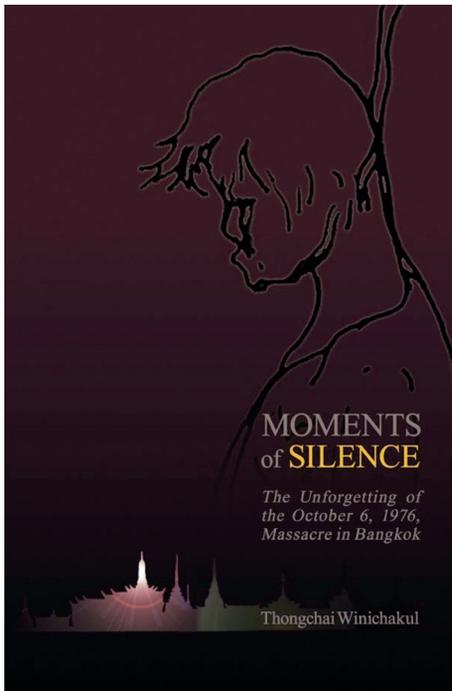


Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok by Thongchai Winichakul. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780824882334 (hardback), US\$72; ISBN: 9780824882341 (paperback), US\$28.



The massacre of student protesters at Thammasat University by police units and royalist paramilitaries on the morning of 6 October 1976 is perhaps the most infamous incident in modern Thai political history. Yet, at the same time, it is one of the most problematic for historians, not to mention the survivors and the families of the victims, with which to come to terms. Official versions of Thai history prefer to ignore the incident. The sheer savagery of the violence, some of which was captured in famous photos by Neal Ulevich, the AP journalist, is almost beyond words. Unarmed students were attacked by machine gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The bodies of some of the students were horribly mutilated. In some cases, stakes were driven into the chests of the corpses, while others were hung from trees or their corpses burnt – all in the heart of civilized Bangkok. The intense polarization

of Thai society at this time due to Cold War tensions has contributed to the difficulty of talking about this incident. Victims' families have had to grieve in silence due to the stigma surrounding their children's connection to the leftist student radicalism of that era. Looming over everything was the question of the monarchy's involvement in the events of that morning, in a country where open discussion of the monarchy is forbidden. *Moments of Silence* is, thus, a book about both the massacre on 6 October and the silence that surrounds the incident.

What makes this book even more notable is that the author was one of the student leaders, who lived through the massacre. The book is an intensely personal work of history. One of the themes running through the book is how to balance the requirement of objectivity on the part of the professional historian with the more subjective and emotional obligation of a survivor of a massacre to bear witness to what happened for the sake of his friends, who lost their lives that day.

The book is also a study of memory. Thongchai shows how the memory of events of 6 October has changed over time due to "chronopolitics", a concept taken from Carol Gluck to describe how changes in domestic and international politics affect the way that people remember events (p. 15). A central theme of the book is Thongchai's own concept of "unforgetting", that is, "an inability to remember or forget, the inability to articulate memories in a comprehensible and meaningful fashion, or to depart from the past completely" (p. 9). It is a condition particularly prevalent in authoritarian societies

where silence about politically sensitive events of the past is enforced.

The book begins with a first-hand account of the events of that day. It then sketches out its intellectual debt to the field of memory studies. It proceeds with a more conventional narrative of the lead-up to the massacre, the events of 6 October, and the immediate aftermath. Another chapter examines the trial of the ‘Bangkok 18’, those students arrested and charged following the massacre, including the author, and the subsequent granting of an amnesty to the students by the new regime following General Kriangsak’s coup in 1977. Surprisingly, the amnesty marked the beginning of the silencing of the memory of 6 October. A series of domestic and international political events compounded this silence. When China ended its support for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the late 1970s, followed by the Thai government’s granting of a general amnesty to anyone who had joined the CPT, the communist insurgency, collapsed (Chapter 5). These events seem to have created an intellectual and emotional crisis for many of the students. Thongchai quotes the October 1973 student leader, Seksan Prasertkul, saying in 1980: “I am a historical ruin”. He later explained, “... After having dedicated one’s life for a cause, binding one’s self-value to such a cause, the utter failure made all purpose in my life almost completely disappear. Life becomes meaningless” (p. 99).

The book examines the first major commemoration of 6 October in 1996, and the subsequent ways in which different participants remembered, or tried to forget, the event. Chapter Nine is a fascinating account of the views of the perpetrators. The book concludes by examining the role of the so-called ‘Octoberists’, the influential generation who experienced October 1973 and October 1976, and their eclipse during the period of political conflict that began with the conflict between Thaksin and the Palace in 2005, when most of them backed the palace and the military against the democratically-elected Thaksin government. In 2018, under the most hard-line military dictatorship since the Cold War, one of the Octoberists, Phichit Likhitkitsombun, made a devastating judgment of the political influence of this generation: “the Octoberists of 1973-76 ... was a generation of absolute, ultimate failure. They were defeated in the past and in the present. And now 90% of them serve and worship the dictatorship” (p. 229).

The book is the most thorough study of 6 October. It draws on the Thai and English language literature, supplemented by the author’s own extensive interviews by many parties involved with the event. Yet, there are many still unanswered questions. In Chapter Two, Thongchai lists thirteen of these questions.

One the most important concerns the exact nature of the relationship between the students, including the student leadership, and the CPT. Early in the book, Thongchai appears to confirm the heavy influence of the CPT on the student movement. Thongchai claims that for “a few years before the massacre the CPT had gained influence over the student movement from top to bottom”, and that, “the CPT’s armed struggle and its rationale was known among the young radicals” (p. 63). Thongchai himself says that in the years after the massacre, “I dreamed of a Communist Party victory, a just outcome after the state’s cruelty” (p. 7). Following the massacre, between 2,000-3,000 students joined the CPT’s armed struggle in Thailand’s jungles. Even those students who did not join the armed struggle but “went underground” were, in Thongchai’s words,

“undeniably under the strong influence, even ideological hegemony, of the CPT’ (p. 66). Yet, later in the book, Thongchai seems less willing to acknowledge the socialist nature of the student movement. For example, on the twentieth anniversary of the massacre, the question of how radical the student movement had become one of the major points of debate about how to remember 6 October: “Were they communists, radicals, democracy lovers, or just young idealists?” (p. 127). Thongchai calls fellow survivor, Somsak Jeamteerasakul, the political historian, “sanctimonious” for his insistence that the student movement be remembered correctly as a socialist one (p. 128). The question is a crucial and perhaps painful one, since if the CPT were heavily involved in 6 October, this would seem to confirm the claims of the far right perpetrators of the violence. This is one example of where the concession made to memory, which is malleable, personal and diverse (on p. 130 Thongchai writes that, “memories from all perspectives should be allowed to exist”) seems to come into conflict with a more orthodox, objective historical account.

Another central question concerns the role of the Palace in the events of 6 October. The cover of the book depicts in dark, sketched outline form the famous Ulevich photo of the hanging student, above a silhouette of the Grand Palace, with a brilliant light emanating from one of the Palace’s spires. The design appears to convey not only a literal meaning that the hanging had taken place at Sanam Luang, opposite the Grand Palace, but that the darkness and lack of clarity surrounding what took place on 6 October can only be illuminated by understanding the Palace’s involvement in the events of that day. The cover’s positioning of the image of the dead student above the image of the Palace is also a violation of the normal convention where any image related to the monarchy must be elevated above other elements in a picture. In Chapter Two, Thongchai directly addresses the role of the Palace in events leading up to the massacre (pp. 39-41). On this point, he cites well-known works by Morrell and Chai-anan, Bowie, Somsak, Handley, more recent work by Hyun, and a statement by the British Ambassador in the aftermath of the event. But there is no startling new evidence.

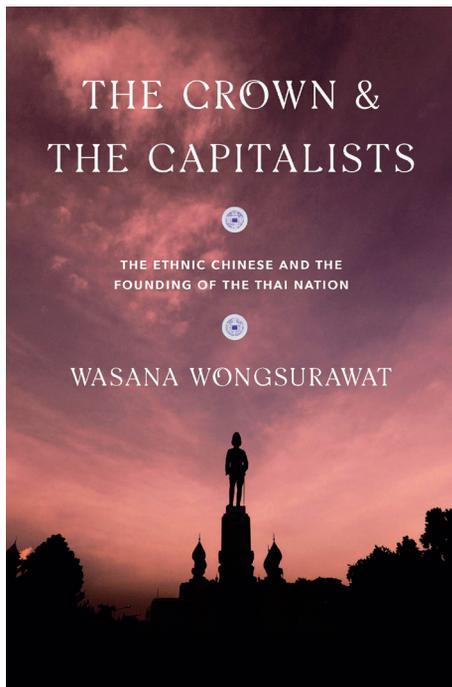
A more interesting revelation comes in Chapter 9, where Thongchai presents an account of his interview with General Uthan Sanidvongse, formerly a lieutenant colonel, who had organised radio propaganda against the students as part of a psychological warfare operation (pp. 207-211). His radio broadcast, *Yan Kro* (Armoured Division Radio), had whipped up rumours that the students were “proxies of the Vietnamese communists” and were planning to overthrow the monarchy. These broadcasts have been blamed for inciting the hatred against the students that resulted in the massacre. Surprisingly, in 2000, Uthan agreed to an interview. Thongchai found him defiantly unrepentant, indeed, even combative. To every question he was asked, Uthan had only two responses: that he and his family were grateful to the Chakri dynasty, and that the monarchy was indispensable to the country (p. 209). Thongchai’s interpretation of this encounter was that the general “implicitly acknowledged the unspeakable truth about the monarchy and the massacre” and that “the massacre was what the radicals deserved” (p. 210).

The recent (2020) commemoration of 6 October 1976 was the largest for many years. As political tensions are again on the rise, changing “chronopolitics” are once

again affecting the memory of 6 October. A new generation of university, and even high-school, students are learning about this event. The book's publication is therefore extraordinarily timely. This is a fascinating and important book, as well as a testament to those who lost their lives on that day. It will throw new light on 6 October, but will also spark debate about the relationship between memory and history.

Patrick Jory

The Crown & the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation by Wasana Wongsurawat. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780295746258 (hardcover), US\$95; ISBN: 9780295746241 (paperback), US\$30; and Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2020. ISBN: 9786162151590 (paperback), 750 Baht.



The Chinese diaspora has in large measure made Thailand modern through industry and commerce. However, apart from superficial and ephemeral books that supposedly explain how to get rich from the economic might of China and its Southeast Asian diasporas, books on the Chinese in Thailand are few. Even fewer are in English. For many readers, the scholarly study of Chinese society in Thailand still begins with its bible, G. William Skinner's encyclopaedic *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytic History*, published in 1957. Crammed with facts, astute analysis and observation, tables, charts and appendices, the comprehensiveness of Skinner's work still amazes and exhausts the reader. Meanwhile, a work of fiction best captures the 20th century social history of the Thai-Chinese. Botan's *Letters from Thailand* (translated into English by Susan Kepner in 1969) follows a family through decades in the

middle of the century in such vivid detail that it seems more fact than fiction.

That people still read these classic works testifies to their significance. It also shows that, despite the centrality of the Chinese in shaping modern Thailand, Thai-Chinese history remains badly understudied. However, Wasana Wongsurawat makes clear in her exciting new book, *The Crown & the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation*, understanding the Chinese community's role in shaping Thailand means understanding the Thai nation itself. With archival research undertaken in English, Chinese and Thai, Wasana—an associate professor in history at Chulalongkorn University—has painted a rich picture of the centrality of the Chinese diaspora not only