

Chang Noi, *Jungle Book: Thailand's Politics, Moral Panic, and Plunder, 1996–2008*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 256 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-63-3

This book consists of a selection of more than five dozen columns published in *The Nation* from 1996, the beginning of the end of the economic boom, until mid-2008. A new constitution came into force in 1997 that created a strong, elected executive, a space that was soon occupied by Thaksin Shinawatra who led his Thai Rak Thai party to two successful national elections. Thaksin's government became destabilized by street protests instigated by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2005 and continued in 2006. In a move that took the country by surprise, the military launched a coup in September 2006, dissolved the parliament, and commenced writing yet another constitution that came into force in 2007. The fiery populist politics conducted by the PAD, the toppling of two governments, the occupation of Government House in late 2008, and the closure of Bangkok's two airports in December of that year fall outside the book's purview.

This background is helpful, because the pseudonymous Chang Noi does not intend to explain these larger events that made Thailand headline news around the world. Instead, the columns delve into what was happening behind the news. While readers may recognise Kipling overtones in the book's title, in fact as they turn the pages they will find

themselves facing frank comment about Thai public life, especially its seamier and more manipulative aspects. Late in the book, outraged at the extrajudicial killings of supposed drug dealers, Chang Noi opines that it is not the rule of law but the law of the jungle that has allowed the murderers to escape prosecution. Indeed, the cover of the book displays 'Tiger in Tropical Storm (Surprise!)', a painting by Henri Rousseau. The striped predator is shown creeping through the lush green foliage with its fangs bared and a paw on the back of Little Elephant (Chang Noi). Possibly Little Elephant is charmed and will escape the lawsuits pursuing it. We learn in the book that as the financial crisis unfolded in 1997 and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's political fortunes deteriorated, his wife was advised by a fortune teller to avert disaster by carrying a toy elephant.

The columns are arranged by topic around the jungle theme. 'Fauna' offers thumbnails of the shift from the godfathers of old to the rich plutocrats who dominate politics today. 'Monks and Gangsters in Thai Politics' (1997) in this section is arguably the most concise and profound four pages ever written about Thai leadership. 'Feeding Habits', featuring Chang Noi's corruption curve, is about scandals and money politics. 'Water and Trees' follows the campaigns against the construction of dams and laments the degradation to the environment resulting from the failure to assess the social and economic value of forests. 'Culture and Custom' is a mixed bag of smart analyses of nationalism provoked by

external controls in response to the 1997 financial crisis, censorship of the royal biography and the use of English in public discourse. 'Birds, Bees, and Beasts' exposes the hypocrisy and moral panic that has accompanied the rise of sexual explicitness in public culture. 'Tooth and Claw' relates some of the more spectacular political murders in Thailand's modern history. 'Lords of the Jungle', the last section, registers Chang Noi's despair at the depths to which Thai politics have fallen. Authoritarianism, suppression and exclusion are the distinctive features of politics in the 2000s. Some of the book's most polemical discussions are to be found in the final pages.

Chang Noi declares that rather than deal with the big topics directly, the columns will identify significant but scarcely noticed changes in Thai society and its view of itself. So-called sensitive topics are deftly handled by the techniques of a ventriloquist. Critical perspectives are put into the mouths of others such as the social critic Sulak Sivaraksa, the sometimes banned *Fa Dieo Kan* magazine, and characters in mock dialogues. But what is Chang Noi's own view of Thai politics and society? For one thing, specific ministries, departments, and offices rather than an abstract 'state' or 'bureaucracy' are held accountable for mismanaged or failed policies. For another, there is surprisingly little about political parties, because they do not explain the dynamics of Thai politics. In contrast to many *farang* and Thai political scientists, it would seem that

Chang Noi does not have much faith that Thai parties express the popular will in any effective way.

The Democrats had a chance to remake Thai politics when they came to power in 1997, but they failed to recognize that the boom in the 1980s and early 1990s had created new social groups that had irrevocably changed the Thai social order. The huge rural population had become more politically savvy, and the middle class began to clamour for more say in the political process. The unmet demand for a new politics laid the foundations for the rise of populism and the demagoguery of the PAD, which is not a party but a movement. The most successful party of recent times, Thai Rak Thai headed by Thaksin Shinawatra with his powerful media businesses, operated like a political cartel by brooking no opposition, pushing rivals to the sidelines, and redistributing resources and profits among its members. Not to be missed are 'How to Buy a Country' (2000) and 'How to Sell a Country' (2006). 'Bulldog on a Leash, or Another Nail in Democracy's Coffin' (2008) highlights the PAD's visceral nationalism, middle-class membership, and contempt for rural people.

Does Chang Noi have good peripheral vision? Does it miss anything as it stomps around in the jungle or up a hill for a broader view of the landscape? The landscape is mostly the cityscape, although from time to time Chang Noi does venture out of the capital into the provinces. In 'Drinking with Mr. Progress' (2001) Chang Noi is in the

countryside sampling illicit moonshine, but the discussion quickly swings back to the centre, and we are again in the world of cartels and monopoly capitalism as Mr. Progress squeezes out the competition, minimises tax, and streamlines production to reduce costs. Except in a few instances, the book views the countryside is a side trip on the way to the largest primate city in the world where all the action takes place.

‘Politics and the Stars’ (2007) reports that two generals and the wife of a third visited a shrine in the northern city of Chiang Mai after the September 2006 coup in search of an assessment of the coup group’s political fortunes. There is not that much about formal religion in the columns, but spiritism and animism catch Chang Noi’s sharp eye as does the influential astrologer and spirit medium, Varin Buaviratler. Most politicians are gamblers who need to hedge their bets, so astrology and other forms of divination are essential in a book about Thai politics.

The partisan and violent politics that beset Thailand today have their roots in earlier periods. Chang Noi traces those roots back to 1932 and the end of the absolute monarchy. The crude pragmatism and egotism that characterise Thai society are explained in part by ‘the heavy legacy of absolutism and dictatorship in the society’s history’ (p. 196). Readers puzzled as to why the policies and actions of government during the prime ministership of Thaksin Shinawatra caused such resentment, or why fear of the countryside and the peasantry preached by the PAD’s Sondhi

Limthongkul attracts such widespread support need look no further than the wry, astute and passionate columns reproduced in this book.

Craig J. Reynolds

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