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Political terror

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A photo of the 6 October 1976 massacre at Thammasat University on display at an exhibition. Photo:

A Good True Thai

Sunisa Manning

Epigram Books: 2020

The years 1973 and 1976 are the bookends of progressive political possibility in Thailand. On 14 October 1973, hundreds of thousands of students and citizens took to the streets to push out a ruling triumvirate of dictators and clear the way for democracy. After fifteen years of military dictatorship, the people wasted no time and worked to create equality in relationships between bosses and workers, landlords and tenant farmers, urban and rural dwellers, professors and students, and most significantly, the rulers and the ruled. Inspired by the rising left throughout the region and the world, dissidents revived the writing of Thai socialists banned during the dictatorship and translated Lenin, Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon and many others into Thai.

Alongside the open struggle and transformation in the cities, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), active since the 1920s, organised in the mountainous margins of the country. But by 1975, with transitions to communism in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, the ruling monarchy-military-capital elite began to fear that loss of power and prestige would land on their doorstep and a right-wing backlash began. They made no distinction between those struggling aboveground in the cities, those in the CPT, and the many who moved between both worlds. All were cast as un-Thai enemies of the monarchy, nation and religion, the murder of whom, to quote a virulent monk, Phra Kitthivudho, would not be demeritorious.

The backlash culminated in a massacre of students at Thammasat University in Bangkok on the morning of 6 October 1976 and a military coup late that afternoon that returned the country to dictatorship. Over forty-four years later, the massacre remains unresolved, the perpetrators are still unpunished and the coups have continued, with four more since then.

Sunisa Manning unravels the hope, imagination and terror of this three-year

period of possibility in her luminous and challenging novel, *A Good True Thai*. Centred on the lives of three university students—Det, Chang and Lek—this is a novel of struggle, friendship, obligation and the forms of love that bind and liberate them. Det, the son of a granddaughter of King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V, the fifth king of the Chakri dynasty, is a commoner who worked his way up to be minister of education. He is at once constrained and emboldened by his place high in the ever present hierarchy of the country. Chang, the son of a savvy single-mother factory worker who sews leather purses for the wealthy, is class analysis embodied. Lek, the most clarion voice in the novel, is the oldest daughter in a Sino-Thai immigrant family. She knows and senses more about hierarchy and class than Det and Chang, the two men whose lives she brings together and pushes apart, perhaps because her gender and ethnicity make acuity essential for survival in patriarchal, xenophobic Thailand.

When the protests begin in October 1973, both Chang and Lek go into the streets, while Det, who has started to date Lek, stays back. At home in his palatial house on the night of 13 October, Det is drawn into the streets by the sound of gunfire. Accompanied by P’Preechai, the driver who would be his closest friend if not separated by the chasm between the high and low born, Det searches the streets and hospitals for Chang and Lek. When he cannot find them, Manning drops one of the brilliant insights on loss in a time of struggle that recur throughout the book: ‘... Det holds onto the anger of that October and the shame that he wasn’t there, that he hadn’t joined, that he was left scrambling like the weak, to find those with the courage to act, who are gone.’

Chang and Lek survive and appear as heroes at Det’s door the next afternoon, when democracy has blossomed after the king takes the side of the protesters and the three dictators have gone into exile. From this moment forward, the lives and fates of Det, Chang and Lek are inseparable. They organise workers and attend student meetings together, the verve of the change they are fomenting palpable in Manning’s fluid prose. But Lek’s daring persistence in the service of change soon leads the three to a point of danger and decision.

Lek's commitment to rebellion is signalled early in the novel, when she sends a nun's habit flying across the room while discussing *Madame Bovary* in secondary school. But while knocking off the nun's habit earns her a reward—expulsion from a cloistered Catholic girls' school and a place in the elite public school, Triam Udom, where many student activists then and now study—revolt in university nearly costs her everything. She dreams of being a writer and translator like the most famous among the dissident writers punished and silenced in the 1950s, Jit Phumisak.

Like Det, Chang and Lek, Jit was a student in the Faculty of Letters at Chulalongkorn University. In 1953, he proposed a daring change for the student yearbook, displacing the traditional picture of King Chulalongkorn on the cover and content glorifying him with critical perspectives. Jit was hauled before 3,000 students to explain himself, but thrown to the ground and beaten before he had a chance to do so, and then suspended from the university for twelve months.

In 1975, Lek plans to print Jit's never-printed yearbook as well as poems of Jit's that she and other students find buried in a professor's garden. In real life, Jit was allowed to finish his degree in 1957, but was arrested and imprisoned on the accusation of being a communist in relation to a tract he published, *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, which traced the lasting power of feudal ideas even beyond the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. After being released from prison after seven years, Jit fled to the jungle and joined the CPT. He was assassinated by state forces in May 1966. His writing and life have inspired each successive wave of student activism, and in October 2020 Chulalongkorn University students formally apologised to Jit for his persecution by their seniors.

When Lek's plan to print Jit's yearbook becomes known to the university administration in *A Good True Thai*, the consequences are even graver than those faced by Jit. She is accused of *lèse majesté*, or insulting the king, punishable by years in prison and social sanctions that would affect her entire family. Det, despite feeling as though her actions are a personal attack on him, since King Chulalongkorn was his grandfather, implores his father to intervene. Lek escapes

unscathed, but the incident pushes the three friends to flee to the jungle and join the CPT. Like the real-life students who actually fled, what they find is not the paradise beyond hierarchy that they imagined. As Det, Chang and Lek try to figure out who they are individually, to one another, within the society they have left and the new one they are working to build, the costs of political transformation become blindingly personal. As the novel concludes with the 6 October 1976 massacre and the end of possibility, Manning elegantly unveils how right-wing forces exacted these costs upon the whole society.

A *Good True Thai* was published in September last year, just as secondary and university students were emerging as leaders of the most radical mass movement to emerge in Thailand since the October 1976 massacre. As 2020 moved into 2021, the future of the movement remained undecided. King Vajiralongkorn has yet to respond to, or even acknowledge, the demands calling for reform of the monarchy.

Although rising Covid-19 cases may keep protesters out of the streets for a few months, the protests have raised a series of questions about the relationships between the monarchy, state and people that are unlikely to go away on their own. Those with power will have to respond, hopefully with dialogue rather than the repression that they have so often chosen.

Resonant with the murder and suppression of the 6 October 1976 massacre, students are facing violence and the loss of freedoms for questioning the monarchy. Yet what makes Sunisa Manning's book urgent in this moment is not that the past is repeating itself—any historian will assert that repetition is impossible—but that through the lives, dreams and sacrifices of Det, Chang, and Lek, she conjures into being the kind of citizens capable of transforming themselves and their society. In so doing, she has written a novel that both bears witness to the upheaval and suffering of the 1970s, and is timeless.



Tyrell Haberkorn is author of *Revolution Interrupted*.

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