

# A boycott of the Thai Studies conference?

Sunday 6 May 2007, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2007).

Every three years scholars from around the world gather for a conference on Thai Studies. The next will be hosted by Thammasat University in Bangkok in January 2008. According to the official announcement, the conference will “celebrate the auspicious occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol.” Probably for the first time in the 25-year history of these conferences, someone has proposed that foreign scholars boycott this meeting.

These conferences stretch over several days and attract several hundred scholars from around the world. Papers presented span the range of academic specialization from the grammar of obscure disappearing dialects through the anthropological significance of Thai boxing to the architecture of the Fifth Reign. Most scholars will not feel the political background has any significance for their participation. The royal association with these conferences is nothing new. In the past it has been a tradition for Princess Sirindhorn to preside over the opening ceremony and listen to the keynote address.

Yet these meetings also tend to focus on the key issues of the present day. They are unique occasions for insiders and outsiders to debate what is happening to Thailand. At the last conference three years ago, the best attended and most raucous session was about where Thaksin was taking the country. The call for a boycott raises some queries. Will it be possible to submit the Sufficiency Economy to the same academic scrutiny and criticism that was applied to Thaksinomics? Can the conference discuss what is really going on in present-day Thai politics? Will free academic discussion be constrained by the lese majeste law?

The proposed boycott has been debated on websites and email exchanges. Those in support argue that the conference will be manipulated as a propaganda exercise to lend some legitimacy to a coup regime which overthrew a democratically elected government. They urge colleagues not to participate in an event which cannot possibly enjoy academic freedom.

Opponents of the boycott find these fears a bit hysterical. They argue that a boycott would not achieve much politically, only reduce the quality of the conference. Those who would suffer would be Thai academics who value the interchange with foreign scholars but do not get much chance unless such conferences are held inside the country.

The boycotters reply: principle is always more important than practical details.

Thai Studies is a pretty small teacup, and this is not such a raging storm. But the fact such a boycott has even been suggested highlights a wider issue.

Part of the excitement of these academic jamborees is the chemistry between the “insiders” who have the intimacy of experiencing Thailand day by day, and the “outsiders” who have the benefit of distance, detachment, and a comparative perspective.

Since the coup of September 2006, the gap between inside and outside has gaped wider than ever. Inside, the issue of the monarchic institution is off limits for public debate. The question of any relationship between the institution and the coup cannot be written about without incurring

considerable risk. The junta has officially declared that General Prem had nothing to do with the coup.

Outside, this same issue has been the subject of intense interest. One of the first international articles analyzing the coup was explicitly headlined, "All the King's men." The BBC's coup story was titled "Thai King remains centre stage," and the Guardian's, "The general and the king." Last week a symposium was held at Cornell University, one of the epicentres of Thai Studies in the world, under the title "The Thai monarchy and politics: what we know and what we don't." The recent conviction and sentencing of a Swiss man on charges of lese majeste featured in the headlines of the world's newspapers and TV news programmes where items on Thailand are usually rare.

Thailand cannot avoid this attention. As its economy becomes more globalized, its politics are more and more subject to international scrutiny, if only because those politics impact on the profits of international investors. Inside, there may be restrictions on debate. Outside, there are not. Academics, businessmen, and journalists are all trying to understand what is truly going on.

This is not the first time that such conferences have served as an arena in which the gap between inside and outside is closed.

Thirty years ago, a similar international conference was held in Bangkok in very similar political circumstances. The conference was not part of the Thai Studies series, but a meeting of the International Association of Historians of Asia. A few months earlier, the army had overthrown an elected government. The prime minister, Thanin Kraivixien, was a strong royalist and was widely believed to have been hand-picked by the King. When some foreign delegates discovered that Thanin would open the conference, they arranged a hasty protest against dictatorship by walking out as the prime minister started speaking.

In 1984, the Thai Studies conference was held for the first time in Bangkok. Shortly before the meeting convened, Sulak Sivaraksa was arraigned for lese majeste, and three prominent young radicals were arrested on other charges. A group of foreign scholars, encouraged by Thai colleagues who were outraged by these arrests but rightly concerned for their own safety, organised a petition in protest, held a press conference, and delivered the petition to the residence of the prime minister (General Prem). The group was criticised for bringing politics into an academic conference, but their protest gained wide publicity in the local and foreign press. The detainees were released soon after, and the charge against Sulak failed in the courts.

A boycott may or may not be a good idea. But the call for this boycott signals something important. The organizers have themed the conference on transnationalism and the erosion of borders in the modern world. One border that may be swept away is the thick black line between what can be said inside the country, and what already is being said outside it.

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\* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/boycott.htm>