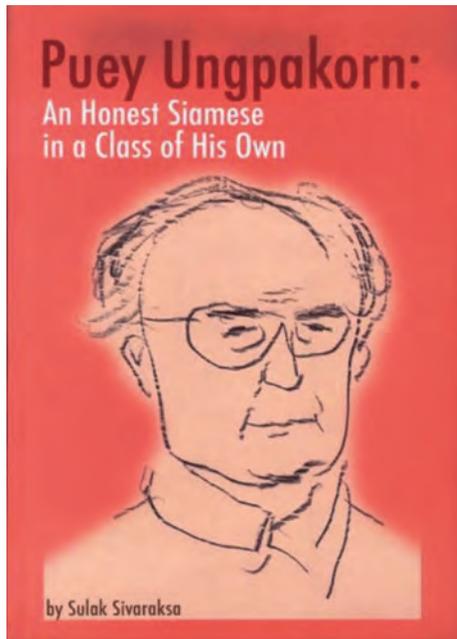


*Puey Ungpakorn: An Honest Siamese in a Class of His Own*, by Sulak Sivaraksa. Bangkok: Foundation for Children Publishing House, 2014. ISBN: 9786163070364 (soft). 475 Baht.



There is a growing perception that Thailand's modern history suffers from a dearth of heroes. Thais hunger for heroes, as Chinese people hungered for religion in the People's Republic of China (PRC). There has been a recent movement to create new heroes from Thailand's modern history, through a series of seminars, articles, books and study trips to celebrate the legacy of Pridi Banomyong, Jit Phumisak and Dr. Puey Ungpakorn. The 100th anniversary of Puey's birth was celebrated in 2014 with a series of events and activities at landmark sites throughout the country, reaching out to all sectors of society. The English edition of Sulak Sivaraksa's memoir, *Puey Ungpakorn: An Honest Siamese in a Class of His Own*, published in 2014, belongs to this genre.

The people of Thailand are not alone in their quest to invent heroes to enrich national consciousness. Following the recent death of former President S.R. Nathan in August 2016, the Singapore Government has begun a propaganda campaign to glorify the late president. Reacting to a meager turnout at his funeral, a Singapore newspaper, *The Straits Times*, ran repeated stories praising Nathan as a "hero" of the republic. Unlike in Singapore, the Thai movement to create heroes is not a state-centered initiative. In Singapore the movement to ennoble Nathan represents the government's attempt to create a place in history for one of their own. Nathan, who enjoyed a distinguished career as head of the Security Intelligence Department (SID), Singapore's equivalent of the CIA, later became President of the Republic (Head of State) and was the perfect embodiment of the state-centered actor. In contrast, the movement to create heroes in Thailand is a society-centered initiative that came in the wake of the toppling of Thailand's electoral democracy by a succession of military coups, the last of which installed a military government in 2014. Spearheaded by student groups, leading academics, social critics, religious activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the movement to edify the legacy of Pridi Banomyong, Jit Pumisak and Dr. Puey emanates from outside the state sector, and is dominated by NGOs.

The celebration of commoner heroes in the kingdom's modern history, as opposed to royal heroes embodied in the ancient chronicles, reflects the dynamics of class antagonism between state and society and commoner and royalty. It is society centered in the spirit of social revolution as opposed to palace coups and state-sponsored counter-revolutions. Embodying an emancipatory social impulse these new heroes are claimed

by civil society to fortify itself against the resurrection of an oppressive militarist state apparatus. Against this backdrop, Sulak has written a wonderful book on Puey that is intended to introduce Puey to the Thai public: he is a man of integrity and a paragon of virtue amidst a sea of corruption, dishonesty, selfishness and personal aggrandizement in Thai public life. Establishing the image of Puey as a knight on a white horse, come to save Thai public officials from their moral and personal failings, Sulak masterfully uses a simple, but very effective, narrative technique – the anecdote.

Through a series of anecdotes, Sulak establishes the many different aspects of Puey's character: as a student, teacher, academic, philanthropist, intellectual and public official. Like his previous book, titled *The Powers That Be: Pridi Banomyong through the rise and fall of Thai democracy*, this book is as much about Sulak as it is about Puey, as Puey is observed through Sulak's eyes through his numerous encounters with the author. Sulak judges his audience well. For the average Thai, who reads fewer lines per year than his ASEAN counterparts, the anecdotal approach is probably more effective than an academic, analytical biography. Besides employing a simple storyteller's anecdotal narrative technique, Sulak has deliberately written a short book, at just 161 pages, which is only slightly longer than Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Addressing men of power and practical affairs rather than scholars, Machiavelli (1469-1527) wrote *The Prince* in the form of a manual, on how to be a ruler, rather than as an abstract philosophical treatise. Indeed, clarity and simplicity are the hallmarks of both books, while another commonality is that they speak to the issue of public morality.

It is apparent that Sulak is using this book in support of the broader society-centered NGO movement's crusade against the corruption and immorality of state actors, including party politicians, military-cum-bureaucrat officials and holders of public office. In Thailand's corrupt political landscape men of integrity like Puey are few and far between. Sulak thus holds up Puey as an embodiment of the wholesome moral values that are sadly and conspicuously missing among our political leaders and military dictators. Sulak would like Thailand's contemporary political leaders and all holders of public office to emulate the moral example of Puey. In praising the exemplary moral character of Puey—in the same way that Confucius praised the principled actions of the legendary Duke of Zhou—Puey has become a 20th century commoner reincarnation of that 11th century Mandarin. It should be noted that both Puey and the Duke of Zhou were loyal servants of the respective states they served. Puey was a loyal servant of the Sarit-Thanom and Praphat military dictatorships, although he subsequently served the democratic Prime Ministers, Seri and Kukrit Pramoj, while the Duke of Zhou was a loyal servant of the state of Zhou. Ironically, the moral virtue of each was subsequently hijacked by those who sought to raise the standard of rebellion.

Sulak uses the moral values personified by Puey to reflect on the shortcomings of contemporary Thai political leaders, hoping to undermine their legitimacy and topple them from power. Analogously, in Chinese history weak or evil emperors are held up to measure against the incorruptible moral virtues of the Duke of Zhou: failing to measure up they are alleged to have lost *The Mandate of Heaven* and hence their legitimacy to rule. Thus arises the tradition of the morality of rebellion, which has throughout history been used to serve as a check on power, to legitimize rebellion and to effect regime

change. Modern examples abound: Egypt (the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square in 2011); Bangkok (14 October 1973 and in 1992); Iran (the Khomeini Revolution in 1979 and the Green Revolution in 2011); Beijing (Tiananmen Square in 1989); Greece (2010–2012), Libya (2011), New York (Occupy Wall Street in 2011), Brazil (2013), Turkey (Taksim Square in 2013), Ukraine (2014), and Hong Kong (the Umbrella Revolution in 2014). In the antagonism between civil society and the state, the latter also has its own ideological defenders. The strongest moral case in defense of the state is made by Niccolo Machiavelli in his book, *The Prince*.

Just as Sulak's memoir has been widely praised for commending the wholesome moral values embodied by Puey, many who read *The Prince* for the first time have been shocked and fascinated by Machiavelli's apparent immorality. Still others have found his lack of humbug refreshing. Machiavelli is notorious for his cynical insights into the ruthless nature of politics. He is invariably remembered for offering shockingly frank political advice to would-be rulers: that it is better to be feared than to be loved; that one should keep one's word only when it is in one's interest to do so, especially when the reasons for making the promise, in the first place, are no longer relevant. The morality embodied in *The Prince* is in direct opposition to the moral ground represented by Puey. Sulak emphatically claims that Puey "lacked the ability to put on a show or to deceive; it was not his nature to dissemble or to be tricky in his personal and professional relationships." (p. vi)

Just as Sulak holds up Puey as a model for emulation by political leaders and holders of public office, *The Prince* also has its cast of exemplary characters. But historians have judged them so harshly that few have been persuaded to admire the models held up by Machiavelli, such as the lecherous Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503) and his son Cesare Borgia (1498–1507). But Machiavelli praised Pope Alexander for the very qualities that conventional public opinion would have him condemned: "No man was ever more effective in making promises or bound himself by more solemn oaths or observed them less." Similarly Cesare, who resorted to bribery and assassination to unify Central Italy under the Borgias, was not condemned by Machiavelli. Far from criticizing the evil man, Machiavelli saluted his immoral methods as a model worthy of emulation: "Perceiving thus all the actions of the Duke, I find nothing to blame; on the contrary it seems proper to hold him as an example to be imitated." Why does Machiavelli praise leaders and rulers who are absolutely unscrupulous? For Machiavelli, to have scruples may be an asset for the ordinary man; but in a ruler it becomes a lethal liability.

When a ruler is faced with a political decision, on which the safety of the state depends, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, to praise or shame. That all other considerations should be set aside and that course of action adopted, which will ensure the survival of the state and the sovereign independence of the country. He adds that the safety of the ruler and the welfare of the state must trump all other considerations. To this end the ruler may in appropriate circumstances ignore legality, morality, public opinion, violate faith and sin against charity, humanity and religion.

So where does this long argument lead? Ultimately, to irreconcilable differences between the Puey camp and the Machiavellian camp. These boil down to fundamental

philosophical assumptions about human nature. Sulak believes that man is essentially good. Evil deeds and moral lapses spring from ignorance. By highlighting the lives of good men like Puey and promoting broad based moral education, we can eventually raise ethical standards in electoral politics, public policy, commercial dealings and public administration.

Unlike Sulak, Machiavelli believes that man's nature is bad and he cannot be educated. He adds that the successful ruler, who ultimately survives challenges and threats to his power, is the one who does not take his cue from the way men ought to live, but the way they actually live. Given that man is greedy, cruel, ambitious, untrustworthy and moved only by self-interest, it is useless to try to make human beings good through education. Since human nature is bad, any attempt to create a viable political order must take into account this fundamental truth. Paradoxically, Machiavelli seeks to create a good political order out of man's badness, which may be harnessed to serve good ends. Ironically, in this imaginary altercation, Machiavelli does not appear to have the last word. His exhortation to the Prince to be evil, cruel, faithless and unscrupulous is only delivered behind closed doors in the corridors of power. In public he would have his Prince pay lip service to the very conventional morality he privately denounces. Indeed, he insists that a prince must appear to have the virtues of mercy, good faith, humanity, integrity and piety; nor should he ever let a word escape his mouth which is not full of those estimable qualities.

While the world pays lip service to conventional morality, Machiavellian morals remains alive and well in the 21st century. The Obama Administration's public condemnation of ISIS whilst covertly arming, training and supplying the *ihadists* through Turkey is vintage Machiavelli. Similarly, signing the September 2016 Syrian ceasefire agreement with Russia, and breaking it before the ink is dry, is yet another leaf taken out of the pages of *The Prince*. True to Machiavellian form, the unsavory alliance with terrorists was conducted under an elaborate cloak of deniability through the collaboration of mainstream media to obfuscate the identity between "moderate rebels" and ISIS/Al Nusra terrorists. How, could the world be deceived so easily by such a blatant outright lie? Machiavelli's answer is that people are gullible. History has repeatedly shown how rulers break their word with impunity. It's simply a matter of skill in deception. Anyone who has a mind to deceive will have no trouble finding people who are willing to be deceived.

In a hypocritical world, Machiavellian morals cannot be openly embraced. It remains fashionable to pay lip service to conventional morality. In this sense, the Puey camp may have the last word: they have won the public argument, but have they lost the war in private?

Jeffery Sng