
BELONGING: BEN ANDERSON AND SIAM

Tamara Loos

Few scholars can be described as beloved *and* unflinchingly critical. For many of his students and peers, Ben was both. He once described me as a “terrific American woman,” which gave me pause, unsure this was entirely complimentary. I rarely think of myself in terms of my national identity, except when writing about Thailand’s militarily supported monarchy, but Ben did. He interpreted people and their behavior as influenced by where they came from, the nation or nations that shaped their identities. And he was capable of doing so—making critical, profoundly informed generalizations about political culture without creating monolithic national stereotypes. Ben’s curiosity about the world motivated his trademark and seemingly zany line of inquiry, asked with the intensity of an interrogation, about your own area of expertise, that led up to an obvious yet brilliant conclusion that had somehow eluded you until then. As a mentor and a teacher, Ben challenged and inspired. He also had high expectations that he assumed you could meet. His very belief in you inspired you to prove him right.

Ben remained unstoppably curious about the world around him. He also expressed his praise and friendship in uncommon ways, most often by taking your ideas about Southeast Asia seriously. When referring to his own scholarship, however, he balked at the idea of writing the introduction to a collection of his essays about Thailand. He thought it would appear too self-adoring. Instead, he honored me by asking if I would write the introduction to his outstanding, field-changing collection of articles about Thailand—articles that he had written over a forty-year period and that I, as a Thailand scholar, was raised on. He gave me no instructions, no guidance, no rules

Tamara Loos is an Associate Professor in the History Department at Cornell University.

about what I could or could not say. So, I wrote the piece with great enthusiasm and just as much trepidation. Much of what I share below stems from that introduction.¹

The decision by Suharto's government in 1972 to ban Ben Anderson from Indonesia was fortuitous, in retrospect, for scholars of Thailand. It prompted Ben to explore beyond Indonesia, a country so fascinating and "politically saturated," to use his own words, that it may have otherwise consumed his full attention. Still young, with his professional life ahead of him, Ben initially set his sights on Sri Lanka. However, for a combination of reasons, he changed his mind and decided to work on Thailand instead. First, he had become close with several progressive Thai students who studied in the United States, including Charnvit Kasetsiri and Thak Chaloentiarana, who both arrived at Cornell in the late 1960s; and Nidhi Eoseewong, who studied Indonesian literature at the University of Michigan, but occasionally stayed with Ben while using the Cornell Library's invaluable Echols collection. As Ben recalls, "[m]ost of the time he [Nidhi] lived with me, and boy did I learn from him."² All three men went on to become leading intellectuals in Thailand, and, in the case of Thak, also an extraordinary director of Cornell's Southeast Asia Program. Ben found himself among these men and many other sharp Thai graduate students who studied at or near Cornell in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Second, events in Thailand drew Ben into that country's orbit. Under the penumbra of US Cold War policies and funding, Thailand's economy had grown exponentially, which enabled the expansion of the middle class and funded education abroad for many students. At the same time, Thais grew increasingly critical of the unremitting exploitation by business interests and the military elite's flagrant corruption. Protests arose from students in Bangkok against the government's slavish subordination to American policy, from Buddhist monks critical of crass materialism and the Americanization of Thai culture, from factory and farm workers fed up with poor working conditions and exploitative land policies, and from villagers challenging the increased penetration and exploitation by the state.

In October 1973, over half a million people gathered in Bangkok to demand a constitution, which was granted, but in the process soldiers killed nearly eighty demonstrators and injured hundreds more. This act undermined the remaining authority of the military regime and sent its leaders into exile. The sight of a military regime packing its bags and fleeing with its proverbial tail between its legs appealed to Ben, who also found the elation of his politically engaged Thai students infectious. In Thailand, Ben saw the possibilities for the advancement of progressive politics where they had failed in Indonesia.

So began his second love affair with a Southeast Asian country. Charnvit Kasetsiri accompanied Ben on his first trip to Thailand, in 1968, shortly after Ben founded the journal *Indonesia* and began teaching in Cornell's department of government. "Through him I first came to love Siam, and most of what I have learned about the country has

¹ Tamara Loos, "Life Commitments: Ben Anderson's Scholarship on Thailand," in Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014), 1–14. Much of that introduction is reproduced in modified and abbreviated form here with the permission of Cornell's SEAP Publications.

² Personal communication, August 23, 2013.

been by his teaching and guidance.”³ Four short years later, in 1974, Ben returned to Thailand, began to study the Thai language, and watched with fascination the unprecedented political situation as it unfolded before him.

The euphoria unleashed by the events of 1973 lasted only three short, exhilarating years. Many in Thailand, especially those who had benefited from the military regime and its lucrative links to the United States, grew wary of the economic and social instability that characterized the period between 1973 and 1976. Within those three years, politics polarized globally and within Thailand. The United States withdrew from Vietnam; communist states were established in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; economic crises struck Thailand; and extremist right-wing propaganda whipped the newly organized rural and vocational youths into frenzy. In October 1976, mob violence and a coup returned power to the military, the bureaucratic elite, and the monarchy. At least forty-three individuals were killed, over eight thousand arrested, and thousands of students, workers, writers, and farmer activists fled cities for the jungle and abroad. Some eventually made their way to Cornell or nearby. These revolutionaries, as Ben referred to them—Thanet Aphornsuvan, Kasian Tejapira, Seksan Prasertkun, Thongchai Winichakul, Kavi Chongkittavorn, and Supot Chaengrew—all influenced his understanding of Thailand.

For Ben, the events of October 1976 marked a turning point in Thai politics. Witnessing it from Cornell, he denounced the killers and the hypocrisy of the U.S. State Department in a letter published by the *New York Times*. He wrote: “The coup represents a violent reaction on the part of long-entrenched authoritarian military and bureaucratic cliques to the ‘threatening’ consequences of parliamentary democracy itself. Accustomed to exacting unquestioned deference from the rest of society, to immunity from criticism or accountability and to an intimate, immensely profitable relationship with Washington, they have been panic-stricken when badly paid workers demanded the right to strike for better wages, when farmers were insolent enough to press for implementation of existing land-reform laws, when a free press and an elected Parliament exposed widespread corruption and abuse of power, and when the democratically elected Government worked to normalize relations with China and Thailand’s Indochina neighbors, for which an essential condition was terminating the huge American military and intelligence presence.”⁴

In today’s easy (and sometimes effective) sign-on climate enabled by Change.Org, Facebook, and email generally, one would imagine numerous scholars of Thai studies signing Ben’s letter. But this was not the case. Professors Dan Lev, James Scott, George Kahin, and Jerome Cohen, who studied Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China, signed the letter printed in the *New York Times*, but no scholar of Thailand contacted by Ben agreed to attach their name and reputation to the open letter. Although he surely did not intend the letter to serve as a political litmus test for his colleagues working on Thailand, that’s precisely what the missive did. At Cornell, splits had already erupted on campus and in the Southeast Asia Program over the US government’s role in Thailand. Radical student groups and faculty members accused some of Cornell’s Thailand specialists of assisting the US government’s

³ Benedict Anderson, “Preface,” in *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, ed. Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985), 4.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, “Thailand: The New Dictators,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1976.

counterinsurgency efforts in Thailand, thereby embroiling them in the “Thailand Controversy” that played out on several campuses nationwide.⁵ The polarization of politics within US academia left little room for any scholar seeking to influence US policy through means other than vocal public opposition.

For Ben, the lack of support for his letter was disheartening and infuriating. It also inspired his penetrating and now classic essay, “Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies,” a *tour de force* that took Thai Studies scholars writing in English to task for their uncritical treatment of Thai history and politics.⁶ The article deserves special attention because of its tectonic impact on the field. With it, Ben did not simply contribute to Thai Studies, but he altered its course both in Thailand and the United States. He presented an astute review of the extant English-language scholarship about Thailand in a meeting held in conjunction with the Association of Asian Studies in March 1978. Deploying what he in retrospect called “Rottweiler” methods, Ben bluntly outlined the conservative political implications of the scholarship written by the major scholars of Thai studies, most of whom sat in the room listening to someone they could only consider an upstart. The article’s breadth of vision and mastery of the scholarship set the tone for much of the critical scholarship about Thailand after its publication in 1978. A glance at the piece’s footnotes reveals that Ben had read all the scholarship available, including unpublished dissertations, and that he had bitingly utilized the same data to support vastly different, gutsy conclusions about Thailand.

By revealing the poverty of critical political studies about Thailand, he unsettled some of the founding assumptions upon which Thai studies had been based, such as the idea that it was an unqualified blessing that Thailand had not been colonized. The article proposed four counterintuitive “scandalous hypotheses”: Thailand was unfortunate because it was indirectly, rather than directly colonized; it was the last *national* state in Southeast Asia despite its status as perennially sovereign; it was a modernizing state only in the sense that colonial regimes were, not in a way that typifies independent nationalist states; and its leaders were inflexible and unstable rather than flexible and stable as the scholarship understood them to be. These shifts in perspective caused consternation (and perhaps excitement, too) among scholars who saw their work in a new and unflattering light—as politically conformist. It forced Western academics into a critical position *vis-à-vis* the Thai state and monarchy. Today, these scandalous hypotheses are understood as axiomatic among discerning scholars.

Many of us still assign to our students this blasphemous bomb of an essay. Thai scholars also hungrily devoured the piece. But reading it in the 2000s differs from its reception in the 1970s. Reflecting on it in a memorial held for Ben in late 2015, Professor Nidhi Eoseewong, one of Thailand’s most respected intellectuals, stated that Ben’s article carved out a new space from which to view Thailand’s otherwise lionized

⁵ Eric Wakin, *Anthropology Goes to War: Professional Ethics and Counterinsurgency in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph 7, 1992).

⁶ “Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies,” in *The Study of Thailand: Analysis of Knowledges, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art, History, Economics, and Political Science*, ed. Eliezer Ayal (Athens: Ohio State University Center for International Studies, 1978).

noncolonized status.⁷ It enabled Nidhi and others to explore Thai history in directions that moved beyond crediting the abilities of its monarchs. Ben's impact on Thai scholars and Thai studies expanded far beyond this singular state of the field essay, but "Studies of the Thai State" launched him as a leading scholar of Thailand. All the while, he continued to publish on Indonesia and testify before US Congressional committees and the UN about Suharto's domestic Gulag and the military invasion of and murders in East Timor.

Ben's essays written in the late 1970s and early 1980s continued in this critical vein. Based on his conversations with his Thai intellectual comrades, nearly all of whom were male, Ben believed that the military regime would continue its efforts to eradicate from the education system and public memory all the texts and individuals who advocated fundamental social change. It motivated him to write about the literary production by left-leaning Thais and to publish translations of short fictional pieces by Thai writers born (mostly) outside of Bangkok and politically conscious by the 1970s. He sought to give non-Thai readers access to what he called "the real Siam."

It also reveals his commitment to the translation of Southeast Asian literature, speeches, memoirs, and other pieces that enabled one to make links between literary work and political culture. "My Government colleagues always thought I was crazy, because translation gets you nowhere in Polisci [sic] careers."⁸ Thai film also became a subject within Ben's discerning repertoire of politically salient cultural productions. By 1990, when he first wrote about film, the tenor of his scholarship on Thailand shifted from anger and anguish to irony. Based on a film called *Mue Puen* (The Gunmen, 1983), for instance, he argued counterintuitively that the increase in assassinations of MPs in the 1980s was a sign of political progress because it revealed that MPs not only had market value, they also finally had a real say in political affairs. The position of MP was literally worth killing for.⁹

Between 1990 and 2006, Ben published *Language and Power*, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, and *Under Three Flags*, but nothing more on Thailand.¹⁰ His workload at Cornell, lobbying for East Timor's independence, public speaking engagements, and the intensity of his connection to all things political had taken their toll on his health, so he shifted gears, slid into semiretirement, and sidelined political analysis in favor of the study of cultures. By the time he began publishing again on Thailand in 2006, Ben had entered his sixth decade and had been engaged with Thai politics for nearly forty years. The angry, hard-hitting tone of his earlier articles gave way to mischievous, provocative playfulness.

Unlike his earlier work on Thailand, the later articles consider sexuality, gender, artistic production, monuments, and ephemera. Ben adjusted his focus from politics

⁷ Nidhi, panel commemorating Benedict Anderson, December 22, 2015, hosted by the Book Republic, available on YouTube (in Thai), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngWpXVvkrTA>, accessed May 25, 2016.

⁸ Personal communication, August 23, 2013.

⁹ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam," *New Left Review* 181 (May–June 1990): 33–48.

¹⁰ *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998); and *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005).

to culture, from the primacy of English to Thai language publications, and from military regimes and male leftists to film and masculinity. Because Ben is the type of scholar whose work is profoundly grounded in the interests of the company he keeps, it makes sense that a shift in his comradely communities and scholarly attention would occur simultaneously, as they did in his articles about Thailand published after the millennium. His intellectual trajectory reveals the reciprocal influence of Thai colleagues from two generations: the October generation from the 1970s and what might be called the “lost” or May (1992) generation. These friendships informed his stance on Thai politics and culture, so the distinct compositions of these friendships—nearly all men in the 1970s generation, and mostly gender nonconforming female intellectuals and gays in the 1990s—were relevant to the scholarship Ben produced. If in *Imagined Communities*,¹¹ nationalism was a male endeavor par excellence, mirrored by his intellectual company in the 1970s and 1980s, then his later articles on Thai films, Buddhist hell, billboards, and amulets reflect a much more eclectic community of (mostly) women.

Many of the iconoclastic student leaders from the 1970s who Ben had befriended and championed in his early publications were absorbed into academia, business ventures, and NGOs, or became journalists and writers. Others rejoined the political fray: a few Octoberists participated in the government of Sino-Thai capitalist Thaksin Shinawatra, while others linked up with opposed rightwing, royalist PAD (People’s Alliance for Democracy). However, politics in the early twenty-first century, unlike in the 1970s, provided no clear progressive ground to stand on or obvious north on Thailand’s political moral compass. For these reasons, the progressively inclined younger intellectuals with whom Ben associated consider themselves the “lost” generation.

Ben’s conversations and friendships with this new, young generation of publishers, artists, and intellectuals informed his selection of topics, which he writes about with a sense of levity. These included Ida Aroonwong, the feminist editor of the literary journal *Aan* [Read]; film critic and scholar May Adadol Ingawanij; filmmakers Apichatpong Wirasethakun and Anocha Suwichakornpong; and “Thailand’s top satirist” Mukhom Wongthet. Ben’s unflinching assessment of the Octoberists opened a new space for members of this cohort to express their political and social aspirations and critiques. The strength of his social, political, and intellectual relationships with both generations provided a bridge between the two.

It was a bridge planked by long, hot afternoons of blazing tropical sun and equally heated conversation. While few people have had, in a mere handful of essays, such a lasting and catalyzing effect on Thai Studies as Ben, it is also clear that Thai intellectuals over the generations had as equally profound an impact on his understanding of Thailand. These friendships opened Thailand to Ben, who, as a consequence, viewed that country’s politics as tangible, immediate, and lived, rather than as a reified, detached object of analysis. Ben became an “intellectual giant” globally and yet his communities in Thailand felt that he belonged to them in the profoundest sense: that he was one of them.

¹¹ *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

To be honest, I'm not sure how he accomplished this. It is difficult to learn the language and culture of foreign place well enough to produce scholarship that is meaningful to the political life of that country. Yet Ben accomplished this not just in one, but in three nations. Perhaps the particular way he spoke and used Thai (or Indonesian or Tagalog) enabled his metaphorical adoption as a fellow countryman. Ben chose not speak the kind of Thai that one might hear on the evening news or even on an academic panel. Instead, long late nights in conversations with colleagues, lubricated by whiskey, molded Ben's use of Thai. Ben's vocabulary comprised swear words, slang, and pronouns that could provoke a brawl should they be misused. Ben lived his Thai life in these steamy linguistic corners, which most foreign academics considered nonessential or inaccessible.

Ben touched us all, but not in a typical way. Arguably, there was little that was typical about him or how he moved in the world, both intellectually and socially. In the wake of his passing, I heard many express deep, abiding respect for Ben and a profound sense of loss. Ben, even in his death, managed to connect people from around the globe into a tight and devoted community. Members of his family, broadly construed, came from the United Kingdom, Indonesia, the United States, the Philippines, Thailand, and elsewhere to Java, where together they mourned and celebrated him. In the words of one of his former students, Coeli Barry, Ben "fought the good fight and earned his rest." Ben's commitment to Thailand and the broad spectrum of friendships he nurtured there never flagged, even after Suharto's fall enabled his long awaited and now eternal return to Indonesia.