

articles

Detecting Thainess: Primordialism and Constructivism in the Thai Expatriate Crime Novel

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Abstract

One of the major and increasingly more contested discourses on Thai society, politics and culture is that of “Thainess”. Thainess is notoriously difficult to define. However, two basic approaches or attitudes to the notion of Thainess can be discerned – primordialism and constructivism. The primordialist vision sees Thainess as an axiomatic given that is ultimately unsusceptible to scientific, rationalist explanation. It is something that is inherent in the “blood” of Thais. It is a set of cultural, social and political beliefs and practices that are intuitively understood, maintained and practiced by all true Thais. By contrast, the constructivist approach, as its name would suggest, sees Thainess as a construction, rather than an essence, and as a discourse that has been used to justify and sustain centralized power and hierarchy in the Thai state. In this paper, I look at a perhaps neglected source of information about Thainess. I analyze constructivist and primordialist visions of Thainess and Thailand in two popular Thai expat crime novels, Christopher G. Moore’s *The Corruptionist* and John Burdett’s *Bangkok Haunts*.

Keywords: Thailand, Thainess, primordialism, constructivism, detective fiction, Christopher G. Moore, John Burdett

Introduction

Thailand is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, a hub for the regional headquarters of many global corporations, and a country trying to integrate itself into global markets and policies through the active promotion of English as a Second Language, among other strategies. It is also the long-term or short-term residence of many foreigners who have come to the country for retirement, through love and marriage and countless other reasons. Others who have never been to the country may be planning to visit or just have a general interest in it. So, many foreigners have an interest in Thailand.

Sooner or later, these people will probably come across the discourse of "Thainess", a discourse that operates at many levels of the society, and which is pervasive and powerful, both among Thais and foreigners. These foreigners may play a big or small role in Thai society – but whatever the case – their attitude to and understanding of Thainess will have some influence on Thailand and attitudes to Thailand generally. Where do these people learn about Thainess? From many sources and in different ways for each individual, no doubt – personal experience and relationships, popular media, academic work, historical research, official sources, gossip, anecdote and so on.

From these sources, they will get different understandings of Thainess. This concept is notoriously difficult to define. However, two basic approaches or attitudes to the notion of Thainess can be discerned – primordialism and constructivism.¹ The primordialist approach sees Thainess as an axiomatic given that is ultimately unsusceptible to scientific, rationalist explanation. It is something that is inherent in the "blood" of Thais. It is a set of cultural, social and political beliefs and practices that are intuitively understood, maintained and practiced by all true Thais. By contrast, the constructivist approach, as its name would suggest, sees Thainess as a construction, rather than an essence, and also as a discourse that has been used to justify and sustain centralized power and hierarchy in the Thai state.

In this paper, I propose to examine a somewhat neglected source, the Thai expatriate crime fiction novel, that would play some role especially among non-Thais in shaping attitudes to and understanding of Thainess. The two

novels that I propose to examine focus on the question of Thainess and come up with radically different definitions of it which I think can be generally labeled as “constructivist” or “primordial”.

But first we must come to an understanding of the contested nature of Thainess today. How has Thainess been conceived and understood? Once it may have seemed an unquestioned given, a sort of *je ne sais quoi* which somehow defined something indefinable and which has been employed by politicians, the military, the monarchy and other cultural leaders with an air of certainty. But increasingly – particularly given the political battles which have riven Thailand for the past decade, revealing the cracks in the tale of a united Thailand with universal respect for key institutions and values – the given-ness and substantiality of Thainess has been undermined. So much so that David Streckfuss, Thailand’s foremost scholar of the *lèse majesté* controversy which, I think, has revealed these cracks in their sharpest form, says: “I’m not so sure that anyone really understands what’s going on in Thai society – Thai or foreigner. The discourse on Thailand and Thainess has drifted into *terra incognita* and as such perhaps no one has a privileged perspective any more” (qtd. in Rojanaphruk 2010). For Streckfuss and other Western and Thai scholars, it is a concept that has been paramount for a long time but which is now breaking down ineluctably and leaving a vacuum.

But despite the views of academics such as Streckfuss, many continue to promote the old paradigm of an essentialist, primordialist, and transcendent Thainess. This paradigm sees Thais and Thai culture as unique and ultimately unsusceptible to scientific, rationalist explanation or to clear definition. Craig Reynolds writes critically of the “disarming ring of transcendence and permanence” (1991, 14) around the concept of Thainess. For constructivists, Thainess is a national mythology rather than a rational value but like all mythologies its power is changed if its mythic nature is exposed and hence there has been a continuing resistance to such an exposure. Primordialist Thainess has something of a religious character. It resists academic definition because Thainess is experienced as a feeling and emotional identification not as an intellectual argument. Its adherents are seen by constructivists as holding to the Romantic notion that truth is inherent in feeling just as much, if not more, than it is in reason, logic and academic definition. From this viewpoint, primordialist Thainess is an extremely flexible concept. It is sometimes something that is inherent in the blood and ancestry of Thais and sometimes not (Barmé 1993, 124-131; Pavin Chachavalpongpun 2005; Jory 2003; Reynolds 1991, 17-19; Saichol

Sattayanurak n.d; Chai-anan Samudavanija 1991; Stithorn Thanantithichat 2011). It is sometimes something that is intuitively understood and practiced by Thais and sometimes something that must be learnt and cultivated. It normally encompasses the three pillars of Thainess – nation, religion and monarchy – but it can also embrace language, good morality, unity and good cultural practices, both local and imported (Stithorn Thanantithichat 2011).

Although the rhetoric of Thainess is often rooted in the local and world-wide nationalisms of the thirties, it remains a current and powerful force in Thai society. Like American exceptionalism and other forms of primordialism, Thai primordialism is probably best seen in the words of politicians, generals and other national boosters. These are the areas of discourse in which it seems to have the most power and life. As Stithorn Thananatichot (2011, 257-260) points out, Thainess has been used as a mechanism by the “political entrepreneur” since the construction of the modern nation-state in the reign of King Rama IV from 1851 to 1868. For Privy Councillor, ex-Prime Minister and powerbroker, Gen. Prem Tinsulanond, the arguments for Thainess are circular: “To be Thai, you must have Thainess and be impartial” (“Gen Prem” 2012). But although Thainess is by this definition seemingly inherent in all Thais, they remain permanently in danger of losing their birthright of Thainess and becoming unThai. When talking to young secondary school students at a propaganda campaign called “Love of the Land Songs”, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the current head of the Royal Thai Army, explicitly stated some of these propositions: namely, the fragility of Thainess, its basis in race and blood, and its attachment to the three pillars: “I have always said that we must not doubt loyalty. If anyone does, he or she is not Thai. So Thais must not doubt loyalty because we were born with this word, and we will die with it, no matter what” (“Prayuth” 2011). Politicians are also generally notorious for attacking opponents by asking the rhetorical question “Are you Thai?” of their political opponents. What is unThai is by definition bad.ⁱⁱ They also invoke the idea of ancestry and blood – a key element of primordial explanations of national, tribal and family identity in many cultures – to denote allegiance to Thainess and particularly to the monarchical pillar. Leading politician Yongyuth Wichaidit has said that any discussion of monarchical reform is out of the question because “to protect the institution was the soul and spirit inherent in the blood of all Thai people” (“Government to revive Village Scouts” 2011). The ultra-nationalist leader and medical doctor Dr Tul Sritsimwong updates the blood metaphor to incorporate more recent scientific advances, saying that “love for the country

and the king was embedded only in Thais' DNA" ("Anti-red-shirts group" 2010). Of course, it might be objected that these are only metaphors, but metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnston argue, are the very stuff of our conceptual processes not mere embroidery; they are the ideas we live by.

However, the primacy of blood in the construction of Thainess is not universal. Today, the Thai-Chinese are fully integrated into Thai society and questions about their Thainess are not asked as they were during the reigns of King Vajiravudh and Field Marshal Phibulsongkram. Even *farangs* can lay claim to Thainess if they feel so inclined. René-Phillipe Dubout (n.d), a Swiss lawyer whose website advertises his advice and help for foreigners who need to negotiate Thainess and Thai ways, denies the primacy of ethnicity and nationality in the construction of Thainess and puts it somewhere even more basic yet still more elusive: "You can learn Thai language but you cannot learn Thainess, it is instinctive. Foreigners in Thailand can be divided into two categories, those that have it and those that will never have it."

Many foreigners who have a perhaps more dismissive attitude to versions of Thainess which proclaim Thailand as the fount of all goodness nevertheless still somehow accept the idea of Thainess and Thai culture as being ultimately inexplicable at a rational level. The former *Bangkok Post* night life columnist Bernard Trink is generally regarded as the coiner of the phrase *TIT*. This is an acronym for *This is Thailand* and the phrase has achieved wide currency in expatriate circles. It is the shrug of the shoulders response to any story of Thai mismanagement, corruption, stupidity or incompetence or alternatively the pleased reaction to Thai smiles and good-hearted, pleasure-seeking *sanuk*. But it always means that the explanation lies not at the level of the humanity of the people involved but at the level of their Thainess and that beyond this no further explanation can be made.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the academic sphere, this same sort of concession to Thainess (or its less fashionable orientalist relatives of days gone by, the "inscrutable oriental" or the "Mysterious East") has raised hackles among some Western scholars of the region who reject primordialism in favour of rational enquiry. In his critical book on Thai economic, social and political development *Modernization without Development*, Norman Jacobs makes a plea for a rational non-xenophobic consideration of his work: "we hope that we are not that kind of foreigner preferred by too many Asians, that is, an outsider who does not pretend to understand Asians because he does not believe the Asians can understand themselves and hence amusingly accepts all he sees

and hears at face value and is sympathetic and apologetic for everyone and everything Asian" (1971, 25-26). Thainess can be linked to the sense of Asian primordialism inherent in the notion of "Asian values" promoted by leading Asian political figures such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed.

Although for much of the last two centuries, primordialism has been the generally accepted explanation for the nation, there has been a long history of constructivist opposition to this view. In 1916, the German historian Friedrich Meinecke adopted a constructivist position against his colleagues who saw Germany's role in the First World War as a righteous crusade that reflected the "character of the nation". Meinecke wrote scathingly that "a rigid, stupid, dogmatic nationalism is not able to tear itself away from the notion that the spirits of the nations are unchanging gods or idols which command an exclusive cult of worship and unconditional obedience" (qtd. in Kramer 2007, 193). With the modernist and post-modernist questioning of previously seemingly fixed categories such as gender and race, it is not surprising that the notion of a primordial national identity has come further under question. This withdrawal from primordialism as a legitimate explanation of the origins of nations has accelerated in academic discourses particularly since primordialist explanations of Hitler's German Reich or the Japanese Empire have been seen as amongst the major causes of World War Two and its attendant horrors. Indeed, Felipe Fernández-Armesto says that "The big change, I think, that has overtaken my own discipline in my lifetime is that we historians have more or less abandoned the search for long-term origins" (2010, 325).

The anthropologist Niels Mulder has criticized Thai scholars for their unwillingness to examine Thainess and by implication for accepting it as a primordial quality: "Although the Thais are very self-consciously Thai, there exists remarkably little reflection on the essence or the characteristics of Thainess. Somehow the qualities of its own being are taken for granted without being questioned or defined" (1979, 181). He partly attributes this to a "deep conviction that the [sic] own ways are best and expressive of primordial Thainess" (1979, 183). In later revised editions of the same book, he characterizes this unquestioning attitude as a fundamental feature of Thai culture which he sees as directed to presentation and present perception rather than structure and history: "Thai culture is at its heart informed by its overwhelmingly animistic system of perception that shies

from asking the reflective questions relating to philosophy, science, mysticism, art, or even modern social analysis" (1996, 145).

But this unwillingness seems to have diminished. In his landmark book *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai Winichakul (1994) took up Anderson's thesis that nations and national identities are created as "imagined communities" through the persuasive emotional power and collective acceptance of primordial myths. Thongchai argued that the Thai nation was largely constructed through the Siamese contact with colonialist France and Britain and the concurrent adoption and naturalization of Western conceptions of mapping, territorialization and nationhood. This led to the establishment of fixed borders and fixed national identity, to what Thongchai calls the "geo-body" of Siam. In *A Plastic Nation*, Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2005) takes up Thongchai's thesis and locates the construction of Thainess in the construction of non-Thainess, in the demonization of various others, particularly the Burmese. This process, according to Pavin, was not just caused through outbreaks of national feeling but was an instrumental process directed by the power elite in Thai society, a process that continues to be hidden by primordial assumptions about nationhood: "most Thai scholarship has treated and continued to treat nationhood as naturally occurring and inevitable rather than as socially constructed and historically made-up; this is due to the illusion of Thainess created by the power holders" (Pavin 2005, 13). Chai-anan Samudavanija contributes to this undermining of primordial Thainess by recounting the differing national identities which have been offered by the Thai state over the second half of the twentieth century. Some of these excluded the Chinese, for example, from Thainess whereas today Chineseness is smoothly integrated into Thainess. Chai-anan rejects the nationalist story of the origins of the Tai tribe in "the ancient kingdom of Nanchao, the putative homeland of the Thai" in China from which they were driven south by the Chinese to Thailand. This is an "official historical version of the Thai state" which was "created" as part of Thailand's "historical *imaginaire*" (Chai-anan 1991, 72). Sattayanurak Saichol (n.d.) has outlined the way in which primordial Thainess has been consciously and instrumentally developed through the intellectual input of key figures such as Prince Damrong, Kukrit Pramoj, and Luang Wichit Wathakan as a sort of ideological glue to hold a basically disparate and recently established nation together.

Western scholars have shared in this interest in analyzing the construction of Thainess. Scot Barmé (1993) has also looked at the role of Phibulsongkram's court intellectual Luang Wichit Wathakan in the creation

of Thai identity. Barmé says that Wichit created “a new cosmology for Thailand, a conceptual system through which the contemporary Thai socio-political universe is to be understood” (1993: 184). Craig Reynolds, like Pavin and Thongchai, sees Thainess as being constructed against the other. He shows that at various times there have been Chinese others (1991: 17-18) and Communist and leftist others (1991, 14, 26-27). In similar terms to those of Pavin Chachavalpongpan, Reynolds says: “We might better understand Thai identity as a negative force, the name for that which resists the pressures and intrusiveness of what is foreign and alien. The power of Thai identity lies in its imagined capacity to differentiate inside from outside and in the process of doing so to hold the subversive Other at arm’s length” (1991, 30). Jack Fong has examined the recent creation and re-creation of ritual trappings around the monarchy as a central pillar of Thainess in terms of their promotion of primordial Thainess in a way which draws on Hobshawm and Ranger’s (1983) edited collection exposing the constructed nature of seemingly primordial British monarchical rituals and national traditions. Michael Connors has also discussed the very personal role of the present King in “embodying Thainess” (2007, 128-152) and encouraging something which is, at least superficially similar to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (1991). Connors sees a contradictory set of postures around Thainess through the promotion and interiorization of the three pillars of Thainess: “The people were Thai but expressions of Thainess was to be cultivated, policed, and socialized” (2007, 147), something which can certainly be seen in the exhortations to Thainess made by Generals Prem and Prayuth.

Clearly, the current intellectual and academic weight in the discussion of Thainess is behind a constructivist view. Many of the constructivist critiques of Thainess are clearly critical of the instrumental use of Thainess in maintaining hegemonic control over Thailand by the bureaucracy, military and monarchy. From this viewpoint, adapting Thongchai Winichakul, we might say “Thainess can be mapped”. Thainess can be defined and mapped as an ideological construction, a national myth that has been put together and propagated to serve and maintain power in Thailand.

But the struggle over whether Thainess is primordial or constructed is a political battle and as such involves more than simply academic debate; it also involves emotional investment and the struggle for political and social power. In this struggle, what is believed about the nation is more important than what is true about the nation. In fact, what is believed about the nation

becomes true as it is the source for action and personal identity. If someone believes that he or she is Thai and that because of the Thainess that derives from this they must believe and act in certain ways, then this could be a powerful force in creating a nation that is in some sense a primordial nation. As Terry Eagleton says in his reflections on Irish nationalism, “If a nation is a bourgeois abstraction [as Benedict Anderson maintains], it is equally a matter of passionate popular sentiment; and much of its appeal springs from the fluency with which a translation can be made from one to the other” (1995, 283).

It is important to remember, however, that most constructivists do not deny the imaginative reality and effect of the primordial vision. Throughout his *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991) stresses that nations are “imagined” communities not “imaginary” communities. Novelists too are “imagers” of the communities they create and imaginers of other possible communities. It is these imagined communities I wish to look at now.

The novelist

In encounters with a foreign culture, it is useful to obtain the services of a go-between, a mediator, an interpreter. The tourist needs a map or tour guide. Novelists are go-betweens who guide their reader through the imagined reality of the novel and introduce them to a new world. In the detective novel in general, the detective himself is a mediator between the world of law and order and the world of crime and the detective reveals their locations relative to each other – sometimes distant, sometimes coterminous. In the Thai expat crime novel the detective and his novelist also serve as mediators between the world of Thainess and the world of his farang readers.

John Burdett and Christopher G. Moore are both commercially and critically acclaimed novelists much of whose work is set in Thailand. Burdett’s *Bangkok 8*, *Bangkok Tattoo*, *Bangkok Haunts*, and *The Godfather of Kathmandu* feature *luk kreung* detective Sonchai Jitpleecheep. Moore is a prolific writer who is best known for his series of novels featuring disgraced New York lawyer turned Bangkok private eye Vincent Calvino. He has also written a number of other novels, radio plays and non-fiction works dealing with Thai language and culture. Moore is quite explicit about his mediating role. He writes of his private eye Vincent Calvino as a “cultural detective”

who “makes sense of the location and people living in South-East Asia” (2010b, 99)

The Corruptionist

The Corruptionist (2010a) is the eleventh Christopher G. Moore novel featuring Bangkok private eye Vincent Calvino. It is set against a composite fictionalized backdrop of Thailand’s last six or seven years of political turmoil culminating in the deaths of over 90 people in the violence of April–May 2010. The novel weaves together the street demonstrations and political violence of these years, the occupation of Government House and the airport, and the coup of 2006. There are also flashbacks to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s war on drugs in which thousands of people were the victims of extra-judicial killings, the military massacres of civilians in 1992 and 1976 and the ensuing flight of radical students and Communists after the 1976 massacre at Thammasat University to take part in an ultimately unsuccessful jungle-based insurgency. Behind the scenes, manipulative politicians and businessmen from Thailand, China and America are orchestrating political violence and intrigue in order to secure power and wealth. A Thai general, General Suchart, with the backing of a Chinese financier, Wei Zhang, has formed the “True Sons of the Thai Soil” party which aims to take over the government and carve up the new business opportunities in genetically modified rice.

Vincent Calvino has many years experience in Thailand and has learnt a lot about how the culture works and how to get by in it. He works his ways through the dead bodies, through affairs with two women, and through the political and financial shenanigans with the help of his cultural go-between, protector and mentor, a very atypical Thai police colonel – the saxophone-playing, Shakespeare-quoting and personally uncorrupt Colonel Prachai.

Learning and Teaching Thainess

The novel is very much about Thainess and what it is to be Thai. Early in the novel, we learn that Calvino has come into some money which has enabled him to move closer to a centre of Thai life. He moves out of his cheap room in the farang ghetto of Washington Square into a hi-so condo. His windfall comes through his acquisition of a collection of erotic Thai nudes painted in the early twentieth century by Calvino’s great-grandfather, Galileo Chini. Through the sale of these paintings to Khun Montri, a top

businessman, he is the guest of honour at the first showing, a private event for the rich and powerful and their hangers-on. Are the paintings Thai? Or Italian? They could have been sold to an Italian museum, one of the guests suggests. But another responds that that would be selling off Thailand's heritage, saying, "If we lose our heritage, we lose everything" (67). Calvino is represented by another guest as the "The man who'd sold his heritage" (69). Here the suggestion is clear that Thai heritage is not purely Thai; it is a congeries of many cultures and is changeable and changing.

This point is underlined later in the novel; Thailand's political history, social development and artistic heritage are linked to the mainstream of history. Calvino is walking through a big demonstration at Government House with an American sidekick who remarks that Government House "doesn't look Thai. It looks like some crack-headed European built the mansion in *Gone with the Wind*" (174). Calvino, who knows his history, replies that it was designed by the Italian Annibale Rigotti; he muses privately that it was decorated by Corrado Feroci. Feroci was an Italian sculptor later to take up Thai citizenship and the Thai name, Silpa Bhirasi. He was responsible for the sculptures and bas-reliefs on two of Thailand's most important political icons, Democracy Monument and Victory Monument. These were done in the international "heroic realism" style, the dominant mode of both the socialist realism of Stalin's USSR and the art of Thailand's Axis associates, Italy and Germany, in World War Two and in the period leading up to World War Two. Feroci's bas-reliefs for the Democracy Monument, somewhat ironically in the light of the various army coups including that of 2006, show the army fighting for democracy. They were commissioned by the Government of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram who changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand, an action in tune with the ethnic primordialism which was a dominant ideological force in all the Axis partners, Germany, Italy and Japan.

A major tenet of this primordialism in the thirties and forties was, of course, the notion that ethnicity determined and underlay personal and national character. Thai, as Charnvit Kasetsiri " ("Historian wants country called 'Siam'" 2007), has pointed out, is an ethnically exclusive term that was chosen for essentially primordial and racist reasons. Pibulsongkram's policies were designed to ensure that every citizen became "Thai". But the primordial notion that ethnicity and nationality determine character is undermined in the novel. At the outset of the novel, Calvino meets his first love interest, the beautiful Tanny Craig, who has been sent to Thailand to do

some auditing work for an American firm and, incidentally and unbeknown to Calvino, some investigation into the murder of a Thai business associate. Tanny Craig is an anomaly. She is an ethnic Thai, adopted by an American family at the age of three months; she does not speak Thai and has very little knowledge of Thai ways. She is cool and rational, the counter stereotype to the instinctive, superstitious Thai. Given the fact that her appearance does not mesh with her “non-Thainess” she immediately causes “confusion in a land that was an ‘us against them’ kind of place. Maybe most places had a prejudice against the outsiders. But Thailand had turned it into an art, even an educational mission, teaching children about the dangers of *khon nork* - the outsider” (2). Thainess here is seen not as something inherent but as something that is learnt and that is defined by its absence, by the non-Thainess of the outsider. Through Calvino, Moore insists that the perception of Thainess and non-Thainess is part of an “educational mission” (2). That is to say, it something that is both taught and learnt and as a “mission” it is something that is taught for the instrumental reason of converting people into Thais.

Moore goes on to dissect the Thai smile, the emblematic expression of Thainess, which is something that is also learnt:

Tanny Craig was the only ethnic Thai he’d ever met who didn’t flash the automatic Thai smile. That default grin had been refined over the centuries to oil the hard gears of daily life, which feudalism had the tendency to gum up... Most everyone got a smile for nothing. But no one cared; earned or not, the smiles lit up the place and all that grinning often kept people from one another’s throats. (II)

Even the Thai smile, that primordial feature of the tourist Land of Smiles is not an inherent part of Thainess; it is historically and rationally explicable as a learnt response to the rigours of feudalism and the necessity of smoothing social relations.

Calvino and Tanny Craig become allies and lovers on the basis of their shared but problematic non-Thainess and Calvino, as the apparently more knowledgeable of the two, begins to teach her strategies to get by in Thailand. Even so, there are some apparently trivial things about her that he thinks of as inextricably Thai: “He had the feeling that despite her American upbringing some Thai gene triggered the urge to eat every three hours or collapse into a coma” (127). The question of genetic inheritance is

amplified in a discussion of the Thai family and the way family relationships are ramified in all Thai social relationships and how the family supersedes “laws, rights and justice” (134). Calvino lectures her on the sacredness and importance of the Thai family but as someone who feels that she was cruelly abandoned as a baby by her Thai mother Tanny feels rather cold about Thai familial notions. This episode though foreshadows the later search for her mother which will bring up the fact that she was not abandoned at all, but rather saved by her mother’s maternal sacrifice.

At that moment though, Calvino feels that she lives “inside a Thai woman’s body but never had a chance to *learn* what it meant to be Thai... She was a Thai without the brainwashing” (137, my italics) that “something beyond DNA had been responsible for her psychological wiring” (137). Clearly, Thainess in Calvino’s view is not simply heritable. The idea that people learn to act out their cultural identities leads of course to the notion that cultural identity can be learnt in different ways so Tanny will later be able to change the way she feels about her mother and become “Thai”. And learning can be done through brainwashing and very often in the novel the construction of Thainess is seen as being achieved through a process of mindless indoctrination.

Calvino teaches Tanny about Thainess through a metaphor that he feels a teacherly pride in. He finds his best explanation of Thai behavior through an analysis of traffic patterns. He first hits on the idea when he is thinking about his Thai love interest, his stockbroker Siriporn, who lives in the same condo and is a rival to Tanny Craig for his affections:

A few lessons in the Zen of Thai traffic might help give her [Tanny] insight into the movement, gesture and body language – the ballet that Thais performed daily, both on the road and in the boardroom...Near misses, one after another. None of the drivers kept their cars within the yellow line. Each assumed that the road belonged exclusively to him... Nothing in any driver’s behavior suggested that crossing the line had any meaningful consequence. (84)

This metaphor is continuously developed in very different directions throughout the novel. The behavior of Thais in traffic is figured as an expression of freedom, “to ignore the yellow line is to be free” (105). And of course, to be Thai is to be free as the root meaning of *Tai* is *free*. But paradoxically it is also an expression of hierarchy and freedom only for some

because the socially inferior must give way to the superior (148, 264). The traffic is also an expression of an innately intuited sense of Thai unity: "Brothers and sisters all glued together with their *samakki*" (106). And finally it is *sanuk* with its "flashing lights" (320) and "fun" (459). Disregarding the metaphorical development of the idea, foreigners who have learnt to drive in Thai traffic may at the least regard the observations on which Calvino advances his metaphor as empirically accurate. But the important point is that Calvino doesn't see Thainess as an unapproachable mystery but as something that can be analysed and can be taught and learnt.

Calvino instigates a search for Tanny's natural mother, Mem, and finds her as a participant in the anti-government demonstrations at Government House. She reveals to Tanny the reasons that caused her to leave her with an orphanage. Tanny's parents were among the 1976 Thammasat University massacre generation who had gone into the jungles to fight the government. Given the danger of their situation, they had allowed a sympathetic district officer to evacuate Tanny and other children from the rebel camp. After the amnesty for the insurgents, Mem gave birth to another daughter who was later killed in the 2003 War on Drugs. Her participation in the demonstration is motivated by her desire to get justice for her dead daughter. Given this history, she has rejected any ideas about the unique goodness of Thainess: "At night, after Jeab was murdered, I told myself that it was a blessing that you had been adopted out of this land. We have too much blood and tears and corruption. So stupid and senseless" (191).

Calvino reflects on the fate of Mem's family and on the concept of karma which is seen again to have to do with family: "if Mem's father had a famous family name, the cards would have dramatically improved...Some called the famous-name system karma – the good deeds from the last life earned a person birth into a privileged family- while others fled to fight in the jungles figuring that karma was another delusion of the mighty worth fighting against" (194). Mem and her fellow jungle insurgents are Thais who critically analyze Thainess and see it as a political instrument. Karma is a pillar of the Buddhist religion which in turn is one of the three pillars of Thainess, so this refusal of karma is tantamount to a rejection of the "Thainess" which prescribes it.

As events develop, Calvino moves from being the teacher to being the student. Firstly, Tanny begins to feel Thai now that she has made contact with her Thai mother. Secondly, she knew a lot more about the shady

business deals than she had let on to Calvino. When Tanny finally concedes to his request to try and find her mother she gives her permission in an offhand way saying that Calvino is a “lucky” guy and might have luck with this mission. With this double reference to her finding her mother and the importance of luck, Calvino sees “a glimpse of a slipstream of Thainess flowing deep below her New York ground-level” (145) hinting at Thainess as an essence rather than a construction. But what he is perceiving as Thainess may be related to a more truly primordial essence, that of sex, sexual desire and sexual difference. As he perceives her “slipstream of Thainess”, he is inhaling “the smell of sex” (143), and he had previously perceived that both Siriporn and Tanny smelt exactly the same, something which confuses and disturbs him (142).

But Mem is by no means fully free of Thainess. Before meeting her mother, Tanny had practiced “the mother’s wai” (the *wai* is a traditional and much-prized gesture of respect and deference), an induction into and proof of some form of Thainess⁴:

Her mother nodded, receiving her daughter’s wai. Not even a rebel fighter would wish her daughter to abandon that gesture of respect, no matter that foreigners might label it as subjugation and an insult to the class struggle. Thai pragmatism never encountered an ideology that stripped it of the ancient gestures of respect giving. Finding her mother was the first piece of good luck that had come Tanny’s way in many years.” (193)

Thainess here is identified with good luck and a deep permanence. Towards the end of the novel Tanny identifies completely as Thai. She has come to a moment where she feels she has to identify as Thai or farang, to be inside or outside, to be family or non-family. She has obtained a patron in the form of the corrupt Chinese businessman, Wei Zhang. Ultimately, for all his knowledge of Thais and Thailand, Calvino is inadequate as a go-between and teacher. She has been able to reach a deeper, more powerful level, that of family. Calvino must remain an outsider, without family. Excusing herself for her double dealing with Calvino, she writes. “I hope you understand, I had to do what was necessary. Family is everything to a Thai person. But you already know that” (364). Calvino’s mind “was already trying to trace Tanny’s Thai identity. How far back had this happened? What were the chances that she had set him up from the very beginning?” (385).

So family – DNA as hinted at earlier in some of Calvino's observations – is a marker of Thainess. But maybe not, maybe just a marker of humanity. In further explanation of her double dealing, Tanny universalizes as female what she had previously particularized as Thai: "Choices are hard to make but when it comes to helping her mother, every woman is clear about the choice" (409). In the end, Calvino survives in this world, as an outsider who is partly inside because he is able to create his own family from sources that he has constructed for himself rather than mere heredity. The adoptive family of friendship can transcend blood and DNA: "the feeling of family isn't just about a bloodline. Colonel Prachai is as close as any brother could ever be" (72).

The minor characters: Thais learning Thainess

Colonel Prachai is a bundle of "Thainess" and "non-Thainess". As a member of the police force, "he lived inside a network of loyalties, and nothing could tempt him to cross the border where foreigners and outsiders dwelled" (88). But in his own way and in his own society, he too is an outsider. He sees the businessman Achara as "part of a rich, closed Thai-Chinese circle that excluded Thais like him" (91). He has raised his children in such a way that they ask questions and are prepared to act in a "non-Thai" way. One of the clichés of Thainess is *kreng jai*, from the perspective of Thainess a respectful deference to authority but from a more critical perspective a reluctance to rock the boat and seek social change. But Calvino sees in Prachai's son Suchin a reaction against *kreng jai*: "a tiny streak of rebellion...enough of the challenge to authority that gave him hope for the new generation of Thais" and it is evident that Prachai does not discourage this rebelliousness too harshly (225). While *kreng jai* has a particular name and particular practices in Thailand, the motivations behind it are universal. Ultimately, Calvino sees that Thais are not bound to the hierarchies in which they are enmeshed. These have no primordial force and are subject to historical forces and change.

General Suchart is a "great patriot" (68) according to his clients. He is a composite caricature of many of the main players in Thai politics over the period that the novel deals with – Thaksin, Chamlong, Sondhi, Sonthi, Prem and others. We meet him at a distance, mostly through his intriguing wife Tamarine. He is the founder of the True Sons of the Thai Soil party and, highlighting the superficiality and expediency of Thai nationalist

propaganda, his special adviser and party financier is the Chinese Wei Zhang. Like lower-class Thais, Suchart is brainwashed; he is characterized as a man “whose mind had been molded by childhood textbooks” (87) and his version of the Thai future is “an escape to a glorious past” (87). His certain conviction that there is “only one true vision of Thai goodness” (87) and his desire to realize it excuses the corruption and manipulation that are carried out by seeming clients like Wei Zhang and his wife. His primordial vision of Thainess is learned not inherited.

Nueng is a prostitute who attends the demonstration out of sincere political conviction but her photo is plastered on posters accusing her of using the demonstration to find customers. She accepts this public humiliation humbly, characterizing herself as a “bad person”, whose work is a “sin” and someone who people have a right to look down on. Like General Suchart at the opposite pole of the social scale, she is produced by her education: “Like a slave who’d been trained to wear her chains without complaints, Nueng would have been taught to know her place and stay away from decent people” (198).

Finally, the Thai populace in general learns to internalize a primordial vision of Thainess. Moore, through Calvino, tackles one of the major premises of primordialism, the notion that only members of the nation know what it is that constitutes the nation, that there is a “deep commonality known only to those who shared in it, and only expressible in words more mythical than conceptual” (Harold Isaacs qtd. in Beatty 1999). Wandering through the antigovernment demonstration at Government House, Calvino is pondering the violence and extreme anger that have accompanied it: “Demonstrators had told him before that farang couldn’t understand how, that you had to be Thai to understand.” Calvino immediately rejects this explanation, dismissing it as a universal and deluded species of indoctrinated mysticism rather than a convincing explanation of Thai uniqueness: “at the end of the day, all cults and true believers sounded pretty much alike” (311-312). Moore is careful in his descriptions of the demonstrators and demonstrations to not portray them as specifically red or yellow but in reality both sides seem to evoke Thainess as part of their rhetorical armoury and a defence of their position. Thongchai Winichakul (2008), as a constructivist, argues that there are many versions of “Thainess”. Along with perhaps the more familiar, elitist and royalist Thainess there is the equally nationalist, equally essentialist, equally primordial “left wing” Thainess

characterized by a pre-capitalist “peasant anarchism” such as that espoused by Chattip Natsupha.

This explanation of Thainess as something that can only be understood or even articulated by Thais seems naturally to shift into a construction of Thainess which is based on the other, a position articulated by Pavin (2005). Pavin argues that Thainess is constructed by its rejection of the other. This other has been Burmese and could also be farang. Thongchai (2008) argues that various versions of Thainess have been able to be deployed against supposedly Western creations such as capitalism and communism and Calvino observes that both opposing groups of demonstrators – presumably although the colors are not mentioned in the novel, the reds and the yellows – had their “farang haters” and that the time had come when attention centered on the evilness of the outsider” (312). Both groups can bolster their sense of Thainess by defining it against the Other.

But farangs and Chinese are also guilty of primordialism from the other side. One of the prime characteristics of primordialism is that all members of an ethnic or national group are seen as having a national or ethnic character. In a discussion on the popularity of photos of corpses from murders, traffic accidents and the like in the Thai newspapers, one of Calvino’s offsideers, a bar owner called Larry, characterizes all Thais as possessing one set of attitudes, tastes and preferences. Larry says that Thais love looking at dead bodies. Colonel Prachai asserts his individuality, replying that he doesn’t like looking at dead bodies. Larry begins to retreat from his statement saying, “Okay. *Some* Thais. Most Thais. The ones from upcountry who can’t speak English” (289). Larry has turned back to primordialism with his qualifications which imply a purer and more representative Thai who hasn’t been undermined in his natural native predilections by foreign habits.

Wei Zhang, the Chinese associate and financier behind the True Sons of the Thai Soil party, is also a primordialist or at least as long as he sees a profit in it. He criticizes the Thai-Chinese businessman, Achara, who he had assassinated for blowing the whistle on his plot to take over the country, as having failed through not being “Chinese enough” and being “more Thai than Chinese” (431). Calvino questions his assertion that what Thais like most from their governments is stability and a strong hand; Zhang advises him to ask the “real Thais” what they think, confident that he knows who and what the “real Thais” are. The novel leaves this category in doubt

Bangkok Haunts: Farangness/Thainess

The narrator and protagonist of *Bangkok Haunts*, Captain Sonchai Jitpleejeep is a member of a rare species. Born to a bargirl mother and an American serviceman, he has spent much of his life in the farang-patronized go-go bars and massage parlours of Patpong, moonlighting from the police force to manage his mother's bar. As a child he spent stretches of time overseas with several of his mother's long-term customers, learning about the farang world at its seediest worst. Where Calvino has Colonel Prachai as his mediator to Thai society and Thainess, Colonel Sonchai has no need of intermediaries. He is his own intramediary. He has a split mind caused by his dual genetic inheritance, and consequently spiritual inheritance, of Thai blood and farang blood. And thus he is gifted with a primordial understanding of both Thainess and farangness. But he has opted to favor his Thainess over his farangness or it may be that the superior nature of Thainess has necessarily won out in his mind. This is perhaps understandable as the world he comes from does not reveal farangs at their best but nevertheless Sonchai sees these farangs as representatives of the whole of Western culture. Sonchai constantly addresses the reader as *farang* in a semi-intimate but also seemingly hostile way. Farangs are the other; they are figured by Sonchai and his Thai associates in various uncomplimentary ways: as addicted to the morbid state" of "being in love" (13); as trying to "take reality naked, like a dumb farang" (37), as possessing a "farang mind-set" (37), as "men who come here to be nobody" (37); as members of a "whole culture" which is "childish" (81); as "boys [who] have no self-control" (132); the lives of his Western police counterparts are simple and their quest for justice is "schoolboyish" (247). They have a "farang notion about equality, honor, democracy, the righteousness of love, all that nonsense." (247) and a "farang addiction to logic" (283). The West is a "culture of hypocrisy" (25) which cannot accept reality and it is a culture in denial of death (11).

These definitions of farangness help Sonchai to define his own primordial – genetic not just cultural – Thainess. He is in a perpetual struggle against the farang side of his nature: "My blood is half farang but I think like a Thai" (220). These invocations of blood are quite constant in the novel and have something of the flavour of nineteenth and early twentieth century racial descriptions. Could we bottle this blood and separate it into its constituent farang and Thai parts? Not only is his blood Thai and farang. He has Thai

genes which give him a “haunted look” and farang genes which “provide an illusion of efficiency” (III).

The farang reader – constructed as a male denizen of Bangkok’s farang-oriented bars and brothels in Lower Sukhumvit and Patpong is one foil for Sonchai’s Thainess; the other is his “good friend FBI agent Kimberley Jones” (3). The story opens as they begin their investigation of a particularly horrific crime which is eventually unravelled. They are watching a snuff movie in which a Thai prostitute and former lover of Sonchai is strangled by a farang while they are having sex. Although Jones is given the stereotypical emotionality of a woman – unlike Sonchai, she cries when she sees the movie – she is also given the stereotypical logic, efficiency and trust in science of the Westerner. Intuition is instead claimed as the province of Thais like Sonchai: “She’s not intuitive as I am, but owns a mind like a steel trap” (4). Like Sonchai, the Thai forensic scientist also possesses intuition. Her hobby is taking photos of ghosts: “I’m a scientist,” Dr Supatra says “but I’m not a Western scientist” (II) which implies that her science must be constituted through Thainess not through the universalist ideas of science. Her interpretation of the forensic analysis of the corpse of the dead Thai prostitute reveals no signs of struggle, something which shocks Kimberley Jones who has never come across anything like that before. Dr Supatra explains that Thai culture produces a “different kind of consciousness” (II) with a different attitude to death. Not just a different consciousness but a different kind of consciousness.

Innocence and intuition

Sonchai elaborates on this different kind of consciousness at various points in the story. The Western mind is capable of dividing and compartmentalizing itself in the search for efficiency but “a nation which has been surviving on intuition and custom for a thousand years doesn’t pick up Aristotelian logic just like that. The revelation that ‘A cannot be not-A’ does not come naturally to undivided minds” (67). The idea that the Thai nation has been in existence for a thousand years reveals a primordial view of it as ancient and constituted in some essential way before what constructivist historians would generally regard as its consolidation as a nation-state in the nineteenth century. This primordialism is also evident in his ideas about this religion. Sonchai identifies with Thai religious belief using “we” to discuss it. Whereas the Western mind is identified in constructivist terms as “the product of a botched religion and a bunch of ancient Greek pedophiles”

(167), Thai religion is purely primordial. It is the expression of “a deeply conservative people”. It is “two thousand five hundred years old and we haven’t changed a word of it” (168). Most scholars of Thai Buddhism as it is practiced would say that the religion is an accretion of Brahminist, animist and Buddhist elements, but here we are directed to its presumed unimpeachable primordial core.

Despite the fact that farang are classed as simple-minded, they are simplistic rather than simple and they make things needlessly complicated. They think too much. Thais on the other hand are seen as possessing innocence. Innocence is inevitably, of course, to the Western reader, the primordial quality *par excellence*, the innocence possessed by our primordial parents Adam and Eve before the Fall, the absence of guilt, of suffering, and of the knowledge of good and evil. Kimberley Jones wonders why she feels “dirty twenty-four hours a day” when she is a paragon of proper behaviour whereas Sonchai who is a son of a whore, a pimp, a brothel owner, and a member of a corrupt police force is innocent. His reply: “We don’t have original sin... That iron rod through the skull. We just don’t have it” (98). Likewise, his thoroughly corrupt boss, Colonel Vikorn, who dabbles in pornography and the drug trade and has no compunction about framing the innocent and protecting the guilty, is presented as an enthusiastic businessman always open to new ideas, to “the innocence of fresh revelation” (25). A young Thai student of English is presented as having an “innocence that you rarely see in farang of that age” (42).

A Thai ghost and superior being

The dead Thai prostitute, Damrong, is the moral center and heroine of the novel. She comes from a background of poverty and violence and was sold to a Malaysian brothel at the age of fourteen. Her only real human attachment is to her younger brother who is in the monkhood. For most of the others in her life, she seeks vengeance. Sonchai remembers her as a supreme sexual artist and he is visited by her in an erotic dream where he is overwhelmed by her sexual genius and power: “there is no erotic experience compared to being fucked by a ghost” (33). She is figured as a real ghost not simply a metaphorical one as she appears and acts in the climactic episodes as a real figure in some mystical way risen from the dead. She is in touch with magic and witchcraft which are associated with her Khmer origins rather than with the accident of her Thai nationality. “They’re Khmer, you know, not Thai people at all,” a villager says of her family (215). This is another form of

primordialism. Her Khmer ancestry gives her the magical power associated in Thailand with the Khmer *khom* script and Khmer *moordu* or shamans: "All magic comes from the Khmer in the end," says Lek, Sonchai's transsexual offsider. Sonchai visits his first lead, her American husband Dan Baker who is working as a teacher in Bangkok. "Mrs Damrong Baker, the asymmetry in the name might say it all" (35) muses Sonchai. And it does say a lot. First of all, Damrong is an exclusively male name. This may be a simple oversight of Burdett or it may be an attribution to her of a masculine power. Secondly, the ascription of "asymmetry" to her name it implies that marriage between Thais and farangs are always askew, irregular and power-struggles. For Dan Baker, their problems were more than a cultural conflict:

Cultural conflict? You mean between a Western man with his pathetic need for a safe womb to crawl into and a Thai whore looking for a gold mine to exploit. I guess you could call it cultural conflict if you were giving a seminar to anthropology students...Total fuck-up is what I call it. Of me, by her. Period. (40)

Baker explains how she used their marriage to set herself up as prostitute in their Florida town and earn big money while reducing him to the status of her slave and cameraman in the business of blackmailing her small town America clients. He analyses himself in exactly the way that Sonchai analyses farangs in general. He was motivated by the "disease...called passion" like any "Mr. Average farang" (39) whereas she was "programmed in a totally different way" (41) and "had a better grasp of reality" (39).

Damrong returns to Bangkok and pursues the same line of business, prostitution and pornography, and she manages to hook two high-fliers as lovers, Tom Smith, a British lawyer, and Khun Tanakan, a powerful Chinese-Thai banker. The sexual artistry that Sonchai sees in her is also a primordial inheritance that enables her to take her lovers to a sort of anti-Eden, a "forbidden jungle of lethal pleasure":

She could get wild-eyed too with the frenzy of sex, and I have a snapshot of her in that state: black hair flying, madness in her eyes, hunched like a witch over her breasts, her brown skin glistening with sweat, the room redolent with the stench of our lovemaking—even at such times to deny her power would have been as futile as denying our pagan origins. A hundred thousand years our ancestors spent carefully adding to the stock of

irresistible allurements in the collective subconscious: her real art was to take men back to that forbidden jungle of lethal pleasure. (227)

She has transcended what would conventionally be called the victimhood of her life and has risen to a state of enlightenment where she knows that “Once you stop wanting to live, you become free” (231). Smith and Tanakan are symbols of “the invisible men [who] control everything on the planet” (231). This invisible order is figured in terms of the primordial opposition of East and West – the West as all logic and materialism and no heart, the East as a “big heart steadily eaten away by poverty” (231). The snuff movie is written and directed by Damrong as part of an elaborate plot to implicate her two lovers in its production and finally to have them brutally killed to avenge all the sufferings of her life. She manipulates Smith through her flattery of his sexual prowess and Tanakan through her intimations of his sexual inadequacy. Her killer was her helpless slave who was carrying out her orders.

In death, the farang and the Thai are very different as are the East and the West. Smith had “this *farang* notion about equality, honor, democracy, the righteousness of love, all that nonsense” (247) but for Sonchai he is a hypocrite and a mind divided by Western logic and lack of intuition. He is the West and Sonchai pities him for it: “What is it about Asians that makes us feel apologetic towards the West, as if we always knew in our heart of hearts the catastrophe toward which it was headed?” (270).

Damrong’s ghost returns to witness the deaths that she has organized for Tanakan and Smith. Smith, childishly brave in Sonchai’s terms and foolishly seeking to assert his dignity calls her a “fucking pervert”. She taunts Smith as one who does not understand anything: “Tom, Tom...If only you’d been Asian, you would have understood so much better” (283). Tanakan reacts differently; He is using terms of address normally reserved for Buddhas and royalty. No Caucasian resistance here, he has accepted the new reality without reservation” (284).

These are primordial moments. In this dark erotic fantasy, “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet”. The West is a jerry built construction of logic, reason and heartlessness and the East is a primordial inheritance that enlightened beings like Damrong can achieve access to.

Conclusion

Both novels tell stories which we can recognize as containing statements and generalizations about Thailand and Thai identity that have some truth or at least plausibility. But in *The Corruptionist*, Thainess is a social construction which is subject to history. It is used in the service and maintenance of power. Thainess can be learned and understood. Non-thainess can be learned and understood. But not easily. In *Bangkok Haunts*, Thainess is in the blood. It is a genetic inheritance. It is more or less ahistorical. It is antithetical and inexplicable to the farang mindset. It cannot be learnt as it is essentially mystical.

So the competing political ideas of Thainess that are so prominent in today's political struggles among Thais are also being played out in the *farang* novel about Thailand. Of course, this is an extremely limited survey. Just two novels, and although they share some genre similarities they are very different. *The Corruptionist* tends to a sober realism while *Bangkok Haunts* tends to the fantastical and bizarre which, of course, conveys its own reality. But perhaps these descriptions are true of constructivism and primordialism generally. In any case, if Shelley was right and poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, these two novels and others like them may have some, perhaps subtle and tangential, effect on their foreign and Thai readership which may play a role in the ultimate direction of Thainess.

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¹ In "Understanding Thai Nationalism and Ethnic Identity", an article that influences the conceptual framework of this piece, Stithorn Thananitchot (2011) defines a third approach to understanding Thainess, that of instrumentalism. However, I prefer to think of instrumentalism i.e. the deliberate use of notions of national identity for particular social and political ends, as a sub-set of both the primordialist and constructivist approaches.

¹ For some interesting reflections on what has been called "unThai" behavior in the fields of political thinking, ethnic identification, sexual relationships and choice of beer, see Pravit Rojanaphruk (2005)

¹ As my colleague, xxxxxxxx xxxxxx, points out the phrase *TIT* is a *farang* counterpart to the Thai *mai pen rai* which translates roughly as "It doesn't matter": "In a way it's a little bit of Thainess rubbing off on foreigners - a way for foreigners to deal with and accept Thai behavior that is at odds with Western cultural mores. A foreigner saying *TIT* has exactly the attitude of a Thai saying *mai pen rai*. *Mai pen rai* is another double edged sword. It makes for an easy going attitude but can also lead to complacency, laziness, and complete stupidity" (Personal communication to the author).

¹ Canadian beauty queen Natalie Glebowka won the Miss Universe competition held in Thailand in 2005. "Throughout the contest, Natalie gave a nice traditional Thai greeting known as a "[Wai](#)" on every appearance which helped her win over Thai audiences and judges." ("Natalie Glebowka"). She increased her popularity and honorary Thainess by her later marriage to Thai tennis champion Paradorn Sripachan and by her frequent appearances in advertising. In one of these advertisements, she cemented her "Thainess" by giving the *wai* to her parents. Interestingly, Paradorn's previous girlfriend *luk kreung* singer Tata Young was slammed for being "unThai" when she indiscreetly revealed the fact of her relationship with Paradorn (See Pravit Rojanaphruk 2005, 7).