

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY: THE MAKING OF THE SPECIAL THAI-AMERICAN
RELATIONSHIP DURING THE COLD WAR

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Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War*, New York: Routledge, 2016.
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Matthew Phillip's *Thailand in the Cold War* is a welcome addition to the growing historiography on the Cold War in Southeast Asia. A key political ally of the United States, Thailand was a major player in the Cold War. At the height of the American war in Vietnam, it was not only a principal military base for the United States to contain the spread of communism in the region but also the primary centre for American covert operations throughout Indochina. More than merely offering passive support, Thailand was also an active participant, sending its troops to support the United States militarily in Korea and South Vietnam. Why and how did this Thai-American relationship develop?

The prospect of such a partnership was not all that apparent in 1945. At the end of the Second World War, Thailand was in a vulnerable political position. It had backed the losing side in the global conflagration that had by the early 1940s wholly engulfed the countries in Southeast Asia. Worried about the nation's security in a world ostensibly heading towards collision by the end of the 1930s, the military-backed government, which assumed power in the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy, abandoned the country's time-honoured policy of ambiguous neutrality and hedged its bets on a rising Japan. After allying itself with the latter shortly after the onset of the Pacific War in December 1941, Thailand declared war on Britain and the United States in January 1942 and proceeded, with Japanese help, to recover territories not only from the French in Indochina but also from the British in Malaya and Burma. The defeat of the Axis powers by 1945, however, compounded Thailand's ill-fated venture. Fearing that the victorious allies, and the British in particular, would have good cause to exact retribution for its wartime opportunism and betrayal, a chastened Thailand quickly adjusted to post-war developments, disavowing its declaration of war and alliance with Japan and returning territories it acquired since the outbreak of the conflict.

If Britain showed little sympathy for Thailand's post-war predicament, the United States, however, quickly emerged as the country's new best friend and saviour. Efforts by the British to impose punitive sanctions were accordingly blocked by the United States. As the world's most powerful nation at the end of the war, the United States saw itself assuming a

more active global leadership role but found its ability to play such a part in Southeast Asia severely limited by the returning European colonial powers, which were eager to restore imperial credibility and perpetuate the survival of their empires. However, as the region became increasingly mired instead in the messy politics of post-war decolonisation – a de-stabilising recourse that soon conflated with equally volatile forces brought by the turbulent winds of the encroaching Cold War – the United States saw Thailand as a potential ally and prospective bastion from which it could rebuild western credibility, mitigate the taint of imperialism, and combat the onslaught of resurgent communism ominously portended, from the late 1940s, in a spate of seemingly co-ordinated outbreaks of communist-inspired insurgencies in Indochina, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines. Apart from its geo-strategically significant location at the heart of the Southeast Asian landmass, Thailand was also perceived by Washington as a relatively stable state. Having never been colonised, it did not have to contend with the disruptive effects of colonialism or the divisive struggles of independence that afflicted its neighbours. The homogeneity, conservatism and religiosity of the Thai population, it was believed, also made them less vulnerable to communism than people elsewhere in the region. Best of all, while Thais were wary of the British and French, they were not similarly suspicious of the United States, their new-found friend and advocate. Hoping to exploit the Cold War for its own ends, and besotted by the huge attraction of lucrative American financial and military aid, Thailand had, by the late 1940s, become politically allied with the United States, despite initial efforts to steer a more independent path.

The making of this special Thai-American relationship is the theme of *Thailand in the Cold War*. The monograph, however, is less about high politics or the diplomatic history of the Cold War from Thailand's perspective, a first impression that might be mistakenly drawn from the book's succinct but intriguing title. As perhaps better reflected in the designation of Phillip's doctoral dissertation ('Oasis on a Troubled Continent: Culture and Ideology in Cold War Thailand') submitted to the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies in 2012, on which his book is based, *Thailand in the Cold War* is more a study about the cultural and ideological dynamics of that special Thai-American relationship, albeit set against the backdrop of the Cold War.

At the heart of Phillips' argument is the contention that Thailand's integration into an American-centred world order, forged and sustained during the Cold War, was much more than the mere establishment of a political, economic or military relationship; it was set also in cultural terms and carefully adapted to keep Thailand within the American sphere of influence. Using an array of Thai and American sources, including newspapers and periodicals, and archival materials from the National Archives of Thailand and the National Archives at College Park, Phillips shows from the book's

six core chapters how this Thai-American cultural engagement emerged and subsequently underwent transformation as both sets of cultural narratives converged and interacted during the course of the Cold War. In Phillips' view, American 'cultural producers' in the aftermath of the Second World War, through their representation of Thailand as a unique nation in Southeast Asia (having never been colonised) and an 'oasis' in a troubled region, played no small part in facilitating American reception of Thailand as an ideal ally and Cold War bulwark against communism. Likewise, for Thailand, the promotion of a Thai nationalist ideology by the post-1932 military regime, with its legitimising assertions of exceptionalism, modernity, and internationalism, was not entirely irreconcilable with the popular, and probably over-simplified, American image of the country or the allure of American modernity and 'civilisation' to members of the small but influential urban-centred cosmopolitan Thai community. Nevertheless, by the latter half of the 1950s, as the Thai state's role in the Cold War deepened (with Bangkok serving, for example, as the headquarters of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO], the American-sponsored anti-communist front), Thailand struggled to maintain ownership of such ideological assertions, as perceived subservience to the United States brought to the fore the latent anxieties of urban-centred nationalists about their country's hallmark 'independence' and 'sovereignty'.

Both Thai and American state propaganda responded to such disaffections by emphasising 'distance from the other' and producing new cultural narratives that would enable Thailand to maintain its profitable alliance with the United States 'without drawing attention internally to the consequences for Thai sovereignty'. Following the coup of 1958, for instance, the new military regime re-oriented 'Thainess' along more 'traditional' lines, emphasising instead a rural-based, pre-modern culture 'embedded in nostalgia and in ways of life that could be viewed as distinctly Thai' as the key site of the nation's identity. In addition, by exploiting the urban elites' fears of a faltering development, which would impinge on their ability to partake in an American-centred consumerist lifestyle, the new military regime, by promising unfettered progress for as long as the alliance survived, deftly reconciled internal tensions and ensured the participation and instrumentality of this urban cosmopolitan class in supporting a cultural shift and securing American hegemony in the country.

After discussing how Thailand was presented by the US media in the first chapter, the next five core chapters reflect on how cultural productions shifted between the 1930s and the 1960s and assess their impact and significance. Notwithstanding the vicissitudes of an analytical framework based on the fluidity of culture, and the resultant need for mediation through fastidious linguistic interventions, Phillips has presented a multi-layered and plausible version of cultural interactions that contributed to the making of the post-war Thai-American partnership, even if more fundamental politi-

cal calculations might eventually prove more decisive in influencing the Thai nation's choice of alignment. Considering popular culture, Thai silk, dress, literature, film, tourism, fashion and attitudes towards Buddhism, *Thailand in the Cold War* provides an original and fascinating perspective on the making of this special Thai-American relationship during the Cold War and makes an important contribution to the historiography of the cultural Cold War in Southeast Asia.