

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2008



An academic affair

“Recalling these past 40 years I have spent on area studies, focusing on Thailand, I sometimes feel I have come a long way, but other times I feel time was too short. To be honest, I even feel that I have not grown up since my twenties. My wish is that my work will mean something to the Thai people I have met in my life and whom I have learned a great deal from. I believe that will be the only way for me as a scholar to return the various kindness I have received from the Thai people.”

YONEO ISHII
IN HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH OF THE
FUKUOKA ASIAN CULTURAL PRIZE
IN 1994

Japan's foremost Thai scholar Yoneo Ishii discusses his long relationship with the Kingdom

Story by
VASANA CHINVARAKORN
Photo by
KARIN KLINKAJORN

The story of their friendship is extraordinary, unprecedented and loaded with repercussions for the years that followed. Due to the proximity of their abodes, the two men were likely to have met almost every day. Their exchanges would probably have covered a wide range of topics — from language and culture to politics, science and spiritual beliefs — but both remained firmly in their respective creeds: The Siamese monarch in Theravada Buddhism and the French Catholic priest in Christianity. At any rate, during the years they knew each other the first stage of Siam's modernisation was set in motion.

Now in his late seventies, Japanese scholar Yoneo Ishii finds the above cross-cultural relationship between King Mongkut (1804-1868) and Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix (1805-1862) so intriguing that he wants to write a book about it. If completed, that book will add to the vast corpus he has already produced in his prolific academic career that has

run for over half a century. Considered the doyen of Thai studies in Japan, Professor Ishii has commanded respect from generations of students from different disciplines and ideological camps. This should come as no surprise: Ishii is a truly learned man but one who is also full of humility and diplomacy when dealing with others.

But why take such an interest in the relationship between two people who died well over 100 years ago? Ishii's eyes brightened when he described his visit to Conception Church where Pallegoix resided and how he discovered it was less than 200m away from Wat Samorai (aka Wat Rachatiwat), which was King Mongkut's quarters during his monkhood prior to taking the throne. His enthusiasm is like the delight of a child piecing together a jigsaw. Only this game is intellectual. Ishii even went so far as to speculate that Pallegoix, who had a generous physique, would probably walk on foot when visiting his royal friend and avoid taking a row boat. The Japanese professor discussed at length how the more he researched the topic the more he marvelled at both King Mongkut's profound knowledge of Christianity and Pallegoix's amassing of 146 *samut-khoi* (traditional books) from the Kingdom, an exceptional feat considering the limited printing technology of the time and the restricted access a foreigner would have had to such books.

Ishii reckoned that two famous works by the French priest, a book on Thai grammar and the very first Thai dictionary, must have been written in large part with the private collaboration of King Mongkut himself.

“I don't know how many more years I have to live,” said Ishii, speaking in Thai. “I'm 78 now. But if possible, I would like to write this book.”

Ishii could be the only person capable of the task. His fluency in French, Latin, and Pali (among the 20-plus languages he has acquired) facilitated his reading of archival materials. This included browsing through Pallegoix's reports to the Societe des Missions Etrangeres (Missionaries Society) during a one-month stint in Paris. Ishii's acclaimed doctoral thesis, *Sangha, State and Society — Thai Buddhism in History*, which he wrote in the 1970s, already touched briefly on the ties between the two men. But the seeds of Ishii's curiosity were probably planted five decades ago when he spent three months as a monk at Wat Bowon Niwet, which is where King Mongkut first founded the Thammayut sect as part of his effort to reform Buddhism to withstand the influx of Western civilisation and beliefs.

Are these factors merely coincidences? Or have they been the schemes wrought benevolently by the Almighty up there? Ishii's academic career, recounted in the Thai translation of his autobiography *Gueng Sattawat Bon Senthang Thai Suksa* (Half a Century of Thai Studies), tells of several twists and turns which, in the course of time, eventually fitted perfectly together. Ishii summed this

up as “luck”, writing “I even had to ask myself: ‘Is it good that I had this much fun? I think I am such a happy human to be able to discover what I find *sanuk* to do.”

All this started from a simple passion: Languages. In his autobiography, the professor shares his recollections of growing up in postwar Japan. Unlike many of his contemporaries, the young Ishii did not have much concern for mundane matters like graduation or future employment. His sudden, rather haphazard, series of decisions to change fields were a rarity then as now. From a high-school major in science, he switched to take English language and literature in university then moved over to the French department. After a few years taking courses in numerous European languages he dropped out and took up Thai, which at the time he called *pasa Siam*, at another university. “It was all because of what one of my teachers said to me: That I should try to study an Asian language, one that few [Japanese] had yet to learn,” he said. After studying Thai for one year Ishii sat for an exam at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hoping to get a chance to be posted to Thailand as an exchange student. Around two years later, on April 23, 1957, 27-year-old Ishii finally set foot in Thailand.

“I pressed my nose against the [aeroplane] window and peered hard,” he writes in the opening chapter of *Gueng Sattawat*. “I could see it must be a water buffalo. It seemed to be dragging a plough behind, followed by a human. As the buffalo moved, so did the person. That must be a Thai. Is this a real living Thai person? When I finish my studies, I should be able to talk with these people.”

“Hmm ... but will I really be able to speak Thai? Nay, I must be able to speak it! I have two full years. I will try my best.”

And he did. The following years saw the eager young man enrol at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Arts (where he studied with the likes of Phya Anuman Rajadhon), take private Thai lessons with the late Khunying Kanitha Wichiancharoen, travel extensively throughout Indochina with two separate research teams and enter the monkhood at Wat Bowon Niwet. At the Japanese embassy, he was the interpreter for the historic meeting between Thai prime minister Sarit Thanarat and his Japanese counterpart, Hayato Ikeda, that resolved the thorny issue of the “special Yen loans” made by the Japanese government during World War Two. Ishii's linguistic skills pleased Sarit so much that he later made the unprecedented move of recommending Ishii for a royal decoration.

“It was a great honour. I was only a junior embassy staffer,” said Ishii with a grin. “I think I am the second foreigner who earned it. I respect them both, Sarit and Ikeda, so I tried to do perhaps more than my usual duty as a translator. Later a friend told me: ‘You are a very dangerous interpreter. An interpreter should be a kind of machine, not a person. So you are not a good interpreter!’”

The Japanese professor's capacity to

grasp the essence of a language is second-to-none. To say the least, he is naturally gifted — and is renowned for dogged perseverance, too. His Japanese translation of Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* earned him the Grand Prix Asia Pacific Award from *Mainichi* newspaper in 2004. Ishii said that, partly due to his busy schedule, he spent a total of six years on the translation and went through four revisions. Despite his trademark humbleness, he recommended, with an open laugh, that his Japanese translation might serve Japanese intellectuals better than the original English version.

Ishii described the Japanese language as a door to the world's knowledge. “Japan is virtually a translating country,” he said, going on to date this trend to the Edo period when Japan's ruling elite initiated translations of major foreign works as a way to get themselves up-to-date with the outside world. The tradition

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WHAT'S ON Today

TALKS/LECTURES

Who's Responsible?, a talk by three dermatologists at the Bangkok Convention Centre, Central Lat Phrao, from 2 to 4pm. Free admission.
Call Maxima Consultants on 02-434-8300 or 02-434-8547.

MISCELLANEOUS

Peruvian Pisco Night, hosted by Carlos Velasco Mendiola, the Peruvian ambassador, and Thomas E. Fernandez of Iceberg Thailand, to promote the Peruvian national drink, at the Chedi, Chiang Mai, from 6:30 to 8:30pm.

ART EXHIBITIONS

And We Belong Together, mixed-media work by seniors of Chulalongkorn University and new graduates from Srinakharinwirot University, at Hof Art Gallery, Vibhavadi Rangsit Road. Ends today.
Call 02-690-1347-9.

Negative Space: The Depth of Nothingness, watercolours by Pheh It Hao, at Rotunda Gallery, Neilson Hays Library, Surawong Road. Ends today.
Call 02-233-1731.

JABULAI, paintings of Africa by Elly Roolant-Kostense, at V9 Wine Bar and Restaurant, Sofitel Silom, Silom Road. Ends today.
Call 02-238-1991 ext 1403.

Eternal Pastoral, paintings by Xi-Shang, at the Amari Watergate Hotel. Ends today.
Call 02-653-9000 ext 5020.

Asian Faces, paintings by Nicola Culican, at Gossip Gallery and Café, Sukhumvit Road Soi 28. Ends tomorrow.
Call 02-258-6247.

Monumental, prints by Ralph Kiggell, at La Lanta Fine Art, Silom Road. Ends tomorrow.
Call 02-266-9180.

The Call of Seasons, paintings by Anupan Pruekpankajee, at the Goethe Institut, Sathon Tai Road Soi 1. Ends tomorrow.
Call 02-287-0942-4.

A Season in Refuge: Nomadic Monuments, paintings, sculptures, photos and video art by Joshua Harris, at OCAC Art Gallery, TPI Tower 1st floor, Narathiwat Rajachanakarin Road, Sathon. Ends tomorrow.
Call 02-422-8828/9.

Erotic, group exhibition, at 9 Art Gallery/Architect Studio, Phahon Yothin Road, Chiang Rai. Ends tomorrow.
Call 05-371-9110.

Angkarn Kalyanapong: Paintings, drawings and poetry by Angkarn Kalyanapong, at the Art Gallery of Silpakorn University. Ends tomorrow.
Call 02-221-3841.

Paradise Engineering, at the Art Centre, Centre of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University. Ends Saturday.
Call 02-218-2964/5.

Welcome to Verve, photos by Piyat Hemmatat, at 44 Arts, Chakrabongse Road, Talat Yot. Until March 2.
Call 02-629-5822.

Through a Glass Darkly, photos by David Ben-Ami, at the Gallery, Patravadi Theatre, Arun Amarin Road. Until March 3.
Call 02-412-7287.

Strawberry 'Running on Empty', drawings, paintings and videos by Thaweesak Srithongdee, at J Gallery, Thong Lor Soi 15, Sukhumvit Road. Until March 3.
Call 08-5153-0404.

Underlying, art from the Mekong sub-region, at Tadu Contemporary Art, Barcelona Motor Building, Thiam Ruam Mit Road. Until March 5.
Call 02-645-2461.

... Because of Love, by Anan Prachyanan, Thanarit Thipwaree and Kongsak Gulglangdon, at Gallery N, Wireless Road. Until March 7.
Call 02-252-1592.

Leisure Arts, 7 Persons, watercolours and mixed-media, at T Art Gallery, Pa Tone Road, Ayutthaya. Until March 9.
Call 08-1702-0102.

Art and Activism, video work by Paul Chan, at the Conference of Birds Gallery, Pan Road, Silom. Until March 13.
Call 08-4928-1152.

CRACK 2: Artistic Flowers in the Park, group exhibition on the theme of "unconditional giving", at Benjasiri Park, Sukhumvit Road. Until March 14.
Call 02-319-5017.

A Love Affair with London, by Praphan Rakarin, at Paradox Art Gallery, Ekamai Soi 17. Until March 16.
Call 02-559-2364.

Spiritual Space, by 12 artists from three countries (Vietnam, Thailand and Burma), related to spirituality, at Thavibu Gallery, Silom Galleria, Silom Road. Until March 16.
Call 02-266-5454.

An academic affair

FROM Page 01



'Is it good that I had this much fun?' CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Yoneo Ishii presenting his five-volume 'The Computer Concordance to the Law of the Three Seals' to HRH Prince Maha Chakri Sirindhorn as a thank at Wat Bowon Niwet; translating for prime ministers Sirat Thanarat and Waiyato Ikeda at home in Thailand doing field research with Professor Hideo Kobayashi, to whom Ishii attributes his discovery of Thailand since Kobayashi suggested Ishii take up a little-known Asian language; more field research.

carried on in the Meiji era, when Japan was forced to open itself, and has been there since.

Ishii's passion for Thai knowledge soon moved beyond language. In his acceptance speech for the prestigious Pukuoka Asian Cultural Prize in 1994, he described the unfolding of his love for Thailand:

"I first began learning Thai solely as a means to study linguistics. However, as I gradually deepened my bonds to Thailand, the language became a tool to understand the country itself.

"Although my research focus is Thailand, I decided to stop confining myself inside the limited methodological framework. Whether the focus is linguistics, religious study, sociology or historical research, we should use any means we can try and understand Thailand. This is my basic attitude. As a result, I had to cover extremely diverse fields of study."

The Japanese scholar's insights on Thailand may be deeper than those of many Thais. He has always had the determination to get to the very roots of things. In the same speech, Ishii explained his desire to enter the monkhood as a wish to "obtain clues to understand Thailand, to understand Buddhism as it is, rather than as it should be.

"The reason I entered the priesthood was that I wanted to experience Thai Buddhism as the Thai people do and understand it from within and eventually, feel it for itself. I put all my work together into my dissertation in 1975, 17 years after I entered the priesthood."

Ishii also has an awareness of interconnectedness, an ability to look at issues in broad, comprehensive terms. At Kyoto University's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) where he worked for 25 years including five, from 1985 to 1990, as director, Ishii launched several outstanding inter-disciplinary research projects that propelled the institute to be recognised as a world leader in area studies. Among the works produced at this time is one that focuses on the culture and ecology of Thailand as a rice-growing society that inspired similar studies of other such communities. CSEAS pioneered having natural scientists work alongside social scientists, a process conducive to Ishii's belief that the heart of collaboration among intellectuals lies in the deceptively simple act of being able "to dine and drink together".

Initial distrust of CSEAS by the public and leftist students who viewed the organisation as a lackey for US imperialism in Asia (due to opposition to

the Vietnam war and the fact that the centre's first sponsor was the Ford Foundation) eventually gave way to praise and admiration for its work. Meanwhile, although he never aimed to be someone who climbs for the top, Ishii's management skills have nonetheless been much sought after. In 1990, he was invited by Sophia University to be director of its Institute of Asian Cultures. Other offers poured in later, the Japanese professor being asked to hold, often at the same time, senior positions in different organisations. He has been director of the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco (Tokyo), rector of Kanda University of International Studies, director of the Japan Centre for Asian Historical Records, National Archives of Japan, and is presently president of the National Institutes for the Humanities (Nihui), an umbrella group of five Japanese research centres.

"I have done too many [jobs]," Ishii said, laughing. "This March, I plan to take off my biggest 'hat', at Nihui."

The amazing thing is that in the midst of all the administrative demands from his offices, Ishii has been able to keep producing quality research. His autobiography is inspiring largely because it is about motivations, and professor Ishii has plenty. He tells in the book of his private vow that even though other academics could spend 10 hours on their research and he could only spare 30 minutes, he would still keep up the effort. Even dust, he said, citing a Japanese saying, when accumulated over a long period of time could turn into a mountain. After all, this academic game of learning and testing new ideas is, for Ishii, extremely good fun.

So what does Ishii plan to do down the road? There is that book about King Mongkut and Pallegoix. Another interest is Ayutthaya, on which Ishii proposed a ground-breaking idea a few years ago recasting the kingdom as a cosmopolitan port polity to which maritime trade counted more than previously held. Ishii is even studying two more languages in order to pursue this self-assigned research project — Persian and that of the Cham ethnic group.

So does he ever think of relaxation?
"For me, what I like to do most is to study," he said. "I travel in my head. Each language is a world in itself. Whenever I learn new languages, it is like I have discovered another world. So when I, say, get bored with the Japanese world, I could slip into another one."

The Japanese scholar certainly has many "worlds" at his disposal.

A scholar's insights on modern Thailand

Having followed Thai history for more than half a century, Yoneo Ishii believes the biggest turning point for Thailand is the period between October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976.

"Many people usually refer to the 1932 revolution [as the key event]," he said. "But I believe the October 14 and October 6 are far more important. More Thai academics should seriously study this period — the time when there was a radical change in the mentality of Thai people, especially those of the younger generations. Thailand has progressed at the cost of the lives of students who sacrificed themselves for the good of the country.

"That [period] is what I consider to be the true revolution."

For Ishii, the proliferation of books — and ideas — in Thailand during the mid-1970s was a real breakthrough. It was a huge contrast to the lack of reading materials available to the public 50 or more years ago. As a student at Chulalongkorn University, the young Ishii was surprised to learn there was no philosophy class offered to

undergraduates. But the curious man soon found solace in another pursuit — collecting "cremation volumes", the books distributed at a person's cremation containing information on the deceased's life as well as reprints of other pieces of writing, from a second-hand book market at Sanam Luang. At the end of his first seven years in Thailand, Ishii returned to Japan with 27 cartons of cremation volumes. Later, while at Kyoto University, he managed to acquire another 6,000 of the books from a Thai collector, making the library there the world's largest collection of these unique works.

Ishii went on to produce numerous quality pieces of research on Thailand, both independently and with teams of co-researchers. Among them are the classics *Sangha, State and Society — Thai Buddhism in History and Thailand: A Rice-Growing Society*, the com-

prehensive five-volume *The Computer Concordance to the Law of the Three Seals*, and *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia: Translation from the Tosen Fusetu-gaki, 1674-1723*.

A pity that most of Ishii's works have yet to be translated into Thai, for they are critical, well-researched and, despite the passage of time, continue to be relevant to understanding this country and its people. *Sangha, State and Society*, for example, contains several revealing passages such as:

"The modernisation of Thailand, planned and executed by the ruling classes, had as its aim the entrenchment of their privileged position by rationalising the enforcement of their authority. The masses were constantly excluded from the process and, consequently, even up to recent times, never acquired a sense of modern citizenship. Even the Constitutional Revolution [in 1932] was in essence a

court revolution, for the reform of the polity it brought failed to alter fundamentally the relationship between ruler and ruled. For the vast majority of the Thai people, it was no more than an exchange of royal absolutism or an oligarchy of princes for military oligarchy.

"In these circumstances, Thai nationalism lacked the dynamics to reject the privileged ruling class that was traditionally its bearer. Ultimately, the People's Party which toppled the absolute monarchy had to seek political legitimacy in recognition by the king. This situation, moreover, has been repeated after each of the coups d'états in the series that reaches to the present day."

So what does Ishii think of the bilateral relationship between his homeland and his adopted second home, both of which are now indispensable partners in the global economic arena?

After laughing when he recalled his Chula classmates expressing surprise at Japan's ability to manufacture watches and cars, Ishii pointed out that tuk-tuks were adapted from Japanese delivery trucks! Also, he reckoned that it must be extremely difficult to find a taxi in Thailand that is not of Japanese make.

And how about Thailand exerting influence on Japan?

"The term *tom yum gung* has now entered the Japanese lexicon!" was Ishii's succinct reply.

The Japanese scholar raised concerns, though, about putting too much emphasis on the economics over everything else. Quite diplomatically, Ishii declined to comment on the controversy over the Japan-Thailand Economic Partnership agreement, saying he has not been following the issue, but said that friendship and trust between individuals in one nation and those in another must be the bedrock of true "international exchange". After all, he said, underneath the differences, all of us are humans who should try to understand one another.

A surprisingly brisk adventure

Reality trumps fantasy in 'The Spiderwick Chronicles'

DAVID GERMAIN
LOS ANGELES

The *Spiderwick Chronicles* may not be in the same fantasy league as the tales of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling. Yet the family flick based on the books of Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black is an all-around class act, even if its world of ogres and goblins is a bit stale in the wake of its more ambitious cousins in the over-the-rainbow genre.

The human characters are the main source of wonder here. Freddie Highmore, Sarah Bolger and Mary-Louise Parker authentically capture the fractured spirit of a family newly cast into single-parent mode, while David Strathairn adds a wistful streak as a naturalist so absent-minded he fails to notice how his devotion to a magical realm has cut him off from the marvels of everyday life.

Far more modest than films based on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, *The Spiderwick Chronicles* actually becomes more pedestrian the further it wanders from reality.

Hollywood has become so adept at conjuring up computer-generated imps and elves and other beasts that the unremarkable creatures here seem commonplace, and occasionally annoying, by comparison.

The story is simple — newly divorced Helen Grace (Parker), twin sons Jared and Simon (both played by Highmore) and their older sister, Mallory (Bolger), move to the fanciful New England home given to Helen by her great aunt. Jared has serious anger issues over his parents' split, Simon's sweet and bookish and Mallory tries to keep the boys in line to help out her struggling mum.



A scene from 'The Spiderwick Chronicles'.

Aunt Lucinda (Joan Plowright) is now in a rest home, having spent her life in fear of the evil creatures that live in the surrounding woods. Lucinda's dad, Arthur Spiderwick (Strathairn), documented the unseen world of fairies, sprites and monsters in a book before vanishing 80 years earlier.

Shape-shifting ogre Mulgurath (Nick Nolte) covets the book, whose secrets would allow him to take over the world. He sends his gang of goblins against the family after Jared finds the book, setting up some modest action sequences as the Graces duke it out with Mulgurath's minions.

Martin Short provides the voice of a tiny being known as a brownie who has been protecting the book for decades, while Seth Rogen adds vocals for an eager but cowardly hobgoblin seeking revenge against Mulgurath.

Director Mark Waters, graduating to a big action production after making the comedy hits *Mean Girls* and *Freaky Friday*, crafts a surprisingly brisk adventure given the ponderous running times of recent fantasy films.

With a top-notch screenplay credited to Karey Kirkpatrick (*Chicken Run*), David Berenbaum (*Elf*)

and indie-film icon John Sayles, the movie is at its best in the human moments.

Though she's fighting otherworldly thugs, Parker's more grounded in real-world domestic matters here than she is on television as the quirky pot-dealing mum in *Weeds*. Bolger, memorable as the older sister in 2002's *In America*, has blossomed into a lovely, fierce and funny young actress.

Highmore, Johnny Depp's co-star in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Finding Neverland*, anchors the movie with two fine performances, injecting Jared and Simon with distinct personalities and idiosyncrasies.

Strathairn does quiet melancholy better than just about anyone out there, dominating his own brief scenes as the man whose life's work has opened Pandora's Box.

Director Waters' production crew has done a marvelous job on the Spiderwick house, a creaky old place with plenty of strange nooks and crannies and a general Addams family ambience.

The creatures are far less imaginative, mostly squat, clumsy, jabbering little guys that look like delinquent Muppets. They're not terribly interesting or frightening. Neither are the various incarnations of Mulgurath, who appears as a black bird, a serpent, a scaly giant and most memorably, as Nolte in the flesh.

Grizzled, hoary, stooped and muttering menacingly, Nolte himself is far creepier and scarier than anything effects people could ever dream up.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, a Paramount release, runs for 96 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four. AP