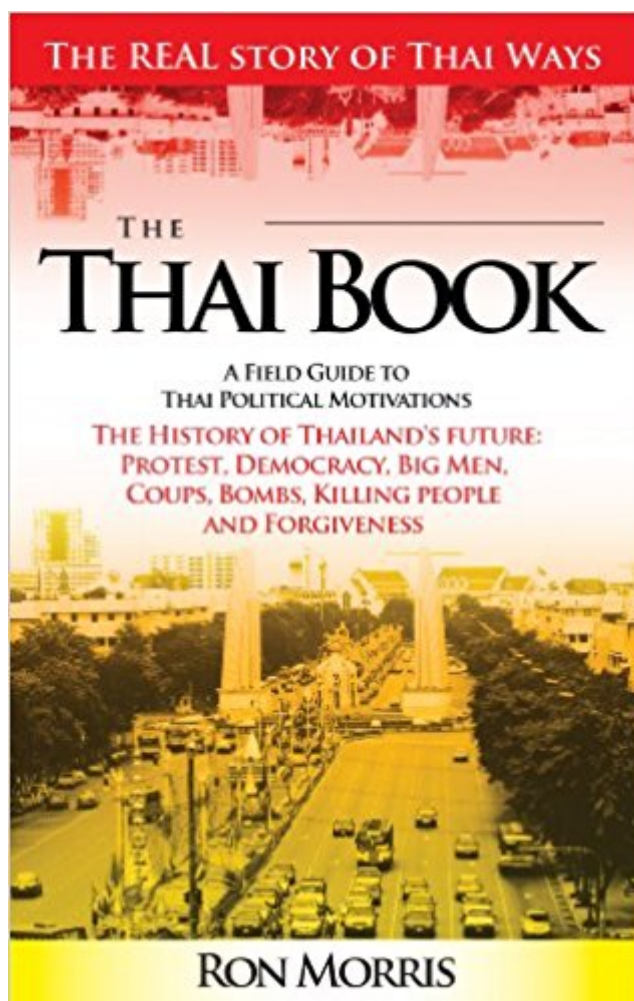


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The Thai Book: A Field Guide To Thai Political Motivations



Synopsis

The History of Thailand's Future: Protest, Democracy, Big Men, Coups, Bombs, Killing People, and Forgiveness

Tired of being told "foreigners can never understand Thai ways"? Assuming that protest and free speech are desirable qualities in Thai democracy misses the fundamental impulses of the culture. Supposing that all expect to be treated as equals overlooks the basic assumptions that govern personal interaction (and explains why Thais are so shy when one first meets them) When the world sees soldiers marching through the streets to confront protesters, it sees events in Western terms. But is a long Siamese peace being broken? Is something unprecedented happening? Or does blood go hand-in-hand with the Thai smile? If we assume that all people naturally recoil at state-sponsored killing, this entirely misses the climate that makes killing people appear to be a common-sense solution.

The Thai Book is the history of Thailand's future. It illuminates the constants of Thai culture and the challenges it faces--protest, democracy, big men, coups, bombs, killing people and forgiveness. The Thai Book is not a dry recounting of the boring politics that always has Thais and foreigners alike running for the exits. No listing of dictators, prime ministers, constitutions, and coups will lead the viewer any closer to understanding Thai ways. It is instead the fascinating tale of why people do the things they do. The Thai Book creates a portrait of Thailand at once painfully honest and genuinely sympathetic. It is a portrait only visible to those who can connect the dots of its cultural and societal inclinations. Thai challenges, limitations, and strengths are all on show. The reader will never see the Thai universe in the same way again. The REAL story of Thai Ways.

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Customer Reviews

The History of Thailand's Future: Protest, Democracy, Big Men, Coups, Bombs, Killing People, and Forgiveness

Tired of being told "foreigners can never understand Thai ways"? Assuming that protest

and free speech are desirable qualities in Thai democracy misses the fundamental impulses of the culture. Supposing that all expect to be treated as equals overlooks the basic assumptions that govern personal interaction (and explains why Thais are so shy when one first meets them) When the world sees soldiers marching through the streets to confront protesters, it sees events in Western terms. But is a long Siamese peace being broken? Is something unprecedented happening? Or does blood go hand-in-hand with the Thai smile? If we assume that all people naturally recoil at state-sponsored killing, this entirely misses the climate that makes killing people appear to be a common-sense solution. The Thai Book is the history of Thailand's future. It illuminates the constants of Thai culture and the challenges it faces--protest, democracy, big men, coups, bombs, killing people and forgiveness. The Thai Book is not a dry recounting of the boring politics that always has Thais and foreigners alike running for the exits. No listing of dictators, prime ministers, constitutions, and coups will lead the viewer any closer to understanding Thai ways. It is instead the fascinating tale of why people do the things they do. The Thai Book creates a portrait of Thailand at once painfully honest and genuinely sympathetic. It is a portrait only visible to those who can connect the dots of its cultural and societal inclinations. Thai challenges, limitations, and strengths are all on show. The reader will never see the Thai universe in the same way again. The REAL story of Thai Ways.

Books and articles analyzing the current political crisis in Thailand along political science or historical lines abound. They have their merit and some are indeed excellent -, but they sometimes carry the risk of an assessment based on a rational or "western" understanding of the situation which, perhaps, does not always resonates with how Thais are living this situation. This is dangerous ground and we are more often than not caught in between an excessively logical reading and a slippery "culturalist reading". But the effort to understand a situation through somebody else's perception is always valuable. And that is why Ron Morris' "The Thai Book" is a book that anyone who is trying to progress in his understanding of the Thais will read with profit. To my knowledge, it is the only book which is attempting a cultural reading of the current political transition crisis in the Kingdom. Along with "Wondering into Thai culture" by Mont Redmond and Niels Mulder's works, Mr Morris' book brought me invaluable insights and gave echo to some of my reflections after 25 years in Thailand. Arnaud Dubus

Ron Morris, has written a political commentators view on Thai politics. The book is a fairly easy read, and it is to some extent nice to read a book without extensive notes and references. The strength is that by being deliberately nonacademic it provides an opportunity for the author to summarize a frame of understanding, that would be hard to do inside a more academic view. The major contribution in this small book is 2 arguments: 1. That Thai politics is not possible to understand by analyzing ideologies. 2. That protest and demonstrations are a last resort of expressing grievance.

Ideologies: In particular Ron's argument that to analyze Thai politics from a perspective of ideology is completely misguided is strong. He very sharply observes that almost all Thai politics works inside a concept of balance of power in the network. Nobody can be too strong! Thaksin and the red shirt are upsetting this balance of power. Thaksin because he deliberately appealed to the masses who previously did not have a voice and he has rock star status, because he delivered on his promises. Only the later part actually delivering is new in Thai politics. The red shirts and the many other voices are also disturbing the balance power because they want their voices heard. This is disturbing because somebody is seeking power - which are simply not part of the power game of the elite.

Protest and grievance: This argument basically say that the public display of anger, disagreement and opposing viewpoints is the last resort in Thai cultural practices. That the public display of emotion, politics and grievance is in itself a humiliation. For many this concept will be strange, however, if you talk to middle class professionals at the latest marching by PDRC was their first ever. In private talks many of these directly expressed chock and surprise that they actually had fun, that they actually talked about their grievance and that they did not feel humiliated, by this public display of emotion and protest! Ron Morris frame perfectly explain these feelings.

Weaknesses: Despite the books strong points it do have some in my view very weak points in its development of the analytical frame. The largest weakness is that the book on the one hand argue that involvement of the masses - country side or urban - and to some extent taking the masses serious has dramatically changed and upset the balance of power in the network of powers is in the center of the new struggle in the political, economical and semi religious elite. However, the book doesn't take into account or in its frame have the possibility to understand how these "newly political aware masses" are seeking influence. The UDD are as a matter of bodily reflex supportive of Thaksin's dynasty, but if you read UDD's viewpoints very large part of UDD and the masses was heavily against an amnesty for all, and many was not prepared to fight this cause to save Thaksin, but at the same time forgetting 2010. The exact same masses that happily walked with Suthep, have been extremely open and peacefully against PDRC blocking peoples right to vote (many left

the movement after this), against the military coup and its censorship. In fact I would claim that the feeling of sitting on a time bomb is even bigger now than it was in 2006. The protest have made the north, north-east political aware, but the urban middle class are not any longer blindly following the elite players. The book is still a must read, but it must be followed by reading the scholarly books like Keyes book "finding their voice: Northeastern villagers and the Thai state, Walkers "Thailand's Political Peasants" and Marschall's book "A Kingdom in crisis - just to mention a few.

Nice view on Thai politics. I do not think the Thai's will every get a real democracy going in their country. They have forever been manipulated by the Elite/Rich aristocrats and Royal Family. They do not know what freedom truly is. And the Army belongs to the King and Elite, not the People. As a Constitutional Monarchy based on England's government it is a failure. The Royal Family is not above involvement in politics, but no one can say it because of the lese majeste laws they have in place and will not remove even though the King himself has said he can be criticized.

Foreign observers often fall into the trap of forcing Thai politics into Western political dichotomies such as conservative royalists vs. progressive republicans and evil soldiers vs. good democrats that yield poor understanding of the situation in the kingdom. Other more open-minded observers tend to be baffled by the apparent insanity of it all: the complete and utter lack of ideology by all mainstream politicians; the blatant lying in the face of facts exhibited by most parties; and the propensity for violence and intimidation among actors of all political stripes. Ron Morris' The Thai Book elegantly makes sense of it all by outlining the cultural backdrop for Thai politics and the motivations this gives the political actors. Some of the cultural references may seem insulting to someone who does not know Thailand ("In the Thai mindset, all activities are first judged by the fun or pleasure they provide at the moment"), but locals and long term residents alike will be hard pressed to deny that these are keen insights. After reviewing the cultural mores and motivations of key political players such as "the rural masses", "big men" (think politicians such as Chalerm and Thaksin, or most military or police commanders), the monarchy (understandably largely redacted by the author given Thailand's unreasonable lese majeste laws) and the courts, Thailand's recent political history suddenly appears rational and coherent. Morris writes in separate chapters that, among Thai people, "nonviolence is not understood and valued in the same way as in the West" and "There is no propensity to see oneself from another's perspective and little value placed on this concept." This is quite incisive, as leading thinkers on violence (see *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*) believe that development of self-reflection and empathy among the

populace has been a key factor in the reduction of both political and personal violence in Europe. In the future, Morris concludes: "There will again be fierce battles just like there were fierce battles in the past. There may be more bombings, shootings, more open insurrection in the streets of Bangkok and even claims of civil war. But ultimately, when the dust settles, the nation, burned and bruised, will endure."

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