GLOBALISERS vs COMMUNITARIANS: PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS DEBATE THAILAND’S FUTURES

Craig J. Reynolds
Asian History Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

In the past decade Thailand’s bubble of prosperity expanded beyond the wildest dreams of investors and burst in the faces of those who had inflated it. By being the fastest growing economy in the world as well as the epicentre of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Thailand became a cautionary tale of hypergrowth. During the boom and especially after the bubble economy burst there were heated debates in Thailand’s highly energised public sphere about the accelerating pace of change, about political reform, and about the possible futures for the country and its people. All Asian countries subjected to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) regime of austerity saw their national economic sovereignty compromised, and in this respect the financial crisis of 1997 had clear parallels with previous threats to Thailand’s sovereignty in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, as in the late 1990s, the ruling elites allowed sovereignty to be compromised.

In this essay I endeavour to map out the intellectual contours of post-boom Thailand. While accepting that these public debates are concentrated in the Bangkok megalopolis, I would suggest that it would be a mistake to dismiss the dominant themes of these debates as fatally elitist or Bangkok-centric. The public intellectuals engaging the issues have close ties to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other activists elsewhere in the country. At the core of these debates is the need to empower local communities in order to contend with the pressures of international financial organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Keywords: Thailand, globalisation, local knowledge, financial crisis, Thai identity, communitarian

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade Thailand’s bubble of prosperity expanded beyond the wildest dreams of investors and burst in the faces of those who had inflated it. Before the crash in mid-1997 growth rates overall and particularly in industry and manufacturing set records by world standards. Planners and academics expressed astonishment at the speed with which Thailand was approaching “NIC-dom”, the condition of being a Newly Industrialised Country. From being the fastest growing economy in the world to being the epicentre of the Asian financial crisis, Thailand experienced such rapid rises and falls in
economic development that it became a cautionary tale of hypergrowth.

During the boom and especially after the bubble economy burst there were heated debates in Thailand’s highly energised public sphere about the accelerating pace of change, about political reform, and about the possible futures for the country and its people. Most importantly, the 1997 crisis reawakened memories of crises of sovereignty in Thailand’s modern history. In the discussion that follows, I endeavour to map out the intellectual contours of post-boom Thailand. While accepting that these public debates are concentrated in the Bangkok megalopolis, I would suggest that the public intellectuals engaging the issues have close ties to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other activists elsewhere in the country. In other words, it would be a mistake to dismiss the dominant themes of these debates as fatally elitist or Bangkok-centric.

In the early 1990s, globalisation was the new narrative of modernity for business people, government officials, and many academic advisors to business and government. Globalisation meant, among other things, the expansion of Thai business into less developed parts of the region, fulfilling the bold declaration of Chatichai Choonhavan to turn the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces (Reynolds, 1998:117; cf. Hirsch, this issue). “Borderless world” was, and still is, a keyword for globalisation in Thai public debates. Ambitious investors, such as Thaksin Shinawatra, moved quickly into media and telecommunications that capitalised on the burgeoning hi-tech service sector (Pasuk & Baker, 1996:28-31; Ukrist, 1999a). Tantalised by the borderless world, Thai entrepreneurs worked out new geometries of development, proposing an economic quadrangle in the north that would embrace Yunnan, Myanmar and Laos, and a growth circle in the south that would compete with Singapore. Epitomising business in the borderless world was a plan for sub-regional tourism involving China, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand that defined the Mekong River as the “main theme” (Peerawat, 1994; Parnwell, 2001). One proposal for a golf course in the northeast actually erased national borders altogether: the links would span the national border into Cambodia and Laos, and golfers would play the course in three countries (Handley, 1990).

But what did the future hold for Thailand? Where was the country headed? What were the consequences of such rapid development? Attempts to address these questions led many officials and public intellectuals into discussions about “vision” (wisaithat) and even how the English word should be translated. The term vision was not only a buzzword in the region, as newly-developing economies picked up the rhetoric of strategic management and used it for national planning, but also in the developed world. It is one of the slogans of globalisation. Malaysia had embarked on the national pursuit of being “a developed nation” by the year 2020 with heavy reliance on the optical metaphor as a guide to the future. The agenda, first articulated by the Office of the Prime Minister in April 1992 as Vision 2020 and mapped out in Malaysia: The Way Forward, prescribed that Malaysia was to achieve its maturity as an economically developed country by the year 2020 (Khoo, 1995:327-31). By 1992 the Thai Prime Minister was already putting comments about vision and “farsightedness” into his speeches. Also, economists with a flair for popularising their science pitched their expertise to business people in terms of visions for the new millennium – Vision 2000, Vision 2020. The cover of Somchai Phakhphapatwiwat’s book pictured him brandishing a volume by the American visionary economist Peter F. Drucker (Somchai, 1995; Witthayakorn, 1996).

One feature of the turbulent 1990s was the fabrication, commodification and consumption of “Thainess”. Prescriptions by the state on the meaning of “Thai” during the late 1970s and early 1980s gave way during the boom years to the promotion of Thailand to both
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Thai and foreigners as a brand name. Thainess was no longer something to be defended in the interests of national security but to be consumed in the interests of boosting the economy. Banks, beer, paint and fish sauce were all advertised in terms of their Thainess. So successful were these advertising campaigns at rooting consumer products in the local culture that some Thai shoppers would regard Lux Soap, Pepsi and Coke as Thai rather than foreign (Jory, 1999:468). There is little doubt that advertising has contributed to a more collective sense of culture and public consciousness (Bunrak, 1994:198).

In 1985, at the beginning of the boom, the Tourism Authority of Thailand conducted market research on how Thailand was perceived in overseas markets, and an international advertising agency was hired to promote and sell Thailand’s image abroad. A series of campaigns followed that played unabashedly on Orientalist clichés about the exotic East: “Brilliant Thailand” (1986); “Visit Thailand Year” (1987); “Exotic Thailand – Golden Places, Smiling Faces” in Thailand Arts and Crafts Year (1989); “I Love Thailand” (1990); “Exotic Thailand – See More of the Country, See More of the People” (1991); “The Year to Campaign for Thai Culture” (1994); and, beginning in late 1997, “Amazing Thailand” (Chalinee, 1991; Reynolds, 1998). One target of these campaigns was the sleaze image the country had acquired as a place where overweight foreign men came to find pleasure with young Thai boys and girls. The promotion of Thai culture also arose from growing concerns about the damage being done to Thai institutions and social relations, the family and the education system by the frantic pace of social and economic change. In 1993 the Siam Society had begun a Thai-language publication, Sayam Araya (Siamese Civilisation), which, in a surprisingly materialist analysis of “the cultural crisis” besetting the country, blamed “the capitalist system of production” for cultural malaise.

What is the meaning of “Thai culture” in this context? The answer to this question is complex, for there are many audiences and, in the age of virtual realities and sophisticated fabrications, Thai culture can be whatever the vendors and the advertising agencies conjure up, provided sufficient signifiers of Thainess are present. These fabrications throw into question the authenticity of this Thai culture. One observer, Bunrak Bunyakhetmala, who has been described as the “Marshall McLuhan of Thailand” because of his astute understanding of the media, pointed out that in the technological revolution upon us, “synthetic Thai” (thai thiam) threatens to compete with and possibly replace the “authentic Thai” culture inherited from the past (Bunrak, 1994:442). With Thai diasporas growing so quickly in the USA and other Western countries, the capacity to produce fabricated Thainess has led to some unusual artifacts. One example is “Pui”, crowned Miss Thailand and Miss Universe in 1988 and 1989 respectively, who was brought up in Los Angeles and schooled in Thai language and Thai deportment by a Thai transvestite who ran a flower shop in Los Angeles (Reynolds, 1999:270-71). Seen in this light, Thainess is rather like a designer label that might be counterfeited anywhere in the world.

A slightly different way of looking at Thainess now is in relation to the cultural forces unleashed by globalisation which have created tension and conflict between the desire to remain Thai and the desire to be “un-Thai” (Kasian, 1996:241; Kasian, 1994). To compete successfully and consume knowingly in the international markets of the post-Cold War world, Thais must adopt the trappings of the global competitor and the global consumer. Thai shoppers love to buy “un-Thai” products made by Benetton, Marks & Spencer or Pierre Cardin. Boutiques overseas have had to hire Thai-speaking sales assistants to look after Thai customers who have an astonishing zest for shopping. Indeed, any product with an “inter” (into) brand name that smacks of foreignness is highly desirable, even if it is made in Thailand; intoe now competes with sakon as a signifier for international style. The upmarket products
advertised in women’s magazines such as Phloi Kaem Phet and Dichan which feature European and Eurasian models, give a good illustration of the “inter”-Thai hybridity. Yet struggling against the strong identification to be globalised and “un-Thai” are deep-seated desires to remain comfortably within the ethno-ideology of Thainess, imagined as a harmonious community where familial and village values continue to prevail (Kasian, 1996:247).

Still another twist to the way Thainess has been transformed has been the popularity of “how to” manuals that are written or translated for business people, civil servants and managers of all stripes, including the military. Now more than ever before, Thailand must trade in regional as well as global markets, and this means the powerful East Asian economies of Japan, Korea and China, as well as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Sino-Thai networks in these countries as well as among the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asian countries are often a key to success. The Chinese treatise on warfare by Sunzi, The Art of War, is a basic source for these manuals, as is the Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sam kok in Thai; Sanguo yanyi in Chinese) that have been disseminated orally in East Asian cultures for many centuries. These writings contain vital information on the “arts of strategy” of particular use to Sino-Thai entrepreneurs and managers and are of increasing interest to anyone of whatever ethnicity wanting to compete in markets for products, commodities or ideas. The “arts of strategy” have a distinctive East Asian pedigree, sometimes encapsulated by the phrase “the wisdom of the East” (phum panya tawanok), that celebrates the economic power and cultural heritage of “Asia” as against “the West” (Reynolds, 1997).

Of special interest in this respect is Suwinai Pharanawalai, an economist at Thammasat University, who was educated in Japan, speaks Japanese fluently and was one of the few observers prescient enough to anticipate the economic collapse three years before it happened (Suwinai, 1994). Suwinai is one of the promoters of a distinctly East Asian “knowledge for struggle in the globalising epoch”, as the subtitle of one of his books puts it (Suwinai, 1995). His Kungfu for a Better Life (Suwinai, 1995), which first appeared in 1990 and was reprinted many times, is indebted to Japanese and Chinese writings that offer the kind of knowledge and personal disciplines needed in tough times. In 1994 he founded a school, Seibukan Martial Arts and Homo Excellens Academy, where he teaches his philosophy for developing mind, body and spirit. The doctrines of the self that Suwinai studies and practices are culturally quite distinct from those promoted by the ideology of “nation-religion-monarchy” that have been typical of the ethno-ideology of Thainess prominent until the late 1980s.

However, older manifestations of Thainess have by no means fallen into extinction. One particularly interesting parallel with the pre-World War II period has been the renewed academic interest in studying Tai groups and languages outside of Thailand. During the periods both of royal absolutism as well as of military rule before the war, the Thai elite expressed yearnings for Tai “brothers and sisters”, the Shan, Lao, Black and White Tai then under the colonial yoke in neighbouring countries (Reynolds, 1993:19-20). These yearnings were two-edged: sympathy for colonised Tai peoples, to be sure; but also feelings of superiority with respect to the ruling elites of Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam who had been less fortunate, or less adept, at negotiating an escape from colonialism.

Nowadays, the rhetoric about the borderless world has encouraged the comparative study of Tai peoples across northern Southeast Asia. In the 1980s, Tai ethnic studies concentrated on village culture, particularly Thai economic culture of the local community. One of the pioneering scholars was Chatthip Nartsupha at Chulalongkorn...
University who embraced Marxist approaches to Thai economic history in the 1970s, and who turned in the 1980s to studies of the village which he regarded as the bedrock of Thai/Tai culture and society (Chatthip, 1984a; 1984b). In the 1990s, as Thailand’s economic interest in neighbouring economies intensified, scholarly interest turned to Tai peoples in the region. Again, Chatthip was a key figure, building on his earlier work to construct a framework for comparative Tai studies to which many other scholars have contributed (Chatthip, 1997).

The motive behind this academic pursuit of Tai peoples is to subvert statist meanings of Thainess. Ethnohistories of Tai peoples scattered across half a dozen Asian countries aim to undercut the nationalist historiography in school textbooks that promotes a linear view of Central Thai development. The linear narrative begins with the nation-state in its embryonic form at Sukhothai, proceeds through the flourishing port-polity at Ayutthaya and ends in triumph with the Bangkok period from the late eighteenth century to the present. By reaching out to Tai groups beyond the ken of the Bangkok-based Royal Thai Government and by charting Tai historical development outside of the Thai nation-state, Thai social scientists produce counter-narratives that pluralise Thai identity (Thongchai, 1995; Hong, 2000). These studies also show that the Central Thai represent merely one of a number of evolutionary paths and have no special claim to speak on behalf of all Tai peoples.

It must be said, however, that academic study of Tai peoples in northern mainland Southeast Asia has not succeeded in dislodging the popular perception that Central Thailand, dominated by the primate city of Bangkok, thinks of itself as the centre of the Thai world. Tai groups elsewhere, such as the Lao, continue to be sensitive to Central Thai hegemony especially when “Thai” appears to stand for Tai everywhere in the region (Evans, 1999:6). Even when attempting to study Thai ethnicity with social scientific finesse, Thai academics too often tack on the Thai alphabet character (yor yak) that makes Tai into Thai and thereby allows Thai to dominate the Tai world (Sumit, 1999).

Moreover, the counter-narratives about Tai-ness articulated by academics seeking to subvert the hegemonic meanings quickly come into the possession of culture managers in the capital’s bureaucracy who effortlessly co-opt them for nationalist ends. A case in point was the international conference on “The Status of and Approaches to Studies of Tai Cultures” held in September 1993 under the auspices of the Office of the National Culture Commission. The National Culture Commission is the institutional offspring of the National Identity Board, and is charged with promoting Thai culture at the national level. Scholars from Thailand, neighbouring countries and overseas were invited to share their research findings on comparative Tai linguistics, culture and society. But the irredentist meanings from the 1930s and 1940s, when Central Thai rhetoric patronised neighbouring Tai peoples, have not been forgotten. Chatthip, for example, has taken care to distance his own research interests in Tai peoples from this earlier period of Thai cultural imperialism. In his words, “we do not seek expansion of the Thai state, for we stand against the state, indeed all states in the region; we want only to build networks among all Tai communities” (Chatthip, 1996:15; 1997:92).

DEBATES ABOUT GLOBALISATION

“Globalisation” has many critics. As a concept, it is attacked for its analytical weaknesses; as a force of historical change, it is attacked for the dire consequences it has wrought.1 My justification for taking it seriously here is that

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1See the critique in Petras, 1999, which argues that globalisation is a baloney sandwich, globaloney, rather than the filet mignon of social theory. To date the most stringent critique in English of the effects of globalisation in Thailand both before and after the crisis is Bello (Bello et al., 1998). Ukrist (1999b) is distinctive for looking at the economic problems in a comparative, regional framework.
since the early 1990s globalisation has been a buzzword in Thai public life, scrutinised by people and groups of all political persuasions for its magical powers as well as for its deleterious effects (Reynolds, 1998:125-38). It can also be argued that what is now called globalisation is a form of cosmopolitanism with deep historical roots in Thailand (Wolters, 1999:209-10; see also Reynolds, 1998:125-30).

Credit for translating globalisation as *lokanuwat* has gone to Chai-anan Samudavanija, formerly a professor of political science at Chulalongkorn University and now head of the King’s School in Bangkok. A recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1999, Chai-anan is one of Thailand’s most prolific and provocative public intellectuals. With Chai-anan leading the way, academics and journalists quickly turned “globalisation” into a key issue of public debate. The topic filled newspaper columns and seminar discussions.

Yet, as Chai-anan himself wryly noted in one of his weekly columns, the debate over globalisation created such confusion that it endangered the mind and health of the frail (Chai-anan, 1994c:45).

In the first half of the 1990s, Chai-anan was senior academic advisor to the Chaiyong Limthongkul Foundation, headed by Sondhi Limthongkul who owned or managed a number of media-related companies. Sondhi published a daily Thai newspaper, *Phujatkan* (“Manager”), and eventually expanded into regional publishing with *Asia, Inc.*, a business-oriented monthly published in Hong Kong, and *Asia Times*, a regional daily that competed with *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. A certain kind of globaliser *par excellence*, Sondhi’s publishing conglomerate represented all that was promising and all that was perilous about the globalising moment. Along with his academic advisors, Sondhi was committed to democratic reform and deregulation of the bureaucratic state that had been dominated for decades by the military. Following the public killings of May 1992, Sondhi’s *Asia, Inc.* featured an exposé of the huge commissions skimmed off by Thai military officials in the process of purchasing weapons from overseas (Stier & Anyou, 1992). On the eve of the crash Sondhi was still in the ascendant, announcing plans to launch a pair of state-of-the-art satellites into orbit above Laos. Behind these ambitious schemes to build an Asia-wide media empire was East versus West competitiveness, the idea of breaking the monopolies on news-gathering and reportage of Western media (Sherry, 1997).

But Sondhi’s empire was an early casualty of Thailand’s economic problems. *Asia Times* shut down its operations in late June 1997 and in August, M Group was forced to sell its stakes in three telecommunications companies (*The Nation*, 27 June 1997; 8 August 1997). In March 2000, Sondhi, termed a “former media magnate”, was still entangled in bankruptcy proceedings (*The Nation*, 11 March 2000).

Emblematic of sensitivity to the deleterious effects of globalisation, be they bankruptcies or environmental degradation, has been controversy about how the English term should be translated. The Royal Institute of Thailand entered the debate in October 1994 and announced that *lokanuwat* carried a connotation of “worldliness”, which is not at all what globalisation should mean in a Buddhist culture (*Thai Rat*, 21 October 1994). Instead, the Thai translation should be *lokaphiwat*, glossed as “to reach outward, to make contact with, to the extent of conquering the world”. Reaction to this intervention, which was interpreted by many to be the work of the monarch himself, was swift, and from late 1994 most commentators and media have heeded the advice from on high to use the Institute’s preferred term. Chai-anan was aware that this pronouncement was not simply a matter of linguistic precision and distanced himself from the Royal Institute, which he regarded as misinterpreting the word’s etymology.

In fact, the Thai term for world (*lok*) is a keyword in the Buddhist lexicon and carries a...
heavy semantic loading. One of the tenets of the religion is the ideal of renouncing the world, and *lokiya* (worldliness) connotes the attachment to material things that constitute the world. Given the unbridled development that accompanied rapid growth from the mid-1980s on, it is little wonder that for many Thai speakers *lokanuwat* evokes all that is unethical and immoral about the consequences of the globalisers’ practices. These include pollution of waterways, the destruction of forests, the deracination of agriculturalists to make way for factory farming or golf courses, and murderous dealings to advance business and political careers, the parliament being the prime site for building business connections. The greed, conspicuous consumption, ill health and bitterness that were the lot of many in Thailand during this period were memorialised in a series of volumes of short stories edited by Suchat Sawatsi, the punning titles of which spoke sardonically about the darker side of globalisation, for example, “greedism” (*lophanuwat*) and unbridled consumerism (*phokanuwat*) (see Reynolds, 1998:126).

The decidedly mixed blessing of globalisation kindled a debate among public intellectuals, mostly academics, authors and professionals who were making a name for themselves through their writings and public appearances. Kasian Tejapira, who wrote a column for the daily *Phujatkan*, one of Sondhi’s media outlets, characterised the protagonists in the debate as “globalisers” and “communitarians” (Kasian, 1995:115-31). To sharpen the distinction between these two positions and to convey a sense of contentiousness, Kasian gleefully characterised the debate as a series of boxing matches.

“Globalisers” aggressively advocated the internationalising of the economy, while the term “communitarians” captured the spirit of NGO workers and their academic supporters who were struggling with the unfortunate by-products of globalisation (Kasian, 1995:115). Globalisers and communitarians agreed on several points. They agreed on their opposition to the bureaucratic state in terms of its lack of direction and its inefficiencies. But they differed in their proposals for reforming state-society relations. The globalisers wanted to see a reduction in state power; they wanted a deregulated market and as little interference in the private sector as possible. By contrast, communitarians have wanted the state to reduce its power and interference in village communities and to respect and ensure the inalienable right of village communities to govern themselves and to manage their own resources. Empowering village communities would enable them to join in economic decision-making with the public and private sectors. The communitarians have substantial support and lobbying power through such organisations as the Assembly of the Poor (*samatcha khonjon*), whose membership, tactics and policies exemplify what communitarians stand for (Baker, 2000).

In neither case did these groups cohere or mobilise in any political sense. By no means could they be seen as discrete camps, nor could left and right express the politics of the boxers. Communitarians could be former political activists from the 1970s, but they also included His Majesty King Bhumiphol, who for many decades has expressed strong views in favour of self-reliance (cf. Hewison, this issue), village cooperation and low-tech solutions (Pasuk & Baker, 2000). By the same token, globalisers such as Sondhi and his academic advisors were in the same camp as people of deep democratic sympathies who were convinced that only by keeping Thailand open to the outside world could the country set higher standards of participatory government and equitable sharing of resources (Chai-anan, 1994a; 1994c). Then again, not all globalisers were populist.

2Another, somewhat simplistic, typology by Chakarin Komolsiri (1995) pits resistors against globalists with fusionists somewhere in between.
Globalisers and communitarians “boxed” with each other on many fronts, such as over the question of the knowledge that would most benefit various constituencies: What kinds of knowledge did Thailand need to produce in order to continue to grow economically? Who presently controlled this knowledge? Who or what were the vehicles for disseminating this knowledge in Thai society? These questions about knowledge were particularly acute in the early- to mid-1990s as advances in computer technology began to have an impact in Thailand. Bunrak among others, wrote passionately about the questions raised by the cybernetic revolution, and he warned against “the illusions of the information society” (Bunrak, 1994:152-57).

But the issue of continued economic productivity with a very shallow base of technical and professional expertise was beginning to worry the globalisers and the international economists who were watching Thailand’s “economic miracle” carefully. In a series of lectures and public speeches on technical, scientific, and social scientific education, Chai-anan, one of the globalisers in Kastian’s typology, argued that Thailand was forced to import advanced technology at huge cost, with fees paid for technical assistance and implementation that had increased by a factor of 75 from 1972 until 1990 (Chai-anan, 1994a:38-39). Over the previous three decades, it had been lax in developing its own technical and scientific knowledge, and its research capacity was now much diminished. In fact, the need for qualified researchers in basic science, technology, social science and humanities was nothing short of desperate (Chai-anan, 1994a:47. 51). If Thailand did not move quickly to meet this need it would lose its comparative advantage, and economic growth would slow. The concern for competitive advantage also led to a campaign to introduce English language at the primary level to equip Thais to manoeuvre in the world of international commerce and communications. Some advocates for increased English proficiency even argued that by not being colonised, Thailand had missed out on English-language capability enjoyed by Malaysia and the Philippines! The national government began to respond to the knowledge crisis by establishing in April 1993 the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) whose ambitious initial plans called for the training of 25,000 doctorates within 25 years.

Another kind of knowledge critical to debates about globalisation before and after the crash was local knowledge. Communitarians, as well as some globalisers, have been sensitive to the issue of what is threatened by globalisation, and what is threatened most is local customs, local practices, local culture, and even local language. Chai-anan himself alluded to this other kind of knowledge when he talked about the need to relate globalised knowledge in a way that benefited local communities. This new knowledge would build “globalised communitarianism” (Chai-anan, 1994a:54), which is not quite the same idea of local identity that communitarians endeavour to protect in responding to the rapacious and marginalising effects of development. In any case, the economic crisis of mid-1997 sharpened the sense of local loss. As the national government buckled under the strict controls imposed by international financial institutions, the national community itself could be said to be “local” in relation to an international regulatory order hovering over the domestic economy.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

In the first months of the crisis, the public, particularly the educated public – civil servants, business people and professionals – demanded explanations of what had happened. The government of former General Chaoyalit Yongchaiyut fell because of the perceived and real mismanagement laid at his feet, but public debate in the media spread the blame much wider to include venal Thai politicians and business people as well as wicked foreign speculators. Unlike Indonesia, which faced a currency crisis and a mounting
political crisis that led to major regime change, blame in Thailand did not fall on the Sino-Thai business elite whose acumen and regional networking fuelled the boom. While the pundits, public intellectuals and the media were generally caught unprepared by the scale and intensity of the crisis, it was clear—and it had been clear for several years previously—that the problems wrought by globalisation were not merely economic but were also cultural, environmental and technological. It was to address these non-economic issues—iniquity, irregularities in the electoral process, corruption in all forms—that a new constitution was being drafted, and the financial crisis now hastened its passage through committees. Its promulgation on 1 October 1997 held out the promise of greater transparency and accountability, and a new government with a new prime minister elected in the same month committed itself to rectifying the abuses that had precipitated the financial chaos.

One public intellectual in the chorus of critics of globalisation was Tienchai Wongchaisuwon, recently returned from his doctoral studies in the USA. Tienchai had already published two books on globalisation and its discontents (Tienchai, 1996a; 1996b). Now, with funding from the TRF he launched a series of books as the “Vision Project” (witthithat) under two headings: the Globalisation Series; and the Local Knowledge Series. For a pen-name he uses the epochal “Yuk Si-ariya” or “Age of the Mettaya Buddha”, the Buddha who is to be reborn in this world long after the religion of Gautama Buddha has come to an end, when the saving message of Dhamma will again right the world after the upheavals of the Age of Darkness, the Kaliyuga. In the popular Thai folktale version of this belief, millenarian elements such as material abundance, common property, perfection of human beauty, and the absence of crime and war have been added to the original story (Kasian, forthcoming:25). Thus, with all its utopian pretensions, Tienchai’s pen-name is a dream of a better Thailand.

The books, which carry the TRF logo, are intended as a forum for public discussion where the country’s economic, political, cultural, and technological problems are aired and analysed. From the outset, the Vision Project was pitched as a resource for readers to educate themselves on global as well as local conditions. The inaugural volume which was published in August 1997, hard on the heels of the initial economic tremors, hospitably invited readers “to the world of the intellect [panya]” (Phitthaya, 1997). The motto on the cover of the series is “books that take flight on the wings of the intellect”. In fact, in promoting the books as a contribution to critical and useful knowledge, Tienchai was taking advantage of what other authors working in the marketplace of ideas were already publishing. For example, Kriangsak Jaroenwongsak, an economist at Kasetsart University and Executive Director of the Institute of Future Studies for Development, had started a series called “Opening Up the World of Ideas” (Kriangsak, 1996). He too was concerned that Thailand was overly dependent on foreign technology and was destined to become an “intellectual colony of the more developed countries” if action was not taken immediately to address the weaknesses in science and technology (Bangkok Post, 9 July 2000).

In casting the series in terms of “vision”, Tienchai and the TRF team were also capitalising on public recognition of the vision metaphor from debates earlier in the 1990s when, after the events of Black May 1992, public intellectuals called on the government to guarantee more genuinely participatory politics. Public intellectuals in Thailand had discussed what the vision should be and whether yanthat or wisaihat was a more appropriate translation. Embedded in the Indo-European etymology of the English-language

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In casting the series in terms of “vision”, Tienchai and the TRF team were also capitalising on public recognition of the vision metaphor from debates earlier in the 1990s when, after the events of Black May 1992, public intellectuals called on the government to guarantee more genuinely participatory politics. Public intellectuals in Thailand had discussed what the vision should be and whether yanthat or wisaihat was a more appropriate translation. Embedded in the Indo-European etymology of the English-language
vision, Thirayut Bunmi argued, was the idea of “knowledge”. In Thai language, too, one cannot “see” without having proper knowledge (Siang Kong [“Sound of the Gong”], *Matichon*, 4 November 1994).

Many of the authors now writing in the Vision Project volumes are those very same public intellectuals: junior and senior scholars; academics now working with NGOs; monks; journalists who have reported on regime changes and public issues for decades; and university-based authors famous for their regular newspaper columns and appearances on television. The output of the project is impressive. With a volume of essays or monograph published virtually every month since March 1998, there are now almost two dozen volumes.

The books are promoted behind covers of striking graphic design that push the issue of Thailand’s vulnerability under the reader’s nose. Titles (translated) such as *Declaration of Independence from the IMF, The Global Crisis and the World Bank’s Plan to Take Over Thailand, America’s Strategies for Maintaining its Hegemony and Thailand in the Age of Cultural Slavery* lack the self-confidence of the boom years and blame external forces for the country’s plight. Such language self-consciously challenges the boosterism and unfettered optimism of the economists and public officials who trumpeted the virtues of foreign loans and investment in non-productive sectors such as real estate development and golf courses. The rhetoric in the books challenges the chic, affluent and “inter” lifestyle of the readers of the upmarket glossy women’s magazines. The rhetoric also employs some of the keywords of Buddhism, setting a moral and apochryphal tone: Kaliyuga (the dark age of misery, misfortune, vice); Maya (illusion, deceptive appearances); hayana (decay, disaster), and of course Tienchai’s own pen-name of utopian promise.

As Tienchai’s critics are quick to point out, the research in the volumes is light and the style journalistic, but the prose in the volumes renders them user-friendly. There are no numbingly long footnotes or padded bibliographies citing works of arcane Western theory. There is also no unified point of view, with diverse authors, some more authoritative than others, offering different perspectives on the crisis. The books are meant to be popular and to appeal to younger people such as university students. It seems that Tienchai is able to cause discomfort in his readers by challenging their assumptions. The notion of Thailand presently besieged by powerful foreign interests shakes Thai confidence that the country’s leadership, culture and institutions have always successfully withstood foreign aggression.

The cultural and environmental critiques of globalisation have filled a void for many readers (Chaiwat Satha-anand, 13 February 2000, personal communication). The first volume in the Globalisation Series, *Kaliyuga and the Collapse of the Thai Economy*, has been reprinted three times since it first appeared in August 1997 (Phitthaya, 1997). The volume on good governance, *Thammarat*, is the best discussion of the topic in Thai (Phitthaya, 1998b), while *The Media Crisis* of the same year is highly critical of the domination of global media (Phitthaya, 1998c). A recent volume on education reform (*Revolutionising Thai Education*) appeared in September 1999 as government plans to privatise the tertiary sector became widely known (Phitthaya, 1999). The titles in the series are topical and unfailingly canny in following items of current news interest.

A volume on science and technology in April 2000 marked the sixteenth book in the Local Knowledge Series of the project (Anut, 2000). For Thailand and other rapidly developing countries, what is at stake in creating a strong science and technology base is the difference between economic sovereignty and economic dependency. To take genetically modified foods as an example, the issue is not so much consumer resistance
to these foods, as in Europe, North America and Australia, but in ownership and control of the technology of genetic engineering. Thailand has joined nine other countries to map the genetic code of rice. Once unravelled, the genetic code is in the public domain, and any country can make use of the information to create new rice varieties. It is thus imperative for Thailand to acquire the science necessary to manipulate the genetic information to improve its rice varieties. Otherwise, it will lose markets to competitors (Anut, 2000:180-82).

In fact, a striking feature of the Vision Project books is the fierce attack on global organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The extent to which these attacks are following public opinion or shaping that opinion is difficult to gauge, but in Tienchai’s own case the nature of the attacks deserves some explanation. For one thing, after the violent coup in October 1976 Tienchai joined many of his peers in the maquis where he spent the years 1977-79 in the southern province of Pattani and the northern province of Nan (Tienchai, 1999). He has leftist credentials as well as a penchant for neo-Marxist analysis of history and the contemporary Thai state. Along with some of the other authors who contribute to the Vision Project books, Tienchai has found a way to recapture the leftist critique that lost favour some time ago and to use it to take back ground from triumphal capitalism.

For another thing, Tienchai studied for his doctorate at the State University of New York-Binghamton, then the home university of Emmanuel Wallerstein and like-minded sociologists committed to theories about the world-system. His doctoral thesis was a theoretical and analytical study of “The Political Economy of Thailand: The Thai Peripheral State, 1958-88”, and its analysis relied heavily on dependency theory to explain Thailand’s enmeshment in American security strategies after World War II. In the chapter on the Thai peripheral state and military authoritarianism, Tienchai argues that Thai military regimes collaborated with government agencies of the USA to promote American political, economic and social models. The American imperial state “was promoted as the greatest friend in helping the Thai people to fight against communism” (Tienchai, 1993:122-23). Yet with some cosmetic rephrasing, this statement is not all that radical and would now be a fairly orthodox explanation of American strategic interests in Thailand during the decades of the so-called communist threat.

One of Tienchai’s teachers at Binghamton was James Petras, a neo-Marxist political sociologist who has discussed the various strategies of resistance to global capitalism and the need for alternative methods found in the local projects of insurgent groups. He is also a stringent critic of “the liberal free market doctrines of the USA” (Petras, 1998; 1999). It is in such a spirit that Tienchai’s project finds its promise, namely, that the country may be able to devise a path, “a way out”, that does not perpetuate the dependency and peripherality of Thailand’s present condition.

But for the time being, until a way out is devised, Tienchai sees Thailand as beset by its dependency and peripherality. One volume whose title and contents argue for Thailand’s vulnerability today is Thailand in the Age of its Cultural Enslavement (Phitthaya, 1998a). “Nowadays we have yielded much of our economic independence to the IMF”, says Ekawit na Thalang (Phittaya, 1998a:49), as the IMF oppresses Thailand with its “iron-clad” rules. The introduction, written by Phitthaya Wongkun, one of Tienchai’s closest associates, asserts that Thai society is becoming so thoroughly Westernised that it is losing its Thai identity. Thais are lured into accepting western ways of life and culture. In the past two decades, farang (European) ideals of male and female beauty have intruded, with Eurasian models replacing Thai
models. Western pop music is overwhelming Thai pop music, and farang values are spreading at the expense of Thai values (Phitthaya, 1998a).4

What is missing in my rendition here of arguments and emphases is the playful and powerful rhyme in Thai language that links free (thai) and slave (that). This handy doublet has been used since the late nineteenth century to signify Thailand’s lucky “escape” from colonial rule, and it has been used in rhetorical flourishes by both the political left and the right in the twentieth century to defend this brutal oppression or attack that ardent doctrine. The last king of the absolute monarchy used it to pour scorn on Pridi Phanomyong’s Economic Plan of the early 1930s. This critique, composed by the seventh Bangkok king, Prajadhipok, likened Pridi’s Plan to an authoritarian Stalinist scheme that would enslave the nation and make it “un-Thai” (Kasian, forthcoming:76-77). Thai touchiness about how close the Thai came to being that helps to sell a book like Thailand in the Age of Its Cultural Enslavement (Phittaya, 1998a), however far-fetched its criticisms of Eurasian actors on television may seem to outsiders.

For me, what is missing in the Vision Project volumes is historical sense. None of the volumes discusses previous crises in Thai history: 1992 and 1976 (the terrible violence of military-police aggression that seriously damaged the institutions of the state); 1932-35 (the end of the absolute monarchy and the seventh Bangkok king’s abdication); 1893 (gunboat diplomacy by the French at the Bangkok port); 1855 (the Bowring Treaty and the Siamese court’s loss of jurisdiction over some Siamese subjects and loss of control over sources of revenue); or 1767 (the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya). Because no other crises are mentioned, the reader of the Vision Project volumes has no sense of whether the present crisis is worse than any other crisis in Thai history. One has no sense of proportion about the seriousness of the current “crisis” in relation to other crises, most of which, like the present one, were crises of sovereignty.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, LOCAL IDENTITY

Yet it is precisely over the issue of sovereignty and the Thai nation-state’s vulnerability to the “iron-clad” stipulations of the IMF (or the World Bank, or the ADB, or the UN Conference on Trade and Development) that the Vision Project volumes strike a sensitive chord. But the “self”, whose identity is now threatened because of this vulnerability, has permutated, transformed from what it was in the late 1970s. In the age of globalisation, a new notion of identity has emerged that is populist, pluralist and protean in its formation. This new notion, which appears on many pages of the Vision Project volumes and on the pages of many other publications, is phum panya, best translated as local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, native wisdom, local genius, ingenuity, knack for doing something or figuring things out, maybe even savoir faire (in French). As with the “vision” keyword, phum panya conveys an emphasis on knowing and, sometimes more formally, knowledge. And, as with the implicit meanings of vision, the noun panya with its Pali-Sanskrit roots (Pali pañña, Sanskrit prajña) carries the sense of “insight” and “knowing by seeing”.

Whereas the older term for Thai “uniqueness” or identity (ekkalak thai) never had much currency in speech, the term phum panya does. What is threatened by westernisation, the IMF, the WTO’s schemes for making production more efficient, or the USA’s strategies for maintaining its hegemony

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4One of the contributors wrote on the culture of violence in Thai history, including forms of punishment and execution, under the heading “The Culture of Power: Traditions of Killing”. The author, Thammakiat Kanari, is a well-known and well-read journalist, whose discussion of technologies of power and public display of executions suggests familiarity with the writings of the French thinker Michel Foucault.
is difficult to name, but *phum panya* is the closest.

Some Thai-speakers insist that this term is very old, on the grounds of its Pali-Sanskrit etymology (*bhumi* – soil, earth, with the sense of autochthony; and *pañña* – intellect, faculty of thought). But I think it is a recent coinage, possibly no more than two decades old, and almost certainly a calque of “local knowledge”. Although of recent invention, the idea of *phum panya* or local knowledge has spread far and wide. Villagers in Mahasarakham Province use the term to designate that special something they put into the recipe for the moonshine they make. The magazine *Technology for Villagers* (*teknoloyi chao ban*) uses the term as a motto for doing things the Thai way, “our” way, without Western interference. NGOs use the term to champion self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

In these usages, *phum panya* has a decidedly rural bias and marks the growing divide between city and village. Local knowledge is the main resource for the self-sufficient economy championed by public intellectuals sometimes referred to as “community economists”. In the wake of the economic crisis, “community economics” or “community culture” holds out the promise of local solutions to complex problems caused by globalisation (Yukati, 1995; Hewison, this issue). Yet, as one academic has pointed out, these ideas play into the hands of the World Bank which advocates that in times of economic crisis, the unemployed and the poor should rely on the local resources of family and community rather than on the state (Ji, n.d.).

Localisation became a buzzword in the 1980s when the Thai government began to encourage decentralisation, and the economic boom fuelled investment in provincial businesses. Local history and local culture were given a big boost in the early 1980s when an overproduction of well-trained social scientists, including historians, found work in regional universities. Many of these younger scholars had local networks of kith and kin, and they turned their skills to local projects.

About the time she began teaching at Mahasarakham University in the 1970s, one such scholar, Jaruwan Thammawat, published a small but important book whose title is best translated as *Mentalité of Northeastern Villagers* (Jaruwan, n.d.). The first sentence reads: “Local traditions show us each community’s unique characteristics [*ekkalak*], some of which are similar and some of which are different according to the geographical and environmental features of each place”. The book then gives an inventory of northeastern customs, proverbs, songs, riddles, beliefs, games, dialects, work practices and folktales. These constitute what would now be called “northeastern *phum panya*”. Indeed, a decade later, Jaruwan published a book called exactly that, *Local Knowledge of the Northeast* (Jaruwan, 1988). During the 1980s, as the economic bubble continued to inflate, *phum panya* grew in popularity as a trope for local identity. In the face of economic development it became more and more urgent for local scholars to classify, collect and preserve local knowledge that might soon disappear.

But I do not think *phum panya* as local knowledge (or ingenuity, or doing things “our” way without Western interference) was invented by villagers making moonshine in Mahasarakham or by NGOs seeking to persuade Thai villagers of the merits of a particular development programme. I would argue that the notion of local or indigenous knowledge is something learned at the global level, for it is a key concept in late twentieth-century development theory. After decades of regarding indigenous or traditional knowledge as inferior, inefficient and an obstacle to development, development theorists did a turn-about and revalued local knowledge (Agrawal, 1995). This happened partly because of the failure of grand theories of development, and partly because Western social scientists came to appreciate subaltern
actors and their agency in historical processes and change. Recognition of the importance of local knowledge has raised questions of ownership and intellectual property rights, particularly as this local knowledge is often unwritten. It may be experiential or experimental knowledge (trial and error, as opposed to controlled experiment); it may be everyday, commonsensical knowledge; it may be peasant or people’s knowledge; or it may be a belief system (Antweiler, 1998:471-72).

Local knowledge is seen as the key to empowerment of the disenfranchised and dispossessed and as fundamental to proposals for alternative development. Thus the catch-cries of current development theory – “growth with equity”, “appropriate technology”, “participatory development”, “sustainable development”, and so forth – all rely more often than not on local knowledge. “Local or indigenous knowledge”, “local wisdom”, call it what you will, is thus called into existence by the very global processes that threaten it.

But what kind of path does the notion of “local knack” signify? Is it an alternative path? While the villagers of Mahasarakham want to mix their moonshine with a little phum panya, the possession of this “stuff” is also attributed to the King, who is said to have some because of his many projects fostering local participation and community action. There is even national phum panya (phum panya haeng chat), and Phitthaya, the energetic editor on Tienchai’s team, proposes to set up a national council, the Council on the Local Knowledge of Thailand. He has outlined aims, policies and a charter that would assist local organisations in resisting pressures from multinational enterprises (Phitthaya, 1998a:123-45). In effect, this proposal would bureaucratisate local knowledge and thereby deprive it of local agency.

With the most prominent public intellectual in the country, the King, preaching the doctrine of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, it cannot be argued that the practices and rhetoric expressed by phum panya offer a “radical” alternative to Thai government policies. In December 1997 just after the crisis, the King in his annual birthday address to his subjects spoke about these very matters:

Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and live, and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live…. If we can change back to a self-sufficient economy, not complete, even not as much as half, perhaps just a quarter, we can survive…

But people who like the modern economy may not agree. It’s like walking backwards into a khlong [canal]. We have to live carefully and we have to go back to do things which are not complicated and which do not use elaborate, expensive equipment. We need to move backwards in order to move forwards. If we don’t do this, the solution to this crisis will be difficult (Pasuk & Baker, 2000:193).

Because of the canal metaphor and its implications of retreat into the past, this speech of the King’s was criticised for its isolationism and inward-looking perspective, yet no one should have been surprised by his analysis and proposed solutions. In fact, public intellectuals such as the late Puey Ungpakorn and Prawes Wasi were speaking in these terms a quarter of a century ago.

The King was no doubt reacting to the threat to sovereignty and “economic warfare” being waged on the country by international financial institutions and the market. All Asian countries subjected to the IMF’s regime of austerity saw their national economic sovereignty compromised, and in this respect the financial crisis of 1997 had clear parallels.
with previous threats to Thailand’s sovereignty in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, as in the late 1990s, the ruling elites allowed sovereignty to be compromised. When asked to compare the current crisis with these previous threats to sovereignty, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand said in April 2000, “we sometimes have to sacrifice sovereignty for the greater good; we have to undertake modern management of sovereignty” (Sukhumbhand, 2000).

The King’s admonition to practice frugality and self-sufficiency and the Vision Project’s calls to cultivate local knowledge are very much in tune with one another. In the “age of the IMF” local knowledge seems to be a reassurance that local identity will not succumb to the hegemony of globalisation. Local knowledge mythifies local initiative and empowers it. Yet it is difficult to imagine that the Thai shoppers looking for the “inter” brands in the glossy magazines or in overseas boutiques really want to walk backwards into the canal. The desire to be a global, “inter” consumer is too powerful. It is on these grounds that sceptics see community economics as naive and utopian (Ji, n.d.).

Thailand is compelled to solve its economic problems by acquiring comparative advantage, and it is difficult to see how this will happen unless the country’s scientists and engineers can manipulate new technologies, such as genetic engineering, that appear with disarming frequency. These technologies will apply to such industries as agribusiness and animal husbandry that have been productive for the country historically. Local knowledge will continue to have deep emotional appeal because it empowers local agency, but the knowledge society that the country’s intellectual elite has been advocating for the past decade and a half can be built only by taking a cosmopolitan perspective. In other words, in certain domains in which it both empowers local initiative and adapts new technologies, phum panya needs to avail itself of foreign knowledge. But in doing so, it will be vulnerable to the criticism that local identity – and sovereignty – may be lost.

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