

The Books of Thaksin

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker

We have just written a book on prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. For us, it is the third in a series on Thai economy and politics, all written with similar concerns, technique, and style. But the media noise, bookshop sales, and overseas interest have been totally different this time. We could kid ourselves this book is better or we are now better known. But truly the difference is not us, but him.

Two books on Thaksin in Thai are now into around twenty editions. Chirmsak Pinthong's mischievously critical "Keeping up with Thaksin" sold an unprecedented 40,000 copies in a few weeks. Several bookshops have sections dedicated to books on Thaksin. Some also have another for books recommended by him. While writing our book, we had to pay regular visits because a new volume seemed to appear each week.

How extraordinary this is needs some comparison. When Chatichai, Chuan and Banharn were prime minister, there was one book on each. On Prem, Anand, and Chavalit, there were none at the time and only single volumes have appeared since. All these books are much the same—reverent studies which do not delve too deep, and have no strong message. Books their mothers would like to read.

The first serious study on Thaksin appeared in 1993 when he was just tiptoeing into politics. It was written by a very prominent journalist, Sorakon Adulyanon. Its subtitle, 'Knight of the Third Wave,' announced that Thaksin was a new sort of leader and this was a new kind of book for Thailand. In part, it was like the "how to" books which are the biggest segment of Thai publishing. Many probably bought it with hopes of replicating Thaksin's success. But in part, it was also serious investigative journalism on Thaksin's concession deals, and his relations with controversial politicians like Montri Phongpanich and Chalerm Yubamruang.

The 1999 biography compiled by Walaya (Laddawan Rattanadilokchai) and subtitled "Eyes on the Stars, Feet on the Ground," was commissioned as part of the campaign to make Thaksin better known and more electable. Like Sorakon's, this book can also be read as a "how to" guide to business and political success. It is also a brilliant piece of political myth-making. While in reality Thaksin was born with a whole set of silver spoons in his mouth, the story presents him as a poor lad from the backwoods who makes good by hard work and entrepreneurial daring. The theme of a Chinese migrant who arrives with "one pillow and one mat" and makes a fortune has become the defining legend of modern urban Thailand, retold countless times in business biographies, novels and TV dramas. Walaya deftly cast Thaksin in the part. This tehming was so successful it was used in Thaksin's 2000–1 election campaign to explain why a multi-millionaire claimed empathy with the masses.

Most Thaksin books flooding the market recently are much simpler creations. Thaksin himself generates a lot of words—in his speeches, weekly radio addresses, and near-monopolisation of political statement in the electronic media. Editors scavenge these words from the Internet, cut and paste them into some themed sequence, and add a catchy title like "Leader of Asia" or "How to Speak Like Thaksin." Publishing houses believe

Thaksin's name can sell books and make them money.

The few critical and analytical studies (like Chirmsak's) are collections of essays which achieve breadth rather than depth and coherence. One exception was a kind of "guerilla book" entitled "How Rich is Thaksin Really?" The cover and title page are so muddled it is not clear who is the author or publisher; there is no sign the publication was registered; and the book appeared briefly in a modest pile beside the check-out and then vanished. But it is a serious attempt to analyse the Shinawatra family's businesses using stockmarket data and press reports. It does not quite answer the question of its own title, but at least makes a stab at it.

So why this unprecedented level of literary fascination with a Thai politician? The interest from outside the country is understandable. The politics of lesser known countries are easier to grasp through a single figure, especially if that person is rather authoritarian and hence a dominating influence. In the past, foreign journalists and "Asia experts" found it much easier to write about Suharto, Mahathir, Lee, or Marcos than to unravel Thailand's struggles to establish democracy. The focus on such leaders also confirms an orientalist view that Asia is run by a bunch of corrupt autocrats. With Thaksin, Thailand has become easier for foreign analysts to "read."

The fascination inside the country is more complex. Thaksin has cast himself as an agent of change. Both those who are hopeful about what he will achieve, and those who are fearful, are anxious to know what he thinks. More broadly, Thaksin is the first Thai premier who has grasped the opportunities and techniques of the media age. His weekly radio chats, and his often spontaneous and unguarded responses to journalists' probing, have given ordinary people a view into the previously dark world of Thai politics. His relationship with the mass of the people seems cool and calculated (with both sides asking "what's in it for me") rather than loving and warm. Yet it is undoubtedly a new kind of relationship in Thai political life.

On an even broader scale, the fascination with Thaksin is simply part of the international cult of celebrity. Nowadays, we seem overwhelmed by great powers, massive corporations, and big finance. As we lose faith in the capacity of the individual or community—and hence in the ideal of democracy—we put our hope in "stars" who can transport us into the realm of fantasy, or "strong leaders" who can turn the real world upside down. This is rather dangerous.

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