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Author(s)	Chachavalpongpun, Pavin
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The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation

SHANE STRATE

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, xii+253p.

The notion of the winners being the ones who write history does not always ring true in the case of Thailand. In Thai historiography, loss and humiliation have also found their way into service as a predominant ideological foundation backing up various state strategies, from the preservation of certain political regimes, the creation of faces of the enemy, to the need to construct the nation's identity. *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* by Shane Strate discusses the pertinent topic of how national humiliation has been politically exploited, and thus became politically useful, in supporting ethnic chauvinism and military expansion, and in the modern day, ironically, the glorification of Thai monarchs, even when it distastefully reveals the vulnerabilities of the Thai state.

In August 2015, the military government of General Prayuth Chan-ocha completed its mission to resurrect the glorious days of Siam's past kings. The "Rajapakdi Park" (Rajapakdi means "loyalty to the monarchy") houses giant statues of seven Siamese kings from all four dynasties—Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin. This is a project eerily similar to that seen in the Myanmar capital of Naypyidaw, which showcases the three great kings of Burma—Anawratha, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya—supposedly serving to legitimize the then military government of General Than Shwe. Undoubtedly, the Rajapakdi Park is designed primarily for a similar purpose: injecting a sense of royal loyalty at the time when Thailand is once again in the custody of a military regime.

Refreshing the magnificent past of Siamese kings is not merely about celebrating Siam, or Thailand, as a great nation with uninterrupted independence. As emphasized in Strate's book, "National Humiliation discourse" has re-emerged alongside the well-known "Royal-Nationalist ideology" as a dogmatic tool to sponsor a form of anti-Western imperialism. Whereas the Royal-Nationalist ideology stresses the widely known argument of Thailand being the only nation in Southeast Asia not to be colonized by Western powers, the National Humiliation discourse unveils the dark side of Thai relations with the West, through unfair treaties, extraterritoriality, trade imbalances, and territorial loss. The West was assigned as the "evil other" harboring ill intention to disparage the Siamese national pride. But as history tells it, Siam, either under the absolute monarchy or military rule, has continued to overcome obstacles and threats posed by the evil other. Strate calls it a tragic heroism characterized by suffering and foreign oppression (p. 43).

Strate elaborates precisely on how the National Humiliation discourse has been discursively used to achieve specific agendas of the Siamese state. There were benefits in depicting Siam as a vulnerable state surrounded by big and small enemies in the region. The book focuses mainly on two periods: Siam under the absolute monarchy during the peak of colonialism and Thailand under

the military regime at the turn of the Second World War, including its aftermath. Through these different periods, Siam, while selectively adopting some Western elements, such as its modernity and concept of sovereignty, openly detested its imperialist bullying that paved the way for Siamese heroes to emerge. In other words, national tragedies gave birth to national heroes. But these same national tragedies also allowed such heroes to hold on tightly to their rule, perhaps no less brutal than the bullying West.

Whichever themes one choose to examine—Royal-Nationalist or National Humiliation discourses—they are used to primarily defend the political interests of the Thai elites. For example, following the Thai invasion of French Indochina in 1941, as Strate explains, the Thai aggression was not the result of Japanese prodding, but it was “born out of the military regime’s (of Phibul Songkhram) search for political legitimacy” (p. 41). In the process, successive regimes exerted different tactics in highlighting the plights of the nation, not just to legitimize anti-Western policy, but also to arouse public sentiment against Western colonialists. Strate investigates in great detail each of these tactics, from Siam’s unequal treaties with the West (among them the Bowring Treaty of 1855), the extraterritorial rights enjoyed by Westerners in Siam (1883–1907), and the loss of supposed Siamese territories, particularly to the French. The author locates the heart of the matter in the Pak Nam incident in 1893 which saw the French fleets attempt to block the Chao Phraya River should Siam not renounce its claim to the left bank of the Mekong. But as Strate argues, the Franco-Siamese crisis was not just reflecting the reality that came out of the power politics at the time; rather, it served as a type of *chosen trauma*—a historical grievance that is the inheritance of every Thai person (p. 11).

For the Thai public, such unequal treaties, and eventually the loss of the supposed Thai territories to Western powers, were unbearably humiliating. They became unforgettable traumatic memories and deep scars within the nation. But Strate also contests such a one-sided view by proposing a reinterpretation of both the unequal treaties with the West and the loss of Thai territories. For example, as argued by Strate, the Bowring Treaty enhanced King Mongkut’s position and created a new basis of political legitimacy. “It was proof that the monarchy could preserve Siamese independence by negotiating with Western powers while adapting their technology and practices to local culture” (p. 28). And surely, the loss of the supposed Thai territories also had its usefulness. Strate quotes Thongchai Winichakul who asserts that the loss of territories invented a geo-body of Siam that never existed and projected it into the past (p. 46). In other words, the loss brought about a physical gain for the nation in the past.

The portrayal of Siam’s passivity, in turn, acted to justify its aggressive policies, as a sort of revenge against the evil West, through the harassment of Catholics in Thailand in the 1940s, and the Thai-endorsed Pan-Asianism during the Second World War with its alignment with Japan. The Catholics were labeled the “fifth column” and subject to all manner of persecution (p. 64). They were painted as the vestiges of French colonialism, the root cause of Siam’s humiliation. Mean-

while, in entering into an alliance with Japan, Siam expected to make use of that alliance to strengthen its authoritarianism at home by identifying itself as part of a greater Asia, led by Japan, in defying the international order set by the Europeans centuries earlier. In so doing, Thailand constructed its new identity based on regionalism. Pan-Asianism with Japan permitted the Thai government to express its sense of nationhood at a regional level. Pan-Asianism was also built principally on Thailand's National Humiliation discourse. But it was another kind of discourse, which stressed specifically how to move away from such humiliation and stand up against the old order. It became a Thai way of introducing a new hierarchical system that would rank Asia as sophisticated (if not more so) compared with the West (p. 111).

Throughout the Cold War period, the binary Royal-Nationalist and National Humiliation narratives continued to influence Thailand's foreign policy, which was driven mainly by domestic political purposes. In this era, one conflict came to redefine the issue of National Humiliation: the Preah Vihear temple. For many decades, the conflict over the ownership of the Preah Vihear (known in Thai as Prasat Phra Wihan), has prevented an improvement in Thai-Cambodian ties. In 1962, the two countries took their conflict to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which in the end ruled in favor of Cambodia. Since then, the loss of Preah Vihear has been a determinant factor in the aggressive Thai policy towards Cambodia, justified by a repeated National Humiliation narrative. Thailand supposedly lost the temple to the French, regained it with Japan's help, and now lost it again to a weaker neighbor, Cambodia. The lost territory discourse was a part of Thai nationalism shaped by the sacredness and vulnerability of territorial integrity, one that is permanently threatened by both internal and external enemies. In 2008, the crisis re-erupted after Thailand offered to support Cambodia's bid to have the temple listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The royalist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) spotted an opportunity to exploit the issue to undermine the Samak Sundaravej government, which was backed by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The PAD accused the Samak government of betraying the motherland in trading Thai support for the personal benefit of Thaksin in Cambodia. Particularly, the PAD alleged that the government was willing to sacrifice both the temple and the 4.6 square kilometers area in the vicinity of the temple. Suddenly, the lost territory discourse was brought back into play. And as a consequence, not only was the Thai government under fierce attack, but Thailand decided to declare war with Cambodia, which lasted until the year 2011.

I found this book intellectually stimulating. It is easy to read, although it engages in a number of complicated narratives, which require a solid understanding of Thailand's historical past. My main criticism however, is twofold. First, the author could have brought out more clearly the urge of the Thai state, in exploiting the Royal-Nationalist narrative and National Humiliation ideology, to aid its process of national identity-making. It is true that at the crux of the National Humiliation ideology was the desperate attempt of Thai elites to preserve its political interests based on national weaknesses and vulnerabilities. But this was the same process through which the Thai elites

wanted to identify themselves differently from the West. The Siamese lamb versus the French wolf is another way of creating “We versus Them,” even when this may serve the same agenda of defending the elites’ power position. Second, the book does not address the issue of Siam being a bellicose victor in wars with its neighbors. The Thai historical textbook traditionally omits this aspect of Siam bullying nearby kingdoms, such as in the sacking of Angkor in 1431—an event that may help boost the Royal-Nationalist narrative but inevitably casts Siam as a devilish villain. Although Strate’s book deals mainly with Siam’s ties with the West, Siam’s complex relationship with neighboring kingdoms, particularly from the perspective of it being an aggressor, may shed light on how the National Humiliation discourse can become disturbingly hollow, discursive, and self-serving.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun ปวิน ชัชวาลพงศ์พันธ์
CSEAS

Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia

SARAH TURNER, ed.

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013, 320p.

One of the most striking changes observed while working in the uplands of Laos over the past decade is the rapid growth in the number of tourists, as ecotourism and minority cultural experiences become increasingly popular. The opening of these areas to tourism seems to indicate that a significant barrier has been removed in the socialist countries of mainland Southeast Asia. Recognition of the cash income that can be derived from tourism has certainly made the region’s landscapes and people more accessible to those who are interested. With political stability and economic opening, researchers’ access to these regions has also become easier over the decades. However, as *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia* illustrates, the challenges to conducting ethnographic research in this region remain formidable.

This volume’s most valuable contribution is the way it unfolds and then fills in the framework of “dilemma.” The chapters are a rich selection of the many difficulties that ethnography faces in this region, although the authors come at their studies from primarily anthropology and geography. In addition to the well-known problems associated with spending extended time in places that are difficult to travel to and lack many of the basics that are taken for granted in researchers’ home countries, at the center of these personal stories is the political minefield that one must navigate in order to get approval for, carry out, and maintain relationships within, field-based research within the socialist administrative structures of Vietnam, China, and Laos. Here, the uplands means minorities, and this immediately puts us in a politically sensitive landscape of extreme complexity.