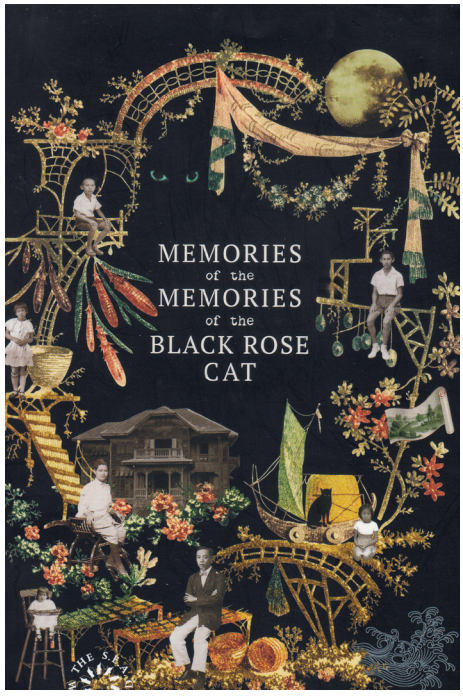
Reviews

Memories of the Memories of the Black Rose Cat by Veeraporn Nitiprapha, [English translation by Kong Rithdee] (Bangkok: River Books, 2022[1]). ISBN: 9786164510609. 495 Baht.



This is the second translation into English of a novel by Veeraporn Nitiprapha.[2] Both this and her previous book were awarded the major SEA Write award in the original Thai, the first time this distinguished literary prize has been won twice by a woman. The translation by Kong Rithdee is excellent throughout and will firmly establish Veeraporn's work in the English language. Of course, certain perspectives in the original get attenuated, such as historical density by, for example, losing the 'Twilight of the century' of the Thai title. But this and other linguistic sleights of hand are perfectly acceptable to gain more sympathetic readers in the foreign Anglosphere.

The subject of Veeraporn's second novel is the movement to the then Siam by various Chinese migrants, chiefly from Guangzhou (Canton) in the 1920s, and their assimilation and entrepreneurial co-existence with Thais,

[1] Veeraporn Nitiprapha, พุทธศักราชอัศดงทรงจำแห่งทรงจำของแมวกุหลาบดำ (*Twilight of the century and the memories of the memories of the black-rose cat*) Bangkok: Matichon, B.E. 2559 [2016]. "Twilight of the century" is omitted from the English translated title. I first read this novel in Thai with the invaluable assistance of Phaptawan Suwannakudt, but for the Anglophone reader, most of my references are to the English translation, which I have subsequently read for this review article.

[2] See Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *Saiduan tapoot nay khaa wongkot,* Bangkok: Dichan, 2556 [2013], translated by Kong Rithdee as *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, Bangkok: River Books, 2018., the winner of the S.E.A. Write award for fiction in 2015. My interpretation is: "A Thai Novel: From the Inside? On Veeraporn Nitiprapha, The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth, 2013, translation 2018", *Journal of the Siam Society,* vol.108 (2020), pt.1, 135-149.

as well as Chinese people from different parts of China.[3] The novel mostly indirectly intermeshes their arrival, survival, prosperity and fall with the events of modern Thai history, whose detailed discussion is often taboo in current public discourse.[4] These 'meetings' are overlaid with the hysterical lives of an extended Sino-Thai family, most of whose members do not die well, but by misadventure, suicide or murder. Veeraporn borrows heavily from T.V. and other popular theatrical soap operas.[5] These plot devices—a crescendo of inevitable life events, a rags-to-riches-rags journey for one Chinese immigrant accompanied by the sharp events of the lives of all his children, an unspeakableness to some other members of the family leading to inevitable conflict and nearly always death.

The use of these devices never seems as mechanically artificial as it would with a less able writer. Her training was not in a university literature department, but by her own commitment to writing as an imaginative act and she always rejects academic approaches to literature and writing technique. She certainly gained some skills over several years working in the ferociously competitive Thai advertising industry. This may have taught her skilfully to blend otherwise weird events into multiple narratives by beautiful and poetic—even magical—descriptions of townscapes, natural events, and a recurrent love of flowers and other flora. Families may not forgive families, but hopefully the bounty of nature in which they might dwell.

Like her previous novel, the reader is allowed to enter a very fecund world of innumerable botanical types and their varied names, shapes, colours and fragrances, some of which are not all that familiar, even to Thais. Veeraporn is aware the natural world shown is very specific to a given place with its own special climate—she gives myriad descriptions of mist, kinds of rain, river currents, floods, and, in the domain of the fantastic, of a "Rain Room" from which, entered through a mirror, is a virtual space which never dries out and is inhabited by a young female ghost. Her identity the reader can only deduce in the last few pages, after her murder. This room is observed by a then early adolescent, Tao, who appeared at the very beginning of the novel as a small boy

[3] There are many references in academic literature to the life of the Chinese in Thailand. A standard earlier study is G. William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: an analytical history*, Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1957, while a very informative later text on the various ethnic populations of Bangkok, including the Chinese is Edward Van Roy, *Siamese melting pot: ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2017, see Chapter Six, "Taming the Dragon: Chinese rivalries". For an important excursion into the figure of Chinese identity in Thai literature see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read till it Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 2018, see Chapter Five, 'Are we them? The Chinese in 20th century Thai literature and history', 155-210.

[4] Many of these taboo issues of recent Sino-Thai history have been brought out by Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: the ethnic Chinese and the founding of the Thai nation,* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. Wasana writes a note on the cover of "Memories…", which she describes as, "Riveting! A fascinating mélange of Marquezian magic realisms and a 21st century version of Dream of the Red Chamber. Tragically sweet with a twisted ending that makes readers wonder - like the forgotten history of the Chinese Diaspora in Thailand – if we really exist".

[5] I am grateful to Veeraporn Nithiprapha and Kong Rithdee for a conversation about the novel together with Phaptawan Suwannakudt on 26 July 2022, and for their subsequent replies to written questions in personal emails of 31 July and 3 August 2022. Some further details of Veeraporn's background can be found in a review of her first book by Kaona Pongpipat, "Myth, love and blind earthworms", *Bangkok Post*, 9 November 2015.

listening to the rattle of the trains outside his grandmother's house. He appears only intermittently throughout the novel, but arrives when a narrative comment is required, or when the narrative shifts a register into fantasy or 'magical' mode, like walking through the mirror in the "Rain Room".[6]

Despite there being a longstanding popular discourse of folk Thai female ghost stories,[7] Veeraporn studiously avoids any explicit reference to the 'Thainess' of these phenomena, and even, with one exception, to royal reigns. I suspect this is because she is quite aware of the 'maleness' of possession of Thailand, a masculinity linked in various forms to Thai autocracy and the rule of soldiers' boots allied to the royal service. Here lies the twist, for another male child in the family, Jitsaway, the only natural child of his father, is a supporter of Chiang Kai-shek and after the defeat on the mainland and Jitsaway's return from Taiwan, serves in the Thai navy during an unsuccessful coup. His failed assimilation to Thai military structures is linked to his failure in the other male hierarchy, the Chinese patriarchy which rules immigrant families, and brings them either to their prosperity or, in this case, to their economic ruin.

Across generations Veeraporn draws a contrast between Tathoud Tong and Jongsawang, in that the former never gives up his wish to return to China and indeed deliberately buys land and remarries a second young Chinese wife to look after it whilst he is in Thailand. But Jongsawang suffers from the illusion that his diligence and ability in keeping Tathoud Tong's rice milling and distribution business going in Thailand will be rewarded by his taking it over when Tathoud Tong eventually retires. This is not to be. Jitsaway, the first-born actual son, takes over the business after he returns from his Chinese and Thai navy adventures, but he is forced to marry Yisun, who was Jongsawang's secret love, and has to look after the illegitimate child of a Malay student, who Jaratsaeng met in Penang. The outsider, non-blood line interloper, Jongsawang was thus doubly-dispossessed, of both his property and his love. He walked away, out of the house and never returned. Jongsawang died by drowning, as he forlornly looked for his friend, Dr Toshiro, who had already drowned.

There must be a hidden dynamic for the physical movement of principal characters beyond and inside Thailand. Partly this was due to Chinese sojourners in search of work and money, who then moved back to China from which they had not removed their attachment. Partly this must have been due to the need for Chinese male partners to find local Thai wives, and so long as their family name was carried on by a male line, provided them with relative satisfaction to stay in Thailand. Veeraporn makes clear the lack of permanent affections in many such relationships, where rational calculation of advantage took place between Chinese men and Thai women: this accounts for a mechanical quality to their affections, unlike the fey happiness of feelings expressed in the first novel. *Memories* has material peculiarly suited to soap opera handling, that is emotional excess by the main characters, who do not know why they need to express

[6] Veeraporn and Kong Rithdee decided not to offer the inclusion of a family tree.

[7] See *Nang Nak* [Ghost Wife], directed by Nonzee Nimbutr, 1999, in Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer sexuality & Vernacular Buddhism in contemporary Thai cinema*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016, 47-86.

this excess, at the same time as they inhibit a psychological domain of suppressed emotions and murderous intentions. Thus, the main characters in Veeraporn's novel find themselves locked in social situations which, given the nature of diaspora, place them in social hierarchies they do not control: they are always leaving one hierarchy to enter another, but as yet imperfectly. The currency between Chinese men is higher status Thai women and businesses, not, as in China, Chinese women of a lower class and land.

Women live in a parallel, but separate, universe. They obtain wealth by marriage and only very rarely by professional skills. Even if some Thai wives may be skilled as entrepreneurs, they do so by favour of, and for the self-interest of, the men, if this may be to the advantage of their children.

But those children, with the exception of Jitsaway, never go back to China. The linkage is through the ties to land in China as a physical insurance [partible capital], and as affective symbolic ties, which mark the continuity of a family or clan group. The children of Thai women by Chinese diasporic fathers, unless particular effort is made to acculturate them to China via language or travel to a hometown, do not symbolically inhabit the land in China, nor do they in law own it. This notion of property means that return to China is nearly always envisaged for their Chinese fathers in Thailand. Of course, doing well in a foreign land, beside the economic necessities, is to give face to the ancestors. But in the real world, the diasporic family and its male head need alliances with the locally powerful males, including Chinese already assimilated, with whom marriage alliances are contracted, as with Thadout Tong. The marriage is often upward to someone in the local symbolic order of higher status, but who not infrequently, like Yaay Thood Sangiam, is at the same time of lower economic status.[8] This seesaw of statuses underpins the dynamic of Veeraporn's book.

The characters operating this system are not fixed human essences, but include conventional, stable figures as well as mobile, 'mystery' characters. When they appear, they do so as if by magic, thus inciting the parallels some have made with Latin American 'magic realism'. The figures seem to be there in the body of agreements between the author and the reader, but also disappear or become evanescent and tentative.[9] A strong case for this analysis comes from the figure of Tao, who starts out as a young child, calls 'grandmother' one of the daughters of Thathuat Tong, and yet is woven into the skein of the novel's threads only intermittently. He seems to appear as a narrative marker, without being a narrator, even though description of him frequently comes from a third-person position. The lack of a commentator and overview narrator—a voice in

[8] Ghassan Hage, the Australian-Lebanese anthropologist, in the *Diasporic Condition: ethnographic explorations of the Lebanese world,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2021*,* has studied diasporic Lebanese families worldwide, and calls this inequality of marriage status "anisogamy", after the concept of Claude Lévi-Strauss. "Anisogamic strategies are part of any situation of interaction between two parties where claims of superiority and inferiority must be managed." [Hage, 2021, 184] The diasporic condition frequently produces double-seeing, which he calls "lenticularity"*,* a kind of visually entangled multiplicity depending on the angle from which any social reality is seen. [Hage, 2021, 185]. Clearly, some kind of comparison across quite disparate and not religiously or geographically contiguous cultures worldwide would be a basis for comparing the historical predicaments of Tathoud Tong and Yaay Thoud Sangiam and their descendants.

[9] Veeraporn in conversation, see Footnote 5, privileges the act of writing for herself, and not the audience to whom it may appeal.

the sky substituting for the voice of God, or the material embodiment of the historical dialectic—is not there. I imagine this is a tactic of resistance, possibly one motivated by a feminist consciousness, to male hegemony over history in Thailand. But the novel deals with strong or political realities only weakly, or only indirectly links them together.

The passion to own land and pass it onto the next generation, the kind of motivation which powers the literary interpretation of pre-Revolutionary China in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1932), is in Veeraporn's book weakly linked, or its links are less tangible and indirect. The avoidance, or covering over, of the construction of historical series seems to result. We know events vaguely alluded to, but their historical energy is not the driving force, merely a kind of ancillary atmosphere.

This weak historical linkage, whose cause is no doubt due to the occupation and obstruction of other views by the 'official history' in Thailand, strictly controlled by the state which is taught from pre-school, really does turn the series of family events into a kind of peep show. Revenging expulsion, murder, or self-murder cannot be historically grasped in such a context by the main characters, even if they can carry out the deeds. Furthermore, whether as some have done, a kind of indebtedness to the structure and content of late Chinese classical novels, such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, will suffice as a mapping for the cloud of consciousness where a dead girl can enter a rain room through a mirror, or the fragrance of flowers does penetrate the very mentalities of some of the characters, tends to indicate that the magical dimension so enacted does not allow the character to enter into the real events depicted at the same time. No psychology of rule or control or power, accepted or resisted and contested, is implicit to provide a structure of narrative.

Is this work a tragicomedy? Whether or not Veeraporn has a personal view on what constitutes tragedy and comedy, one could conclude that Veeraporn's text instantiates tragedy by the willingness of members to sacrifice themselves. The family is a type of collective ideal, and here tragedy is simply an unwilled, but unavoidable, sacrifice for the ideology of family continuity. It is a male sacrifice because the head of the family is male, even though many of the victims are female. Tragedy implies the privileging of a driven need, which is above the control of ethics [usually by religion or familistic custom]. It implies the unavoidability of a bitter conclusion, from which, however, something can be learnt, a kind of peaceful transcendence achieved. I do not think from this perspective that Veeraporn's novel can be understood as tragic because the real world is not opposed by a separate set of freedoms, nor does the notion of a magically interpenetrating other world, beyond the 'Rain Room' and its mirror, allow for such resistance because both worlds are essentially amorphous and transient.

Can the novel be considered a comedy? Certainly, it instances humour and its technique. Perhaps there is a resigned acceptance with the world as it is, and a decision by the characters to go on living within the helplessness of the given. If humour releases previously uncontrolled emotions, often aggressive ones, we could say the characters in Veeraporn's novel have great difficulty in letting out these repressive drives. In other novels, when they do, they can be very tendentious, or manifest violence intended to harm the other. But we do not see that in this novel until the end, and certainly the lived ironies of diasporic and bicultural families are set aside. The whole novel functions as a

comment on an impossible situation for both the male and female figures. The play- or pleasure-giving aspects of the novel lie with the manipulation of direction, with the method to achieve this, and with the distancing of each of the major characters from consequences of the release of emotions.

If 'realism' is the unadorned and direct representation of the world as it is, 'magical realism' uses the devices of realist literature to insist magically on a separate order of reality in whose entrancement the reader is to be imbricated. Sometimes this imbrication is achieved by the life-histories of the main characters, sometimes it will appear about an impossible or fantastical emplacement to which the characters will adjust, such as the 'Rain Room' and its various inhabitants: a female ghost, a suicide and a child at the beginning of the book who was not yet born at the end.

In magical realism, place cannot mark a series of public events because it is shut off from the world, despite how beguilingly present they may seem. The site of magical realism is usually, as in Veeraporn's novel, a private home or a private space within such a home. Or a local place domesticated by folklore, such as the tree in Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is not found by a public for engagement with an open display of power. Simple personal fantasy as an elaboration of tropes of the fantastic, the degree to which the real imposes itself, and the emotional release provided by the imposition into a fantastic world. Tzevetan Todorov10 tried to link considerations of the fantastic with a theory of literary genres, and I am sure Veeraporn is not interested in the theory of genres. Yet, she has instinctively as a writer grasped the slippage between the fantastic and the marvellous, which is theorised by Todorov. In her work, you could say the marvellous resists absorption into the fantastic and declines to go along the road to fear and the Gothic.

A more serious interest in her work lies with the way her novels mark history. Whilst both the present and the previous novels from time-to-time mention or allude to historical events in Thai society and some of their principal actors, in general, both novels lack the description, or character embodiment, of dominant historical personas. They don't show the articulation of historical time through the life histories of famous actors, such as, say, Student Leaders, Artists, Prime Ministers and Kings. For Veeraporn's main characters, history is a current in which the figures swim, even though they face all kinds of domestic upheaval, as well as revolution, coups d'état and war: they do not themselves make history. The only historical figures are the occluded generals and monarchs.

What Veeraporn's novel means is that Thai direct historical knowledge, or participation in the making of history, is neither relevant to her characters' needs nor feasible. She replies to this stricture indirectly by a kind of feminine subversion, which is aesthetic, indirect, and yet displays a definite sinuous strength. She brackets events by feeling or emotional connotation, by the flavour conjured up by a perfume, by the light turned on and through water, by the passing of time in the buildings of a defined urban space.

The internal rancour of some characters may brim up inside and explode, usually

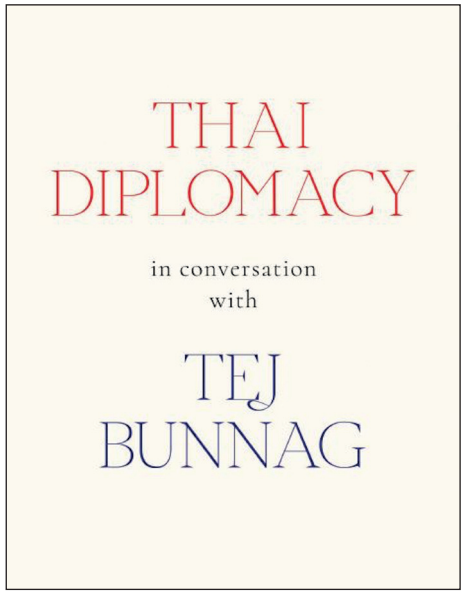
[10] Tzevetan Todorov, *The Fantastic, a structural approach to a literary genre*, (tr. Richard Howard), Ithaca, NY: Cornell Paperbacks, 1975.

in violence, but this is almost irrelevant as a strategy for how they encounter their actual situations. Veeraporn does not proclaim Buddhist evanescence, a noble and transcendental indifference of the characters to their attachment to desires which have caused them pain in the world, but is no doubt aware how this ideal has been inculcated by the Thai education system to force obedience and un-thinking-ness on the 'educated'.

Of course, Veeraporn is writing a novel and creating thereby an imagined world, not a sociology tract. But her mode of articulation through this Sino-Thai family and the very messiness of their lives indicates an order which, in hiding itself, produces its own demise.

John Clark

Thai Diplomacy: In conversation with Tej Bunnag, interviewed and edited by Anuson Chinvanno (Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). ISBN: 978-616-341-087-0 (hardback and e-book). Free download at https://isc.mfa.go.th/en/content/thai-diplomacy-in-conversation-with-tej-bunnag?cate=5f204a5928600c531517cb75.



As both a historian of Thailand and one of its leading former diplomats, Tej Bunnag should be familiar to anyone with more than just a casual interest in the kingdom. After graduating with a doctorate from Oxford University, Tej started his long and distinguished diplomatic career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 1969. Over the course of forty years, he held a number of important positions within the ministry and was ambassador to China, France and the United States of America, culminating in his appointment as Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs in 2001. He also served briefly as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Samak Sundaravej during the start of the border conflict with Cambodia over land surrounding the temple of Preah Vihear in 2008. Given his diplomatic experience and knowledge of Thai history, Tej makes an ideal commentator on the past, present and future of Thailand's foreign affairs.

This volume collects a series of conversations between Tej and Anuson Chinvanno, the director of the International Studies Center of the MFA, into six chapters covering the underlying principles and processes of Thailand's foreign policymaking, and the kingdom's relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours, China, the US, and regional and international organisations, principally the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations (UN). Interestingly, following the suggestion of