how long it takes. Part of me is still the political activist who organizes memorial activities, as I have done several times over the years. Part of me is the historian who wants to leave a scholarly contribution in the hope that it will be taken down from its shelf from time to time so that the October 6 massacre will be known for years to come. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to erect a memorial to friends in the lasting form of a good book, something that is very close to my heart as a historian.

That privilege, nevertheless, comes with a burden—writing this book was very difficult for me in many ways. Anyone who knows

Thailand will realize that the draconian *lèse majesté* law (Article 112 of Thailand's Criminal Code) could pose a problem given the dubious role of the monarchy in the incident. But possible trouble is beyond my control given that the law has been applied arbitrarily anyway. All I can do is to try to walk a fine line in my expression. The passing of King Bhumibol in 2016 and the growing deification of him posthumously, however, did not affect the writing or timing of the publication of this book in any way. The most difficult aspects were personal and intellectual. The emotional toll was beyond words. It is probably the main reason why the project has taken so long, for I needed many breaks along the way, sometimes for months at a time, before I could take up my writing again.

Intellectually, the contradiction of myself as the writing subject has been a major difficulty and challenge. I did not want to write a personal memoir, whether in a melancholy mode, a heroic mode, a guilt-ridden mode, or a vengeful mode, let alone cast blame on other people. As a historian, I wanted to write a critical study of the changing memories of the atrocity. However, I am not an outsider of the historical subject I am writing about, nor an objective historian of the event I study. Even my acts of studying and writing about the incident have been a part of changing memories of the event. In a nutshell, the author's position is problematic. I am a protagonist of the event I was trying to write about as a scholar. The solution was not merely carefulness and self-critique. There was no easy middle path or compromise either. The only way to navigate the space between being a witness or participant and being a historian or analyst is to make it productive and original, allowing the tensions and paradoxes within the author's position to play themselves out in the thinking and writing of the book, producing lines of inquiry, questions, analyses, and interpretations that are unique and insightful.

To anyone who might say that this book is not purely academic, so be it. Part of my soul is in this book. Nevertheless, for anyone who thinks that academic and activist lives cannot be combined, I beg to differ. The result in this case is a unique genre, an academic work with a touch of memoir. The traces of dual authorship are manifest in many forms throughout the writing process and in the text of this book. It is in the story, the tone, the voices, even in the use of pronouns—we or they, ours or theirs, and so on—not only when I discuss the perpetrators, but also the victims, who are sometimes friends, other times companions but also the subjects of my critical

observation. In this book, pronouns are mostly reflexive rather than a calculated device.

Despite the unconventional approach due to the tension in the author's position, nonetheless, I hope readers will find this book to be the serious and critical reflections of a historian about an incident he witnessed and the memory changes he has been part of. Writing this book has been a fulfilling experience. I may not ever be satisfied with this book because the atrocity and the loss of friends are beyond my ability to express. But I am grateful that I have finally been able to tell the world the story that it should not forget. I trust the memory of the massacre will continue as long as this book remains on a shelf somewhere in this world.

Thongchai
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