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INTRODUCTION



Introduction: Thailand in conjuncture

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This special issue, “Thailand in Conjuncture,” systematically examines the intricate intersections of phenomena within Thailand. Its primary aim is to reevaluate the diverse dimensions of contemporary Thai society through the analytical lenses of politics, media cultures, beliefs, and marginalized groups, employing the critical term “conjuncture” as expounded by the late Stuart Hall (1932–2014). Hall conceptualized “conjuncture” as a dynamic alignment of various elements, giving rise to moments of change and transformation. This conceptual framework not only underscores the nature of historical events but also elucidates recent occurrences, such as the establishment of a cabinet that has reneged on its promises. Hall’s concept stimulates scholars in cultural studies to delve into the reciprocal shaping of cultural practices, discourses, and representations by the broader social and political context, as articulated by Morley and Chen (1996) and Gilbert (2019). This interdisciplinary exploration encourages a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay shaping contemporary Thai society.

Thailand has experienced a significant process of democratization, which has been characterized by a shift from military dictatorship in the 1970s to a more representative form of government in the 1980s. This transition occurred concurrently with an era of robust economic expansion known as the zenith of the newly industrialized countries (NICs).

Democratic progress and economic growth were inextricably linked until the late 1990s, when the country was forced into the IMF program in 1997 due to the “Tom Yum Kung” financial crisis. Amidst this period of turmoil, Thaksin Shinawatra capitalized on a favorable circumstance to rekindle economic expansion and instill a sense of nationalistic pride. The implementation of his populist policies, which included extensive social welfare and healthcare provisions, was crucial in rescuing the nation from the crisis and establishing a robust redistributive agenda.

Yet, the ascent of Thaksin was succeeded by the proliferation of progressively anti-democratic sentiments, which were exacerbated by royalist factions and the urban middle class. This resulted in a military revolution in 2014, which subsequently ushered in almost ten years of military-supported governance supervised by Prayut Chan-O-Cha. Since Khana Ratsadon’s coup d’état in 1932, Thailand’s transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy has been marked by thirteen coups, eleven rebellions, and one revolution. This is particularly noteworthy given the course of the last century.

Commencing in 2020, the rise of youth-led demonstrations, motivated by Khana Ratsadon, occurred concurrently with worldwide predicaments such as the economic recession and the COVID-19 outbreak. These demonstrations exemplify a counterhegemonic

movement that employs popular culture, new media, and artistic expression to express dissent. The protests present obstacles that transcend the authoritarian regime and penetrate the monarchy's power structures. This is consistent with Hall's theory that periods of transition frequently necessitate the reorganization of symbolic boundaries as well as changes in ideology and power.

Nevertheless, the course of events abruptly changes when the general elections for Thailand are conducted on 14 May 2023. Predicated on its unexpected victory of the most seats and subsequent inability to form a government, the Pheu Thai Party assumed the responsibility, having secured the most seats in both the 2011 and 2019 elections. This highlights the non-deterministic character of the junctures of Thai democratization. On the contrary, these conjunctures are contingent upon the complex interplay of a multitude of factors. This viewpoint presents a critique of deterministic historical interpretations and advocates for a reevaluation of Thai society in light of its social and historical circumstances.

However, the matter of Thai politics has recently prompted an inquiry into the state of Thai democracy, with particular emphasis on the influence of hyper-royalism (Winichakul 2016) as well as the functions played by various political factions (Chambers and Waitoolkiat 2020). These analyses mostly focus on the realm of formal politics rather than everyday life politics. Thus, I would like to posit that Hall's concept of conjunctures serves as a valuable analytical framework for comprehending the nuanced dynamics of political and social change in everyday life within the context of Thailand's journey toward a democratic society.

Therefore, the articles in this special issue align with Hall's notion, which underscores the significance of considering the intricate interplay of various factors in shaping cultural, political, and social phenomena in contemporary Thailand. These articles delve into a series of scholarly inquiries that illuminate pivotal

conjunctures from three perspectives: *Political Analysis*, *Contextual Understanding*, and *Complex Interplay*, where media, politics, gender, ethnicity, health power, pop culture, guardian spirit, art activity, and education converge as follows.

Political analysis

Identifying points of intervention, tactics, and strategies for advancing political and social justice, "Scholars as Political Influencers: Celebrity, Social Media, and Political Movements in Thailand" by Piyarat Panlee uncovers the intriguing interplay among academia, popular media, and the political sphere, where scholars wield significant influence through political satire, celebrity, and digital platforms.

Kisnaphol Wattanawanyoo's "Bangkok's Changing Foodscape: Mob Urbanism and the Mob(ile) Foodscape" navigates the urban landscape of Bangkok through its evolving culinary scene, revealing intricate connections between food, urban dynamics, and societal shifts in recent political protests.

Contextual understanding

To contextualize cultural phenomena and comprehend the nuanced intricacies of how everyday life practices shape and contribute to social change and justice, Narupon Duangwises explores a distinct facet of Thai sexuality in "Slim and Slender: Homoerotic Images of Young Men in 1980s Thai Gay Magazines." Duangwises unveils the historical representation of gay identities in Thai magazines during the 1980s, a period marked by urbanization and heightened consumption, which significantly contributed to the emergence of such identities.

In a parallel scholarly exploration, Somrak Chaisingkananont and Pattama Pasitpakakul delve into the realm of cultural preservation of ethnic language through "Losing Language is a Loss of Nation': Transnational Movement

to Preserve Mon Scripts in Thailand.” The authors systematically examine the movement dedicated to safeguarding Mon scripts, emphasizing the pivotal role of Mon linguistic heritage in the preservation of the nation’s identity. This movement underscores a transformative initiative seeking to protect linguistic heritage and ethnic identity while preserving the unique fabric of national identity.

Addressing the intersection of health and Muslim identity, Anlaya Samuseneto and Patreeya Kitcharoen present “Changes in the Lives of Muslim Women Infected with HIV by their Husbands in Thailand’s Southernmost Border Provinces.” This article sheds illuminating insights on the challenges confronted by marginalized communities, specifically focusing on HIV in the context of Muslim women in Thailand’s Deep South. The nuanced narratives presented in this study serve as a poignant reminder of the multifaceted difficulties traversed by these communities in their transformative journey.

Complex interplay

By accentuating the interplay of factors such as diverse conditions, cultural trends, and the fluidity of human movement, this section provides a profound understanding of the intricate processes steering societal changes. In the article “Anocha Suwichakornpong, Film Festivals, and the Institutionalization of Art Cinema Auteur” by Anchalee Chaiworaporn, the exploration delves into the cinematic artistry of Anocha Suwichakornpong, illuminating how the filmmaker’s creations transcend borders and encapsulate transnational narratives.

The spiritual terrain of Thailand takes the spotlight in the chapter “From *Ong* to Idols: Hyper-real Religions, Spiritual Practices, and Popular Culture among Thai Youth” by Suriyaporn Eamvijit. This segment unveils a spiritual conjuncture where traditional belief systems intersect with evolving practices, portraying a

transformative moment within the younger generation and Thai spirituality.

In the scholarly work presented by Siriporn Somboonboorana, “Exploring Identity and Affinity: Myanmar Students’ Learning Spaces on the Southernmost Border between Thailand and Myanmar,” the investigation delves into the experiences of Myanmar students in Thai educational institutions and their influence on cross-cultural understanding. This study captures the transformative potential of such encounters in shaping perspectives and fostering understanding of cultural and national boundaries.

In brief, while each chapter in this special issue of “Thailand in Conjuncture” presents its own set of arguments, their interrelation stems from the pivotal moments of space and time that have shaped Thailand’s path in recent decades at the intersections of contemporary sociocultural and political phenomena.

Notes on contributor

Viriya Sawangchot is a cultural researcher based in Bangkok and currently a senior researcher at the Center of Geosocial and Cultural Research (CGCR), Walailak University, Thailand. His research interests are in modern Asian thought, popular music in Asia, and Thai military labor. His book, *Rock Suka*, won the book prize of the International Association of Popular Music in 2021. He is the editor of the book on Thai popular music, *Made in Thailand*, by Routledge.

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