

Celestial Axe: On the Politics of Naming

Chaiwat Satha-Anand

Peace Information Center, Faculty of Political Science,
Thammasat University



A Chinese Woman with Two Names¹⁾

When she left Swataw in Southern China, she was with her first child and so very happy to travel to the Golden Khersonese at the behest of her beloved husband. Upon arrival, the twenty something young Chinese woman encountered the Thai state in human form. She was asked a most common question by an immigration officer: “what is your name?” Most people could imagine the atmosphere of being asked a question by a representative of the state when h/she sets foot in a foreign land for the very first time. The name of the woman was “Khow Nuang Cheng.” Her husband’s name was “Ung Kia Siew.” In the presumably confusing exchange that followed the question, her name was bureaucratically changed in an instance at the powerful hand of the Siamese state into “Ung Khow See.” The sovereign power of the state could be seen on a peron’s identity in the act of naming despite the fact that both “Ung” and “Khow” are family names, and that a Chinese person should have only one family name. And so the “new” Chinese woman with two family names was magically born in a land she would call home for the rest of her life at the hand of the Thai state.

I wonder what Confucius would have said, had he miraculously witnessed the destiny of this Chinese woman? Let’s read his *Analects* together.

Confucius

When a student asked the Master: if a state ruler asked Confucius to help rule a dominion, what would be the very first thing that should be done? Confucius said the state had to deal with “names” first. *The Analects* (Book 13, 3) reports this unusual conversation as followed:

Zilu said: “if the Lord of Wei were waiting for you to run the government, what would you give priority to?” The Master said: “What is necessary is to rectify names, is it not?” Zilu said: “if this were to take place, it would surely be an aberration of yours. Why should they be rectified?” The Master said: “How uncivilized you are. With regard to what he does not understand the gentleman is surely somewhat reluctant to offer an opinion. If names are not rectified, then words are not appropriate. If words are not appropriate, then deeds are not accomplished. If deeds are not accomplished, then the rites and music do not flourish. If the rites and music do not flourish, then punishments do not hit the mark. If punishments do not hit the mark, then the people have nowhere to put hand or foot. So when a gentleman names something, the name can definitely be used in speech; and when he says something, it can definitely be put into practice. In his utterances the gentleman is definitely not casual about anything.”²⁾

For Confucius, names and naming are the most important aspects of governance because this is where all political orders begin. He explained that without attending to “names,” communication is not possible (“Words are not appropriate.”). If communication fails, then affairs of the state cannot be carried out. Virtues, civilized practices, and justice will soon vanish (“Punishment does not hit the mark.”). Without justice, a polis can no longer be a home for citizens because no one would know how to live as one. In short, with naming flows power and political society was born. But is this merely a Chinese story? I wonder?

This keynote address is an attempt to understand the power of naming things/phenomena/people and argues that the politics of naming is earthshakingly powerful not unlike the notion of a “celestial axe” once proclaimed in Thai legal history. I begin by briefly discussing the academic landscape on “name” and “naming.” To illustrate how changes in names engender political reality in terms of the state and its power/governability, recent research on Southern Thailand about a seemingly bland government labor project; the present peace process operation; and a local shaman’s ritual of communicating with the dead locally practiced in Pattani, will be examined. Ancient wisdom namely: the *Bible*’s narrative of exorcism, and the *Qur’an*’s creation story will then be used to illuminate how the power of naming works. This address ends with two stories: the notion of a “celestial axe” as a description of the state’s naming power and a story of resistance as a critique of the seemingly omnipotent politics of naming.

Dictionary

Ashis Nandy is a most prominent intellectual in contemporary India.³ When we met some ten years ago, I asked him what he was doing. He answered: “I am writing a dictionary.” I found his strange answer perplexing.⁴ Then in 2012 while attending another academic conference in Boston, I went to visit another old friend, the late Gene Sharp, the world-renowned pioneer of nonviolent struggle studies. In our luncheon conversation, I asked him casually what he was doing at the time. Sharp answered with a smile: “I am writing a dictionary.” His answer stopped my other questions.⁵ Why is it that these noted world academics have been producing books containing words called “dictionary”?

When the famous author Jhumpa Lahiri was 20 years old, she went to visit the magnificent Uffizi Museum in Florence, Italy. When her sister lost a hat there, she tried to communicate with an Italian guard to help retrieve the hat using the only book she had

at the time, an English-Italian dictionary. When the hat was finally found, she felt as if she had successfully ventured into an uncharted territory. She was grateful because the dictionary had become her guide. It protected and explained everything for her. It was both authoritative and indispensable, not unlike holy books full of mystery and revelations.⁶

Perhaps one of the reasons why these intellectuals spent their valuable time “writing” dictionaries is because the twenty-first century world is different from its predecessor. While the twentieth century world framed life struggles clearly as the battle between the colonizers and the colonized, the superior “race” and those who were dominated, the exploitative elites and those exploited, or even the developed against the underdeveloped, the present world faces much more ambiguous conflicts. Often it is the tension between those who speak the languages of law and rights to show their caring for the world and those who cannot or will not accept such languages. As a result, the right to punish and destroy the whole state identified as “rogue,” “evil,” or “outlawed” sometimes comes from a judgment made by something called: “the international community.” These languages are used to convey how one cares for the world.⁷

Kasian Tejapira, a prominent political scientist from Thammasat, gives a most succinct rationale why it is important to produce a “definitive” book of words. He explains that a society has a way to put a spell around some discourse demons as *lexica non grata* because it is believed that by controlling words, meanings, and thoughts, people will also be duly controlled and in that order. In this sense, writing a dictionary can be construed as an attempt to fix the words with meanings endowed by its author, believing that these words dictate people’s thoughts.⁸

But there are two other important points. First, that a word is present or absent in a dictionary is by itself a marker of its power. A word that is absent from an established dictionary seems to be weaker in terms of its legitimation function, defined as a right to traditionally exist in such a language, than the one that is present. Second, controlling people’s thoughts with words is different from using laws or force to perform similar functions. Laws and force with instruments of violence are both visible and not unrelated, because law exists under the spectre of punishment. Failure to follow laws warrants punishment, oftentimes through various instruments of violence. Thought control through words, on the other hand, is both difficult to see and easier to accept, sometimes unconsciously. Through the popular use of words, a new normality can emerge with little or no possibility of questioning.

This address is not exactly about “words,” but “names.” Although names are words, they are not exactly the same. In the classic philosophical text on the issue, *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke developed a theory of reference that significantly distinguished rigid and non-rigid designators, which also means separating the actual (and the singular) from the possible (and many) worlds. To say, for example, that the military stages a successful coup in Thailand is not necessarily true because there are possible worlds in which it could be unsuccessful. But Kripke would argue that a rigid designator or name, such as the statement “General Prayuth staged a successful coup in Thailand” inflexibly connects to the same referent in all possible worlds.⁹⁾ However, here is not the place to follow Kripke into some metaphysical arguments resuscitating the notion of essence. Let me follow Hun Sen instead.

Hun Sen

In May 2016, the Cambodian government announced that all media in the country must call Prime Minister Hun Sen by his official name: “Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen.”¹⁰⁾ The Cambodian Ministry of Information issued an order in early July 2016 that it would revoke work permits of any journalist who failed to follow its order, and did not call the Prime Minister by his official name especially when first referred to him in the news. However, on July 8, 2016, Hun Sen wrote in his personal Facebook that journalists were not required to write the official name of the government leaders in full.¹¹⁾

Hun Sen must have thought that the “name” he wanted to be called is significant precisely because he might want to be far more than a common Cambodian Prime Minister. The preferred official name consists of four words including the Prime Minister’s proper name. The three prefixes connect the name Hun Sen to three sources of power in Cambodian society, namely: court power (*Samdech*), bureaucratic power (*Akka Moha Sena Padei*), and elemental or supernatural (*Techo* meaning heat from fire) power. The question in this keynote address is not why “names” are important, but what kinds of power hide behind names used, such that an already powerful country leader would dictate that his/her chosen name be used among the state citizens and foreign media?

Necronominalism

William Godwin was an atheist who believed that a human’s death is final with no heaven or hell waiting for anyone in the beyond. But when his wife, Mary

Wollstonecraft¹²⁾ died, he wrote in *Essay on Sepulchres: Or, a Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot Where Their Remains Have Been Interred* (1809) that the burial place of the dead should be identified by names and located in a map not unlike places of famous battles, something like an “Atlas of those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born.”¹³⁾

Godwin wrote this at the beginning of the nineteenth century. That century saw an enormous loss of life in the American Civil War (1861–65), claiming more than 620,000 lives, a number approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the 1812 War, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined. Twice as many Civil War soldiers died of diseases such as measles, mumps, and small pox, among others.¹⁴⁾

But what is important besides the number of dead soldiers was the manner of their deaths. They were thrown into burial trenches, stripped of every identifying object, blown to pieces by artillery shells, and their bodies or what left of them, were devoured by beasts or time. These soldiers perished without names and could be identified only with the word “unknown.” During the war, there were efforts by groups such as the Christian Commission and the Sanitary Commission in the North, the Louisiana Soldier Relief Association in the South, as well as individuals who had worked tirelessly to provide information as to whether a soldier was alive or dead. Such information served as a consoling certainty for families caught in endless bereavement. They felt the unrecognized loss intolerable in an age when family ties were celebrated. Faust writes, “At war’s end, the United States would embark on a program of identification and reburial that redefined the nation’s obligation to its fallen, as well as the meaning of both names and bodies as enduring repositories of the human self.”¹⁵⁾

With the atrocities of the nineteenth century and two World Wars in the twentieth, as well as deaths at the hands of governments during the Nazi and other regimes, the world has entered into a new age some called the age of necronominalism. It is an age where people feel the need to know the names of the fallen to preserve the memories of the once living. I believe that the age of necronominalism is closely related to the growing academic interest in memory studies.

It goes without saying that there are several methods of studying names.¹⁶⁾ In the twenty-first century, the internet world has turned out to be an extraordinary social space. Studying names used in cyberspace found that they are markedly different from

those used in the non-cyber world. Importantly, the names used in cyberspace are chosen by their owners while most people's names are given by their parents. It is also important to note that since people in cyberspace are virtually connected, communications among them are not face-to-face. Instead, their online names become their "faces" in place of identity. Internet name connection works as a medium that at once conceals the person's self while allowing connection to be possible.¹⁷⁾ Importantly, those who study cyberspace names believe that a name does not merely function as a superficial word which has very little to do with the qualitative existence of the thing/person the name refers to. On the contrary, recent studies on the subject maintain that names represent profound identities of people and things. A name works as an object of connection and dependence while reflecting communal values and traditions. Oftentimes names in cyberspace work to identify who are the "in-group" or "outsiders." In this sense, a name is not merely a referential sign, but the social appearance endowed with cultural and linguistic legacy.¹⁸⁾

Since a name represents the user's identity, naming or erasing a name in a particular context could profoundly reflect cultural politics of the time. Naming a person or a place is not an innocent labeling act. Instead, it contains complicated power relations often times born out of fierce spatial and ethnic identity contestations. For example, while there are more than 800 streets named after Martin Luther King Jr. in the US, mostly in Southern states with a sizable African American population, there has been a vigorous debate about who has the power to name a street and whose name is entitled to become a street name in Kenya? The governor of Mombasa, Hassan Joho who is an opposition leader, named a street after his son. The government was furious. It claimed that the opposition has no right to name a street after the governor's relatives. But this debate took place in the context of a political society that saw its first modern president Jomo Kenyatta named an important street, a university, a building, a hospital, and an airport after him. Some were even named after Kenyatta's favorite wife's name. But then the fact that an opposition leader could name a street after his son's could mean that the country's power relations have indeed shifted.¹⁹⁾

What would the politics of name changing look like in the context of violence such as contemporary Southern Thailand?

Labor Graduate²⁰⁾

Two years after the new round of violence exploded in the Deep South, governments tried to find ways to deal with it. General Surayud Julanont's government approved a special economic development zone in the five border provinces: Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, Satun, and four districts of Songkhla (Jana, Tebha, Sabayoi, and Na thavi). The Ministry of Labor has been given a role to care for local people's wellbeing by improving human potential among the working age population. The government has come up with specific measures both to motivate people to continue living, working, doing business in the restive areas, and to provide employment assurance to ensure steady income for the locals.

The Ministry of Labor has devised a program to create jobs and fast track employment in the area. On April 25, 2007, the cabinet approved a project to hire university graduates to become "Volunteer Buddy Labor Graduates."²¹⁾ Four years later, the project's name was changed into "Labor Graduates." The Ministry explained that the name change was necessary for the sake of organizational clarity and to be different from other agencies. In 2013, the area covered by the project expanded to establish labor centers in every district. There were "Labor Graduates" working in all 37 districts while the number of the graduates increased. Another project to improve labor service efficiency was also created.

The "Labor Graduate" project exists in accordance with government policies as well as national strategy. Government policy at the time followed the Government Administration Plan (2012–15). One of the urgent policies (no. 1.5) is to best try to bring about peace and safety in human life and property back to the restive area. One of the national strategies (no. 4) is to create balance and adjust government sector's administration. This is done following principle number 29 on solving the security problems in the local area as well as in ASEAN. Item 29.1 then directs all government agencies to integrate security and development operations in the border provinces as directed by the National Security Policy (2012–16).

To simplify this complex chain of command, I would say that the name "Labor Graduates" is used to call a project designed to improve labor services in the restive area in accordance with national strategy. The Ministry of Labor has been assigned to oversee the project and implement these policies and strategies using the offices of provincial labor in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. But when the name "Labor Graduate" appears on the administrative lines bureaucratically linking plans, policies, and strategies (ministerial and national), it was magically transformed into a

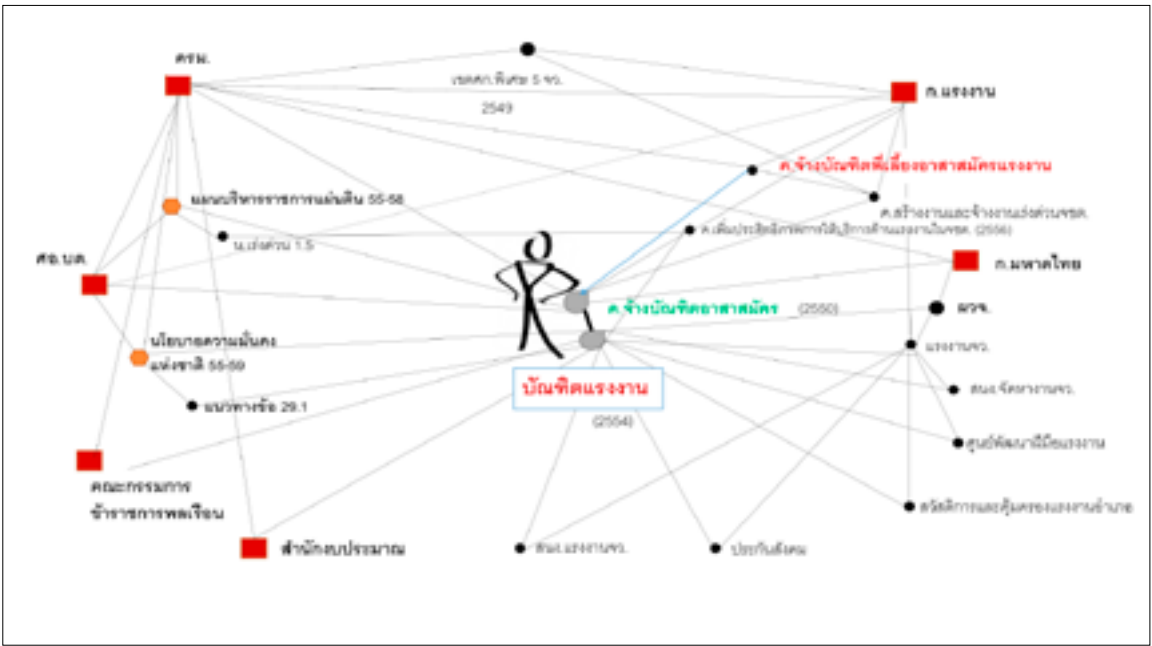


Fig. 1 Graphic Chart of Labor Graduate relations. Prepared by Chaowat Moolpakdi, a research assistant with the Strategic Nonviolence Commission, Thailand's Research Fund.

project under supervision by different layers of government agencies, brimming with bureaucratic power (Fig. 1).²²

But what do these Labor Graduates do? Their job description says they provide services in labor affairs. But their "real" work is to reconnect the state with the local people in a trust building project. Violence in the South during the past decade has significantly robbed the region of the trust the locals might have had in the state and its agencies. The researcher of this project told me that the labor graduates have been quite successful in restoring such trust. Though there certainly are many factors that could explain such success, I would argue that its name is a powerful factor. The people using this name are educated, they are university graduates, and they are there "to help us better our lives with jobs." The name "Labor Graduate" they carry with them is so bland, so harmless and so very apolitical. In just such a context, these are perhaps conditions necessary to efficiently undertake a most political function in any political society, the production of trust between the state and the people.

(Happy) Peace Talk²³

The Yingluck Shinawatra government began an official "talk" between the Thai government and the southern insurgents in early 2013. This was generally known as "Southern Border Peace Talk Process." The word "peace" was commonly used after both sides signed a consensus document. The then National Security secretary general, Lt. Gen. Para-

dorn Pattanathabutr signed the document for the Thai side, while Hasan Tayyib did so for the insurgent side. One month after the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) under General Prayuth Chan-ocha staged a coup d'etat against the Yingluck government on May 22, 2014, a new southern border operation center designed to solve the "southern problem" began its first meeting on June 30, 2014, chaired by General Udomdej Sitaputra, assistant army commander and secretary general of NCPO. The meeting decided to change the Thai name of the peace talk process from "Southern Border Peace Talk Process" to "Southern Border Peace Talk Process."²⁴

General Prayuth did not want the talk process to be called the *Santiparb* (peace) talk. So he ordered the process to be changed into *Santisuk* (peace) talk. The last sentence in the above paragraph is not a typographical nor my editorial error, but a curious translating fact. This is because the word peace in English could be translated as *santiparb* or *santisuk*. If one is to translate the name of the talk process literally, then *santi* comes from *shanti* meaning peace or tranquility, and *suk* or *sukka* is happiness. The exact new name of the talk process should be "happy peace talk process."

As a result of this name change, all official documents after that including high level commanders' orders, or policy papers, the name of the talk has to change from *santiparb* to *santisuk*. All policy, strategic, and planning documents must be synchronized. The word *santiparb* was deleted and replaced with *santisuk*. For example, the Prime Minister issued a

Prime Ministerial Order 230/2014 dated November 26, 2014 on “Establishing driving mechanism for the Southern Border Happy Peace Talk Process.” This PM Order, together with the Southern Border Provinces Administrative and Development Policy (2015–17) are considered important policy instruments giving direction to the talk process with those who “hold different views” from the state.

There were all kinds of explanations about this peace talk process name change. The Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) spokesperson explained that this change of name from “peace” to “happy peace” was done so that it would fit with the common understanding of locals.²⁵⁾ A member of the southern civil society groups maintained that this change of name was necessary for the state “to resume control of the talk so that it won’t fall into the separatists’ game plan, and turn the local people to talk about their genuine happy peace.”²⁶⁾ But the official explanation for this name change first came 10 days later from a high ranking officer attached to ISOC, Col. Wicharn Suksong. He said the government changed the name of the talk process into “happy peace” because “Some argue that Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) wishes to escalate the issue. We want to de-escalate both the problem and the level of the talk. We maintain that this is our domestic problem. There are no warring parties in the area. There is no country at war. The soldiers who came to the South, they are doing their jobs in enforcing the law, and not to wage war. Therefore, we call it ‘happy peace talk.’ But whatever name it takes is unimportant. Moving the process forward is more crucial.”²⁷⁾

If there is anyone who would truly disagree with the above official briefing, and maintain to the contrary that “name is so very important,” that person would be General Prayuth Chan-ocha. The NCPO leader prohibited people from using the name “peace.” In an interview with the press on January 28, 2015, he said:

“... please do not use this issue to pressure the officials or the state... it will only put us in a disadvantageous position. We have to solve this problem step by step, leading military measures with politics. The government formulates policy and the whole process. The government must be firm and show sincerity in creating happy peace. Don’t use the word ‘peace’ (*santiparb*) because there was no armed fighting. This is only about (people) breaking the laws and (the government) enforcing the laws. If there is an armed fighting, that’s between two parties... using forces to take over towns to fight each other. Then it is ‘peace

talking’. Using forces from here and there to put down (the enemy), to stop the violence. But I don’t want us to go there. We don’t want foreign involvement... so do not mix them up.”²⁸⁾

For General Prayuth, and perhaps for the military in general, the word “peace” is the exact opposite of “war and (armed) fighting.” For the military, “peace” is understood as a state of no war. If southern violence is treated as war, the chance of containing it as internal conflict will be undermined. Most important is that this change of name of the talk process into “happy peace” is to limit the problem within the control of the Thai government. Understood from within the military sector, the exact opposite of “happy peace” is the state of no laws (and order). Working towards “happy peace” enables the military to deal with illegal acts by enforcing the law. The name change from “peace talk” to “happy peace talk” is not only a measure to ward off foreign influence on the conflict, but also to systemically solve the problems, reconceptualized militarily, from the policy level to the operational, and tactical levels. This is perhaps his understanding of the once famous “leading military measures with politics” method of conducting conflict that will put “us” in an advantageous position as understood by the general. However, I do not see what currently happens to mitigate deadly conflict in the South as the “leading military measures with politics” method. I would call the present government’s way of conducting this deadly conflict as: “leading military measures with governance using laws as the main instrument.”

What General Prayuth has done was to officially rename the peace talk process. This official renaming indicates a certain amount of symbolic capital alongside hegemonic power to force the advent of symbolic process. His official naming effort is possible because his support comes from different corners in Thai society. But then normally such name changing will be possible when the effort is collectively supported, backed by some levels of consensus. Moreover, the new name should be in line with people’s common sense. In this case, the renaming effort came from someone who many believe to speak on behalf of the state, the entity that monopolizes legitimate symbolic violence.²⁹⁾

I am curious about the level of legitimation required to change the name of the talk process in pursuit of peace amidst southern violence. The present government suffers from legitimation deficit, both in terms of its authority to manage the precarious southern space, and its legitimate source of origin because the government was born from a coup d’etat. Conversely, this name change was done on

the basis of bureaucratic legitimation since the problem of southern violence has long been left in the iron hand of military bureaucracy, with or without a coup, by governments both civilian and military. It would be interesting to see how far reaching this bureaucratic power over names and naming could penetrate into the socio-cultural fabric of the Deep South. To wrestle with this question, I believe we have to examine the dark world of spirits.

Name of a Ghost³⁰⁾

To study Malay Muslim ethnicity in Southern Thailand in the context of Islamization and the Thai state power, an anthropologist chose a 150 year-old fishing community some 50 km from the center of Pattani as his research site. Among his treasure trove of data, I find a most fascinating episode where he recounted what he saw in the rite to connect the living with the dead performed by a Malay Muslim shaman, Bomoh. He told the story of a woman named A-isha whose father just passed away. One night her father came to her in her dream and told her that he was suffering and could not join Allah because of his unsettled debt with a friend. A-isha wanted to settle the debt with this friend to appease her dead father, but she didn't know the name of this friend. So she went to see a Bomoh to ask for help in communicating with the dead.

The 60-year old Bomoh asked A-isha about her father's life story and his name, as well as his favorite local folk arts. With the information from A-isha, the Bomoh began his rite. His body shook. Then he turned himself into a shadow master. After a while, he was tired and the spirit did not come to be in communion with him. People witnessing the rite began to talk. Some were worried about what could have gone wrong since normally the rite did not take this long. Then the Bomoh concluded that A-isha gave him a piece of wrong information. She told him the Malay (Muslim) name of her father. A-isha was asked to write down the name of her father again, but this time it was his Thai name exactly as in the official house registration. With the "correct name," the exact same rite was performed. This time, the spirit came to the Bomoh very quickly. In the daughter's conversation with her father, whose spirit was now in Bomoh's body, she asked him why he used the Thai name. The spirit answered: "Ayah (Father) already changed my name. Ayah must be Thai. I did not come at first because the name in Malay was not mine."³¹⁾

The anthropologist's explanation about the strange behavior of the Malay Muslim ghost who preferred to be called by his Thai name is that in this case the

Thai name, according to official house registration, represents state's power. The state's power in this case is flexible enough to accommodate traditional Islamic teachings that eventually would make it possible for A-isha to know the name of her father's creditor, paid the debt, and presumably sent her father into his preferred state in the beyond.

For me, this fascinating story of spirit possession reflects how the hegemonic power of the Thai state and its presence are represented in the official Thai name insisted by a ghost. That the official name must be used in life transaction, economic and otherwise is not surprising. Some would even assess the success of state power by looking into the degree to which state power could penetrate into the socio-cultural fabric of a community. But in this case, I would say that the long arm of the state is so ghostly powerful that it stretched into the world after death, and made its presence felt within the consciousness of a ghost whose identity as a Malay Muslim has all but gone, and the official consciousness of being a Thai was burned deep into his self. Even the power of death could not render the Thai official name void to allow his original Malay Muslim name to take control. This is an amazing feat of state power in recognizing a name that is without limit, certainly not only in the life of its citizen, but also in death by the dead himself.

Believing that the "correct" name of the spirit is the primary condition for a successful communication with those who live beyond the realm of the living is not a specific case prevalent only in the Malay world. I would say that such practice has thousands of years of history of the occults behind it not only in Southeast Asia.

"My name is 'Legion'"

Since the middle of the third century, the Catholic Church allowed some priests to perform the rite of exorcism. The possessed, with an evil spirit inside, curled their bodies violently, exhibited uncontrollable rage, or vomited profusely because it was/is believed that the evil spirit entered the human body through natural body holes, and needs to be expelled through them. In some medieval paintings depicting the rite, the possession ended when the saints or the priests successfully performed the rite and "black demon" can be seen disgorged from the mouth of the possessed.³²⁾ In modern times, most people believe that these unusual bodily performances are symptoms of epilepsy. The rite, if carried out, could therefore be appreciated for its symbolic function, which could help the possessed/sick feel contented. The rite would sometimes be followed with modern medicinal

treatments.³³⁾

But my interest here is not to ask “what causes demonic possession? Is it because the evil spirit is at work, or a result of epilepsy?” I am interested, however, in the ways in which exorcism has been carried out in Christianity? And how does it work?

To deal with this question, it is important to invoke the authority of the *Bible*, specifically the New Testament. In his short life, Jesus’ miracles included how he healed the paralyzed (Matthew 4, 24–25); the blinded (John 9, 2–11); the leper (Matthew 8, 2–4), or resurrected the dead (John 11, 37–44). But there were times when he exorcised the demons possessing humans (Matthew 4, 24; Mark 9, 17–27). What follows is a case which appears in the gospels.³⁴⁾

When Jesus and his disciples crossed the lake to the territory of Gerasenes, a man possessed with “an unclean spirit” came towards him. This man lived in the tombs, and could no longer be controlled by chains since he snapped out of them, and no man had the strength to hold him down. He would howl all night and day and gashed his body with stones.

Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice: “What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God’s name do not torture me!” For Jesus had been saying to him, “Come out of the man, unclean spirit”. Then he asked, “What is your name?” He answered, “My name is Legion, for there are many of us”. And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district. Now on the mountainside there was a great herd of pigs feeding and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us to the pigs, let us go into them”. So he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and they were drowned. (Mark 5, 2–14; Luke 8, 26–34)

I am interested in the exchange between Jesus and the possessed during the rite. Jesus told the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Then he asked the possessed: “What is your name?” The possessed man answered: “My name is Legion, for there are many of us.”³⁵⁾ It is obvious that Jesus’ question is most relevant to the present discussion. Why did Jesus ask for “the name” of the evil spirits? What does knowing the spirits’ names have anything to do with exorcism?

In a number of cultures, the connection between the person and his/her name is profound. Perhaps this is because a name is a part of the self and needs

to be kept in secret to protect the person from dark and dangerous magic. A traditional song of the Hausa tribe contains the words: “Dear God, please forgive me. I have said things in my husband’s name....” In other cultures, especially in families that have lost many children in childbirths, parents decided to name their newborns with ugly names to prevent the demons from taking the children’s lives. In the Grimm Brothers’ *Rumpelstiltskin*, the tale deals with the power of name. When the evil sorcerer’s name is known, he could be called out and his power evaporated. In other stories, calling out names can bring about spirits from the dark world lies beyond.³⁶⁾ In several Hollywood film renditions on exorcism, the priests who perform the rite must find ways to get the evil spirits to reveal their names. Once successful, the power of possession declines or simply vanishes. The question is why is (revealing) “name” that powerful?

Adam

“Naming/known name/erasing name/changing name” are the ways by which power relations could be established. In sacred books of the past, “knowing names” is important. But because names may not specifically relate to the person/thing at the time it comes into being, it is difficult to guess the correct name of a person.³⁷⁾ At the founding moment when someone or something is named, it is done with despotic authority because the person named is not in symmetric power relations with the one who gives him/her the name. In this sense, a “name” is an esoteric knowledge that “others” do not know unless being told by the name giver directly, or traces of information about the name left as clues for the named themselves or to those interested to explore.

In *Al-Qur’an*,³⁸⁾ when God created human, He told all his angels that “I am putting a successor on earth,” they said, “How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?” but He said, “I know things you do not” (2, 30). He taught Adam the names of all things, then He showed them to the angels and said, “Tell me the names of these if you truly think you can” (2, 31).

When the angels could not because they “have knowledge only of what You have taught us.” God said to Adam: “Adam, tell them the names of these.” When he told them their names, God said, “Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?” (2, 33)

The verses from *Al-Qur’an* show that Adam is superior to other beings God created because Adam

has “knowledge.” Adam’s knowledge is to know “the names of all things.” Knowing names is important and powerful for two reasons. First, these names are not known to anyone but God, the Name Giver. In Islam, God is the culmination of all knowledge Himself. Second, that God chose to tell/teach Adam this knowledge through revelation is to establish human’s hegemonic power over all angels. The Adam who knows “the names of all things” is a different Adam. Adam has been changed by the power to know the names of all things, a power bestowed upon him by the Name Giver who is believed to be the Sole Creator of the universe.

Celestial Axe

I began this keynote address with the story of how the state used the power of naming to alter the life of an individual who might belong to a different cultural tradition of naming, giving her a new name to begin a new life. But not only does the state have the power to alter a person’s life, its naming power could also be a deadly blow to many.

During the 1970s, there were a series of brutal violent incidents perpetrated by state officials against communist insurgents in Southern Thailand especially in the province of Pattalung. The most notorious is widely known as the “red barrel” incident. Government officials would arrest those they accused of being communist insurgents or sympathizers. They would be interrogated, then knocked unconscious and thrown into 200-liter oil barrels. These barrels were generally red in color. Then they would be burned inside. Those who were already dead would naturally burn quietly, but those who were still alive would howl with excruciating pain into the night. The soldiers in charge would drown the victims’ voice with the noise of their truck engines. The bodies would later be dumped into a nearby canal.³⁹⁾

There are two groups of victims inside these red barrels. There were the insurgents’ relatives, friends or acquaintances. These people were interrogated to find out the whereabouts of those hidden in the jungles. Then there were those whose names appeared in official lists, oftentimes provided by government informers. There were two problems with this group of victims. First, the names which appeared on the list could belong to insurgents who did take up arms to fight the government at the time. But there were also names which appeared on the list because of personal conflicts with the informers. Second, and this is most relevant here, there were those who were interrogated, tortured, and later killed because their names were the same as, or sound similar to, the

insurgents’ on the list. Sometimes there appeared the same names but with different family names. Those with these “wrong” names were also rounded up and ended up dead by being burnt in the red barrels for a crime they did not commit.⁴⁰⁾

Put another way, an act of naming by the state could engender life or death over its citizens. How could one describe such deadly naming power? There is an apt description hidden in the legal history of Ayutthaya.

During the reign of King Borommkot or Borommachathirat III of Ayutthaya (1733–58), there was a royal edict with the following description of its power:

... Somdej Phramaha Kasatriya rules the Land because he is the assumed god (deva) with the power to turn the world upside down.⁴¹⁾ If Somdej Phramaha Kasatriya passes an edict on any affair, it is as if a Celestial Axe is thrown. If touched by its might, trees and mountains will no longer stand, but destroyed. If an edict proclaimed to prohibit anything, such will come to pass...⁴²⁾

We are told that the King’s edict in this law should be thought of as the mighty “celestial axe” with enormous destructive power. The “celestial axe” is the sovereign power which could create and destroy, make something-anything- appear as well as vanish.

A Man Named “Puey”

When Puey Ungpakorn (1916–99), the respected former governor of the Bank of Thailand and Rector of Thammasat University, finished his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics (LSE), he returned home to serve then as a Financial Ministry civil servant. That was under the government of Field Marshal Pibunsongkhram who became a Prime Minister after the 1947 coup d’etat. One day the Field Marshal asked him:

“Khun Puey, you are now a high ranking government official, when will you change your name into Thai?”

The respected economist answered: “My name was given to me by my father. My father was already dead so I could not ask him to give me a new name. Moreover, Your Excellency must have been to Lampang (a province in the North). When you travel by train, you must have remembered that there is a train station there named ‘Paeng Puey.’ So (Puey) must be a Thai name.” Hearing Puey’s answer, the Field Marshal fell silent.⁴³⁾

As a matter of fact, the name “Puey” is Chinese and was given to him by his father. It means “earth at the base of a tree.” But I think there are many issues one could reflect on Puey’s response to the absolute power at the time.

First, Puey’s answer fixes the power of naming within a familial relationship, and does not allow outside sovereign power to penetrate, let alone to change it. That’s why he told the Field Marshal that it was his father who named him and he was no more. Second, Puey certainly knew what language his name was and his answer about the name of a train station in Lampang named “Paeng Puey” does not in any sense mean that “Puey” is a Thai word as the Field Marshal might have wondered. Puey’s answer in fact shows that one does not need to think or see the word “Puey” only as a Chinese word. But one could accept that the name “Puey” is a language that has long been in existence in Thai society, though it might not be the central Thai language preferred by the state. Third, it could be argued that the reason why Puey refused to change his name is because he wished to retain his self autonomy rather than allowing the person with state power to have his wish. To insist on retaining the “name” given to him by his father rather than changing it before the seemingly limitless power of someone holding state power is an act of resistance of a gentleman who longed for freedom and peace within himself.

In this sense, the politics of naming has to include resistance to the naming power sometimes issued by the seemingly mighty *celestial axe*.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was given in Thai as the keynote address for the 2016 Social Science-Humanities Conference for the Puey Ungpakorn’s birth centenary, at Thammasat University, July 28, 2016. I also gave a keynote speech based on the idea from this paper at the Asia Pacific Society of Public Affairs 2016 Annual Conference-International Conference on Public Organization VI, at Thammasat University, August 10–11, 2016.

- 1) This is the true story of my mother-in-law.
- 2) Confucius, *The Analects*, Raymond Dawson (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 49.
- 3) There are several interesting works studying the man and his thoughts. See for example, Christine Dettores, *Ashis Nandy and the Cultural Politics of Selfhood* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and Singapore: SAGE, 2013); Vinay Lal (ed.), *Dissenting Knowledge, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 4) The work he was writing was later published as: Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy (eds.), *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the 21st Century* (New Delhi and New York: Penguin Viking, 2005).
- 5) This was later published as *Sharp’s Dictionary of Power and*

Struggle: Language of Civil Resistance in Conflicts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- 6) See Tim Parks, *L’Aventura*, a review of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words* (2016) translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (New York: Knopf) *New York Review of Books* Vol. LXIII, No. 5 (Mar. 24–April 6, 2016), pp. 20–22.
- 7) Lal and Nandy, *The Future of Knowledge and Culture*, 2001, p. xvi.
- 8) Kasian Tejapira, “Phrai kab Ammat: Peesaj Wathakarma” [The Proletarians and the Elites: Demonic Discourse], *Matichon Daily*, April 2, 2010, p. 6. (In Thai)
- 9) Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 10) In the Thai rendition this name should be: “Somdej Akkra Maha Senabodi Decho Hun Sen.”
- 11) *Bangkok Post*, July 9, 2016.
- 12) She is the mother of Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.
- 13) Cited in John Gray, “They Won’t Rest in Peace,” *The New York Review of Books* Vol. LXIII, No. 11 (June 23–July 13, 2016), p. 71.
- 14) Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. xi.
- 15) Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*: chapter 4 on “Naming: The Significant Word Unknown,” pp. 102–136. The quote appears on p. 136.
- 16) Studying names appears to be popular as evident from the journal *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*—published by the American Name Society, established in 1951. <http://www.americannamesociety.org/>
- 17) Katarzyna Leksiejuk, “Internet Personal Naming Practices and Trends in Scholarly Approaches,” in Guy Puzey and Laura Kostanski (eds.), *Names and Naming: People, Places, Perceptions and Power* (Bristol, Buffalo, and Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2016), pp. 3–17.
- 18) Puzey and Kostanski, *Names and Naming*, p. xiii.
- 19) George Kegoro, “A Timely Debate on the Cultural Politics of Naming,” *Daily Nation*, February 14, 2016. <http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/A-timely-debate-on-the-cultural-politics-of-naming/-/440808/3075636/-/ktnagx/-/index.html> (Accessed on July 26, 2016).
- 20) Data on “Labor Graduates” used here come from a research on “The Role of Labor Graduates in Creating Trust among People in the Southern Border Provinces” by Warunee Na Nakorn under the project Malaysia: Implications for Thailand (2016) funded by Thailand Research Funds which I have served as a research advisor. Permission for the data used has been granted by the researcher.
- 21) In Thai it is: “บัณฑิตที่เลี้ยงอาสาสมัครแรงงาน” (*Bundit Pi Liang Asa Samak Rang-ngarn*).
- 22) This graphic was prepared by my research assistant, Mr. Chaowat Moolpakdi. I am grateful for his assistance on this as well as in collecting some data for this research paper.
- 23) Data on this comes from Romadon Panjor, “Politics of Words in Pa(t)tani: Constructing ‘Peace’ in Ethnopolitical Conflict.” Master’s Thesis, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 2015. This thesis will soon be published by Thammasat University Press. (In Thai)
- 24) “NCPO moves ahead-negotiating southern violence,” *Khao Sod*, July 1, 2014, p. 15.
- 25) *Ibid*.
- 26) Issara News Team, “Why ‘peace talk’ has to change to ‘happy peace talk’,” August 7, 2014. http://www.isranews.org/south-news/documentary/item/31925-talk_31925.html (Accessed on December 2, 2017).

- 27) Southern Border Journalist School, "Southern soldiers announce radical moving 'happy peace talk' forward, dialogue platform challenges (the military about) opening political space," August 19, 2014. <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/dsj/6063> (Accessed on December 2, 2017).
- 28) "The Prime Minister reveals 3 steps, hoping for successful happy peace talk." *Thai Rath* Online, January 28, 2015 <http://www.thairath.co.th/content/477689> (Accessed on December 2, 2017).
- 29) Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, J.B. Thompson (ed.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 239.
- 30) Data on exorcism comes from Sorayut Aim-Aur-Yut, "'Payah not jadi nayu' [It is difficult to be Nayu]: Ethnicity, Meanings, and Negotiations of Melayu Muslim in Everyday Life." Master's Thesis, Faculty of Anthropology and Sociology, Thammasat University, 2008.
- 31) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 32) I am thinking of Botticelli's "The Three Miracles of St. Zenobius" displayed at the National Gallery, London.
- 33) Venetia Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft & Magic* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), p. 81.
- 34) This story appears in three of the gospels: Matthew, Luke, and Mark but not in John. The account in Matthew is less detailed than what can be read from gospels according to Luke and Mark.
- 35) *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), p. 1666. In Thai, the language used is incomparable: มีนตบว่า "ชื่อกอง, เพราะว่าพวกข้าพเจ้าหลายตนด้วยกัน" (Mun torb wa "Chue Kong, proh wa puak kappachao lai ton duay gun"), *The Christian Bible Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Bangkok: Thai Christianity Association, 1992), Part Two on The New Testament, p. 103.
- 36) Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft & Magic*, p. 124.
- 37) For example in Thailand a person named *Moo* (Piggy) needs not be fat. But because the word *Moo* (pig) is predetermined to refer to an animal which is generally fat. Naming fat people *Moo* therefore follows.
- 38) *The Qur'an*, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 7.
- 39) Jularat Damrongvithitham, *Red Barrels: Historical Reconstruction and Haunted Memory in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2016), p. 76. (In Thai)
- 40) *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 41) Here the literal translation would be turning "the superiors into inferiors and vice versa."
- 42) Dr. Bradley's Thai Laws cited in Sombat Chantornvong, *Critique of Political Literature and History* (Bangkok: Kobfai, 1997), p. 326. (In Thai)
- 43) S. Sivaraksa, *Puey Ungpakorn: The Trustful Elder* (Bangkok: Komol Keemthong Foundation, 2014), p. 14. (In Thai)

Chaiwat Satha-Anand

Dr. Chaiwat Satha-Anand is Professor of Political Science at Thammasat University and chairperson of the Strategic Nonviolence Commission, Thailand Research Fund, a think tank that proposes nonviolent policy alternatives to deadly conflicts in Thai society. He has written, edited, or co-edited some 40 books published both in Thailand and abroad. Some of his writings have been translated and published in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese and Korean. His most recent publications include *Nonviolent Space/Thailand's Future* (Ed, Bangkok: Protestista, 2016 in Thai); *Barangsiapa Memelihara Kehidupan* (Jakarta: Mizan, 2016-in Bahasa Indonesia); *Nonviolence and Islamic Imperatives* (Sparnas: Irene Publishing, 2017). He was named "Thailand's Best Researcher in Political Science and Public Administration" by the National Research Council in 2006, the National Sri Burapha Distinguished Writer Award in Bangkok and the International El-Hibri Peace Education Prize (Washington D.C.) in 2012.