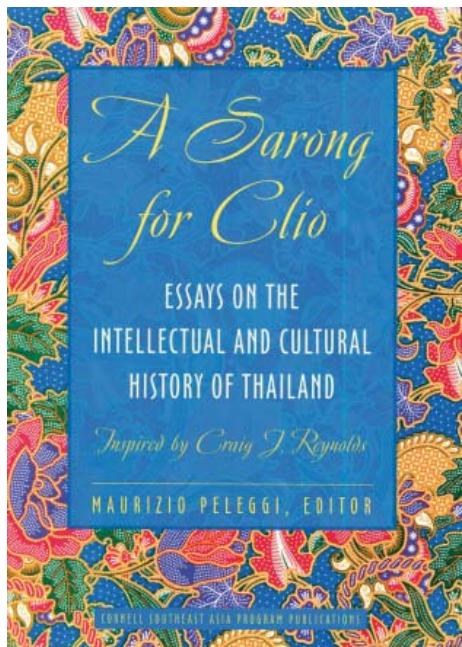


A Sarong for Clio: Essays on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Thailand – Inspired by Craig J. Reynolds, edited by Maurizio Peleggi (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2015). ISBN: 0877277966 (hard) ISBN: 9780877277668 (soft). Hardcover US\$69.95. Paperback 925 Baht/US\$23.95.



By all accounts and purposes, *A Sarong for Clio* is a deliciously seditious collection of essays on the intellectual and cultural history of Thailand. At first glance through the table of contents, one might seriously wonder if, without such a mighty muse as Craig Reynolds, such a collection of works by such prominent figures in the field of Thai history—the likes of Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, Thongchai Winichakul, Tamara Loos, etc.—could ever be brought together and published side by side in such a harmonious and awe-inspiring collection. The area, topic, and period of the articles in *A Sarong for Clio* are quite diverse, covering a rather expansive range, from the literary history of early modern Siam to contemporary political issues of “Governance in Thailand.” Yet, there is a general theme that runs through all the pieces, creating a sort of harmonious unity and

intellectual authority for the collection. That is what obviously appears to be inspired by Craig Reynolds’ lifelong passion and enthusiasm for investigating history through the perspective and experience of those outside the comfortable and authoritative position of the ruling elite—be it the common people, the subaltern, or even the defeated oppositional elite. While history is often criticized as being written by the victors, and therefore, too frequently employed by the ruling powers to suppress voices of dissent and oppress the suffering masses, *A Sarong for Clio* suggests that Craig Reynolds’ kind of history strives to give voice to the voiceless and provide the subaltern with a fighting chance through alternative narratives that do not necessarily glorify the elite.

The collection is divided into two equally exciting parts: *Part I – Historiography, Knowledge, and Power* and *Part II – Political and Business Culture*. The first part consists of four essays investing four alternative narratives that either contest the mainstream or illuminate the not so widely explored subaltern alternative. It is always a pleasure to read the historical pieces by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit and this collection starts out with their essay on “The Revolt of Khun Phaen: Contesting Power in Early Modern Siam.” The article investigates how the folk epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* could have once—prior to being revised, reinterpreted, and coopted by the ruling elite—served as a sort of common man’s manual for navigating and negotiating power with the ruling class. The second article is Thongchai Winichakul’s “Fabrication, Stealth, and Copying of Historical Writings: The Historiographical Misconducts of Mr.

Kulap of Siam." In this essay, Thongchai argues that scandal, discredit, and punishment of Kulap between the late 19th to the early 20th century had more to do with the crime of narrating history from the perspective of the commoner instead of following the safe and approved royalist tradition. While Chris and Pasuk focus on the narrative of village folk and Thongchai on the cultivated commoner, the third essay in the collection, "Renegade Royalist: Autobiography and Siam's Disavowed Prince Prisdang" by Tamara Loos, explores the intriguing narrative of a banned and disgraced member of the royal family. The defeated and denounced elite could also be the source of a bitterly oppressed subaltern narrative. Part I concludes with the editor, Maurizio Peleggi's own essay, "The Plot of Thai Art History: Buddhist Sculpture and the Myth of National Origins," which questions the very core narrative of the mainstream nationalist narrative of the nation's origins through the mainstream investigation in the field of art history and interpretations of ancient artifacts.

Part II explores how the alternative narrative of the subaltern and the marginalized are reflected in various aspects of Thailand's political and business culture from the era of modernization in the mid to late 19th century all the way up to the complex political conflicts of the present day. The essays in this part are also quite diverse in area and scope—from grand themes of republicanism in Patrick Jory's "Republicanism in Thai History" and Kasian Tejapira's "Governance in Thailand" to the more specific cases of populism in local politics in Yoshinori Nishizaki's "Big is Good: The Banharn-Jaemsai Observatory Tower in Suphanburi," and James Ockey's analytic study of madness in "Madness, Authoritarianism, and Political Participation: The Curious Case of Cham Jamratnet." These four essays argue that there are valid and inspiring new ways of perceiving and understanding political culture in Thailand outside of the mainstream royalist nationalistic framework that appears to have dominated the field from Prince Damrong to Luang Wichit Watakarn, and even up to the present military government. A more creative and comprehensive view of Thai political culture needs to be discovered from the vantage point of local agents, lower ranking political players, and regional politics.

Villa Vilaithong's "Marketing Business Knowledge and Consumer Culture before the Boom: The Case of *Khoo Khaeng Magazine*," which is probably the most brilliant piece in this entire collection, also stands out among the work of other contributors in Part II in that she focuses on an alternative culture that is not necessarily marginalized nor subaltern, and yet might be the most potent antidote to the dominant royalist nationalist mainstream narrative. Villa's investigation of the consumer culture through the fantastic success of *Khoo Khaeng* magazine provides a stunning description of the rise of a wider and more diverse business sector that was becoming a force to reckon with. Parliamentary democracy in Thailand might have been hampered by coup after coup throughout the Cold War era, but the rise of the business sector and the increasing influence of foreign investment and the global economy has made the monopoly of political power in Thailand's domestic scene less viable.

In summary, *A Sarong for Clio* has brought about quite an impressive collection of essays on Thai intellectual and cultural history. It is definitely not to be missed by all who claim Thai studies—Thai history, in particular—as their field. There is, however,

one major irony that needs to be addressed concerning the form and presentation of this volume, if one is to truly honor the legacy of Craig Reynolds in this review. There is a problem with naming the collection *A Sarong for Clio* and then having a picture of a young Craig Reynolds (circa 1964) sitting topless in what looks very much like a sarong on the first page of the introduction. This leads one to conclude that Craig Reynolds is being elevated to the supernatural plain of existence of *Clio*, the muse of history. This is not a framework that encourages any sort of critical discussion about anything involving Craig Reynolds' works and, as the editor, Maurizio Peleggi himself asserts, also in the first page of his introduction, such a framework is "not befitting academic writing."

It is ironic that Craig Reynolds spent much of his career studying and promoting alternative historical narratives of the subaltern and marginalized, and yet the volume that he supposedly inspired purports to deify him—make him into a muse that is not to be questioned or criticized. While many of the pieces featured in *A Sarong for Clio* mention the stifling socio-political and academic environment that has arisen in the context of the hegemonic dominance of "royalist nationalism" that operate through draconian *lèse majesté* laws, none of the pieces debate, criticize or even question Reynolds' legacy, ideas, research, methodology or political standpoint. From the perspective of this collection, Craig Reynolds is the mainstream, and so much so that, from a reviewer's perspective, it appears doubtful whether or not there really exists any room to review this collection in any way that is less than positive.

Another major drawback of this collection that needs to be addressed is that, not unlike the mainstream royalist nationalist history works of the conservative elite so criticized throughout this volume, many of the pieces that make up *A Sarong for Clio* appear to be very inward looking. Debates and discussions in the more current pieces, such as Jory's "Republicanism in Thai History," and Kasian's "Governance in Thailand," appear to be limited to the author and the Thai right wing conservatives. The collection as a whole appears to have failed to connect and relate to the broader context of the postcolonial/post-Cold War globalized world. Historians who work on any other area outside of Thailand, even fellow Orientals, would have to struggle pretty hard to discover the relevance of all these very unique cases of very unique Thailand to their respective fields of studies. This, plus the hyper-exoticized title and cover of the book could result in the grave danger of misunderstanding the purpose of the project and altogether misunderstanding Craig Reynolds' legacy.

At this point I would beg readers, most of whom are probably very familiar with Craig Reynolds' works and have enormous respect for him as an academic and historian, to please take a step back and pretend to be an outsider to the field of Thai Studies—especially Thai history—and look again at the title and the cover of this book currently under discussion. Which part of *A Sarong for Clio: Essays on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Thailand – Inspired by Craig J. Reynolds*, with the Southeast Asian floral sarong pattern in the background, does not suggest that this is yet another institutional publication mythologizing a great white male historian of an exotic Oriental land?

I personally have the utmost respect for Craig Reynolds as an academic, a teacher, an intellectual and definitely one of the most brilliant historians of our time and I write

this review with the most profound regards to what is about to become his legacy. The work of the great historian should not only provide inspiration, it should be discussed, debated, criticized, challenged and pushed to the limit so as to continue to be relevant and meaningful through the unforgiving test of time. Craig Reynolds deserves better than to be made into a muse. We all need to honor him by engaging his work more rigorously.

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