

Pro-American, Anti-Communist Propaganda, Stupidification, and Thai Identity in Two Cold War Novellas¹

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Abstract

The fear of “communist subversion” in Thailand from the 1950s to the 1970s played a crucial role in the ongoing government control of public knowledge and the anti-communist propaganda. The companion piece novellas *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot (Made in USA 2)* by Sujit Wongthes (1973), a leading independent writer, disclosed the truth about the Vietnam War and challenged the pro-American hype in the context of 1970s Thailand. *Made in USA* achieved this through a blend of travelogue and journalist distance; *A Complete Idiot* through a portrayal of the internal struggle of a young Thai man who grew up under the extensive influence of the Thai state’s pro-American, anti-communist propaganda. In *A Complete Idiot*, the protagonist’s state of blissful ignorance crumbles when his old “knowledge” of the “evil communist” and Thai-American relations are juxtaposed with new(s) information about the 1971 reconciliation between the US and the People’s Republic of China. Reading the two novellas critically, this article investigates how the state-instilled perceptions of communism and propaganda construct a Thai identity that becomes inadequate vis-à-vis a different set of information. It also looks at the extent to which Thai internal politics was subsumed into the international politics of the Cold War and how such an entanglement informed Thai national identity. Finally, this article argues that the two novellas at once challenge the Thai government at the time and subvert its projection of the US. In doing so, the novellas open up a new space for alternative Thai cultural identities.

The companion piece novellas *Made in USA* (เมดอิน ยู. เอส. เอ.) and *A Complete Idiot (Made in USA 2)* (ไม่เงาแต่ตื้น (เมดอิน ยู. เอส. เอ. 2)), published in 1973 by Sujit Wongthes² (b.1945), directly criticise the military government by showing the crisis of state-defined Thai identity during the Cold War period. They depict an American-era generation of young Thai people who woke up from the government’s anti-communist, pro-American propaganda³ to see “neo-colonialism, military dictatorship, and rapid capitalist exploitation” (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 167) rampaged the country.

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For the purpose of understanding the significance of Sujit Wongthes' novellas, it is important to underline the oppressive control of public knowledge imposed by the junta under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's regime (1957–1963), and the rigorous anti-communist propaganda that was underway since Field Marshal Phibun Songkram's second premiership (1948–1957). During the Cold War period, the "communist" label served as a political weapon in the tug-of-war between royalists and military generals. Phibun executed a "Silent Coup" in 1951, also known as a "Radio Coup", against his own royalist Democrats-dominated government, claiming that there were communists in the parliament and in the cabinet. This incident clearly showed how Thai politics was subsumed into an international ideological struggle (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 143–144). It is widely acknowledged that the rationale "of the [Thai] anticommunist Act (1952), whose model was the Un-American Activities legislation, was that communism is un-Thai in its ideas and as a way of life" (Winichakul, 2004: 6). In terms of cultural strategy, Phibun established the Ministry of Culture in 1952 and, as head of the ministry, rigorously campaigned to "bolster the US-fuelled rhetoric that portrayed communism as public enemy number one" through the use of popular media such as radio programs, adaptations of folk theatre (*likay*), plays and pamphlets" (Harrison, 2010: 199). This pro-American sentiment was intensified alongside the anti-communist propaganda that equated communism with Chineseness.

In the late 1950s, under Sarit's regime, the "communist" label already signified "foreignness" and by extension "un-Thainess". The US became Thailand's great friend. "American foreignness" was desirable particularly because it denoted modernity and progress, the prototype of the Thai state's development ideology. On the contrary, "communist foreignness" was projected as the imminent enemy of nation, religion, and king.

The two novellas depict the lives of their main characters and show how and to what extent these pro-American and anti-communist sentiments constructed Thai politico-national identity. Against the background of the military government's propaganda, the two texts emerged from the anti-Vietnam War movement, spearheaded by Thai intellectuals and students who challenged the government with their nationalist anti-American and anti-war discourse. Because of strict press control and the paucity of public knowledge on the government's military activities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only admitted to Thai-American military collaboration in 1967, after a decade of American anti-communist operations in Vietnam (Sivaraksa, 1967: 3). However, despite the press control, news of Thailand's close collaboration with the US in both Laos and Vietnam had seeped through since the early 1960s, and poured into Thailand by the second half of the decade from both the "communist world" and the "free world".

The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) sourced information from the communist world and attacked the military government calling it a "traitor" and "sidekick of American Imperialism" via a pirate radio station "Voice of the People of Thailand" broadcasting from the People's Republic of China (Kongkirati, 2005: 194–212). By the mid-1960s, news reports on the Vietnam War and Thailand's collaboration with the US appeared in the American press, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Washington Post*; they were increasingly sent back to Thailand by Thai students in the US, and circulated among students, intellectuals and press media in the country (Kongkirati, 2005: 212–244).

Reports from overseas Thai students or amateur correspondents were the primary source of published information. The *Social Science Review* (*Sangkomsat parithat*), launched in 1963 under the editorship of Sulak Sivaraksa, provided an intellectual forum where information from abroad circulated in the form of academic papers, articles, and translated news.⁴ Sujit's articles, written in the US for a Thai newspaper, including *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot*, exemplify the same process of sending back new(s) information contrary to the government's. The crucial difference between the two novellas and the previous publications on those issues is the dramatization of an

individual dealing with this information. In particular, *A Complete Idiot* portrays the crisis of the anti-communist, pro-American Thai identity in relation to the US government's new policy toward the People's Republic of China.

The Author and His Path

Before the publication of *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot*, Sujit was already a well-known writer in his own right. Since the 1960s, he was an active member and a co-founder of the literary group "The Young and the Beautiful" (*Num-nao sao-suay*), together with his literary confidant Khanchai Boonpan (Chitakasem, 1982; Janthimathorn, 1982; Saengyara and Thongrungrrote, 2003). The group was largely based in Silpakorn University in Bangkok, where the two writers graduated from the Faculty of Archaeology. Sujit and Khanchai embody the American-era generation of "capable, ambitious children" who mostly came from local primary schools in the provinces and were swept by social riptide to Bangkok to attend secondary schools and universities (Anderson, 1985: 42). The two of them made Bangkok their home and built their career in the metropolis, which by then had already become the "local center" of what Anderson called "double provincialism" (Anderson, 1985). Bangkok was only the "local center" because capable young urbanites had already left it, to go acquire higher education in North America and Europe.

While Sujit was writing *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot*, from April 1971 to April 1972, he was on leave of absence from his job as a journalist at the *Siamrath Daily*, a top-selling newspaper read by professionals from the middle-class. He went to the US to apprentice with publishing houses in New York City, Syracuse, and Ithaca, where he mingled with Thai postgraduate students, especially at Cornell University. Not only was Cornell one of the centers of the American students' anti-war movement, it was also an informal intellectual center of Thai students, especially in political sciences, anthropology, sociology, and history. It hosted the Cornell Thailand Project and a library with the largest collection of works on Thailand in the US. Most of the Thai students at Cornell were studying on scholarships funded either by American organizations in Thailand or by the Thai government.

During his stay in the US, Sujit kept writing for the *Siamrath Daily*. His articles formed the basis for *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* (Wongthes, 2004: 14). The author quit the *Siamrath Daily* by the time he finished the manuscript for the two novellas in 1972. According to his own words, he "disagreed with the censorship of international political news" (Wongthes, 2004: 276). The effect of this outward journey on an inward, self-reflective, contemplative journey is dramatized in the character of Thongboem Bandan in *A Complete Idiot*. This characterization is made more explicit than in the character of Sujit, the journalist in *Made in USA*.

The two novellas can be loosely categorized as travelogues. Traveling to and in unfamiliar geographical locations, each shows the narrator's perception of the US both in relation and as opposed to Thailand. They portray the collision, conflict, and negotiation between old and new ideas. The old ideas stand for constraints and oppressive authority, while the new ideas and information, gained from experiences in the US, celebrate liberation and egalitarianism. In *A Complete Idiot*, liberation comes at the price of having one's state of blissful ignorance destroyed and one's Thai identity severely challenged.

American Made, Thai Bought

As the title *Made in USA* poignantly suggests, the novellas arose from the milieu of the "American Era" in modern Thai history (Anderson, 1977: 15) and the pro-American hype among the urban

middle classes. Though the phrase “made in USA” normally connotes guaranteed high-quality imported products, the author’s preface renders the title sarcastic. Sujit writes:

The phrase “made in USA” is printed on a wide range of products, ranging from big machines, [...] to radios, televisions, bombs and all sizes of bullets. ...

Of course, “made in USA” is so widespread that it even labels a human being, be it in the shape of a horticultural expert or a university lecturer. It can easily turn a “made in Thailand” person into an unworthy, clearance sale item.

I have no rights to object to or antagonize the phrase “made in USA”; but neither do I adore it to the point of carving it on my headboard. I use it as a title of my book because it is worth noting that, at this very moment in my life, this phrase influences and looms large over Southeast Asia. It is also simply because I wrote the book in America. (Wongthes, 2004: 12–13)

Far from presenting the desirability of “made in USA” products as indicating high quality, fashionable trends, and social status, *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* encapsulate the mixed-feelings of the Thai public toward what “America” stands for, be it “freedom” and the “home of democracy” or “coercion” and the “self-acclaimed world’s police” in American Cold War culture.⁵ Rather than pointing fingers to the US government *per se*, the two novellas direct this resentment toward the Thai military government, its hypocrisy and abuse of power. They denounce the government for being the US’s “running dog” (Wongthes, 2004: 166) and, above all, for concealing true information about the ongoing events in the region as well as about communism. The novellas condemn the Thai self-acclaimed democratic, yet military-led government by juxtaposing Thai censorship to American democracy and freedom. American media can openly protest against their government, or even uncover information that subverts the US government, such as the Pentagon Papers published by the *New York Times* in 1971.

Through the eyes of the narrator, Sujit the journalist, *Made in USA* portrays the American students’ anti-war movement, Thai students’ lives at Cornell University, and their attitudes toward the Vietnam War. *A Complete Idiot* portrays the “awakening” of its narrator, Thongboem Bandan, in the US. Thongboem is portrayed as a country bumpkin who, since childhood, has been indoctrinated by the military regime’s propaganda. He believes that the US is a hero that protects Thailand from China, the communist villain, until a life-changing journey upends his worldview.

Once in the US, Thongboem socializes with Thai postgraduate students at Cornell University, and apprentices with *The Herald*. He is dumbfounded by Richard Nixon’s offer of an olive branch to Mao Zedong. Thongboem is startled by American Sinophilia and daily encounters with new(s) information inaccessible at home. Nixon’s policy has a tremendous effect on Thongboem, who embodies unaware Thai people at large, because he believes the commonly accepted version of truth that “North-Vietnam, the communist, gangs up with China to invade South-Vietnam. This is why America went to war and so do Thai soldiers” (Wongthes, 2004: 148). As a result, Thongboem is shocked to see the two gravest enemies, the US and China, now having a handshake. His shock is sarcastically encapsulated in the title—*A Complete Idiot*.

Made in USA: Discovering the Land of the Free

The appeal of *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* come from the popularity of the author and the public thirst for information other than those from the government. It also comes from the fact that both novellas cater to and at the same time counteract the pro-American hype. As much

as they deal with Thai people and their concerns for Thailand, they also depict America (the extent of American freedom, the anti-war movement in America, and the narrator's experience of the country), Americans (American students campaigning against their government and the Washingtonians' reactions), and American universities represented by Cornell.

Made in USA comprises 11 chapters over the span of 12 eventful days. It starts from the departure of the narrator from Bangkok, on April 22, 1971, and continues up to May Day Protests against the Vietnam War that ended on May 3 in Washington DC. This short time-span delivers a sense of immediacy similar to a journalist report. The first three chapters do not only comically portray the personality of a sarcastic, streetwise narrator, his anxious anticipation and faux pas while traveling abroad for the first time, they also give details of his journey from Bangkok to Ithaca via Bombay, Athens, Rome, Frankfurt, JFK Airport, and Syracuse.

The protagonist's agitation shows in the first sentence of *Made in USA*: "I still don't know (while I'm smartly walking through Don Muang airport) why I'm going to America" (Wongthes, 2004: 30). This opening sentence encompasses both the apprehension and desire for going abroad. Sujit's trip has no clear purpose and he mocks his desire to just go. The chapter ends with his nervous mixed feelings of wanting to hop on a flight, hesitation and uncertainty about what might happen. With sarcasm, the narrator tells his friends: "Don't do anything to heal this infectious society yet. Wait till I come back from America 'cos at least then I'll be called 'made in USA.' Crap! This label's pricey and in popular demand" (Wongthes, 2004: 37). The sarcastic tone renders the message ironic. Though the narrator openly criticizes overseas graduates from the US who suddenly become privileged upon returning home because they studied abroad, he knows he will be in a similar situation for having been to the US. The first chapter shows that, for the protagonist, going overseas is at once a treat and a threat. He is hopeful for his return but apprehensive about leaving the infectious homeland.

The anxiety of a first-time flyer with a language barrier is light-heartedly presented in the second chapter. Once on the plane, the narrator recalls the hard time he had in dealing with a discriminating and bureaucratic Thai official in order to obtain his passport; he juxtaposes it with the convenience of getting a visa from an efficient American consular official. While he was interrogated by the official at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he modestly yet knowingly replied that he worked as a journalist for the *Siamrath Daily*, with the anticipation that he would receive a polite answer and have his document processed quickly. The narrator concludes that "it is actually these government officials who give 'privilege' the meaning it has" (Wongthes, 2004: 43). The point of comparison between "the Thai way" and "the American way" starts here.

The protagonist's restlessness visibly increases as he flies from Rome to Frankfurt in chapter 3. His playful tone is replaced by serious worries: "I am so nervous because I'm traveling so far outside my country. I'll have to mingle with people who speak different languages, have different cultures and complexions. It wouldn't be so bad if we could communicate, but this is impossible" (Wongthes, 2004: 53). At JFK International Airport, he finally struggles through passport control and buys a ticket for domestic flight to Syracuse, NY, to meet his Thai girlfriend, who is doing her MA at Cornell. The "threat" of traveling to the unknown is captured in the narrator's anxiety over the language barrier, revealing his loss of control and inability to communicate.

The journey ends in chapter 4. A new adventure begins when he wakes up in Ithaca. A Thai student invites him to the famous musical "Hair." He agrees out of curiosity, having heard so much about the play's nudity: "I've been wanting to see *farang*⁶ 'meat.' Will watch it to my heart's content this time" (Wongthes, 2004: 65). His attitude can be seen as an attempt to reverse the Western male gaze, which Thai women are often subjected to, by posing himself as a subject of a Thai male gaze upon Western women (and men). In the following chapter, Sujit briefly describes the Cornell Thailand Project and talks to nine Thai postgraduate students. He presents their stories in

their own voices, using an interview style that renders the impression of an objective report. These Thai students tell him about their backgrounds, study programs, and plans after graduation. Some plan to go into the academia; some will become government officials; others still have no idea.

However, his attempt at maintaining journalistic distance fails when he comments on American interests in Thailand. He remarks that “Thailand, the beloved country of many others and mine, is like a virgin who blundered with an American guy. There isn’t a single pore left to interest the fellow. He only has to keep watch and ward over her so that no other guys would seduce her into being their mistress” (Wongthes, 2004: 71). Of course, the analogy refers to Thailand as a strategic location in the domino of the US anti-communist operations in Southeast Asia. However, its sarcastic, misogynistic, and patriotic tone also indicates the unequal relations between Thailand and the US in highly sexualized and gendered terms. Thailand has become a “fallen woman” because of its entanglement with the US.

The analogy also reveals an anxiety over the loss of protection and control of female sexuality which dates back to 1967, when a policy of welcoming American soldiers to Thailand for Rest and Recreation (R&R) tours ignited sex tourism. The estimated number of prostitutes in Bangkok went up to 300,000. “The interior minister, General Praphat Charusathian, wanted even more because they attracted tourists and boosted the economy” (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 149). However, this economic calculation generated antagonistic socio-cultural responses. Jeffrey (2002: 22) pointed out that, during the American Era, “the desire to maintain female purity in the face of foreign influence” was forged along the line of “the symbolic importance of women, and women’s sexual behavior, in maintaining national culture and identity” (Jeffrey, 2002: 30). This divergence further bolsters the cultural division between the “virgin” and the “whore.” Sujit’s analogy, thus, implicitly criticizes the military authority and the multifaceted damages it has caused Thailand.

In chapters 6 and 7, the protagonist becomes an interviewer. Two Thai library staff members brief him on the Thai collection at Cornell library. He meets M.R. Akin Rabibadhana, a PhD student in anthropology who explains how Thailand became a subject of study for both Thai and American researchers. Although the narrator is traveling in a supposedly “unknown land,” he has found a “microcosm of Thailand” in the Thai intellectual community at Cornell. The encounter with the familiar in a different context leads Sujit to reflect on what he has learnt in Thailand, and compare it to the opinions and information he found in the US.

In chapter 8, the narrator then shifts his focus to the overwhelmingly democratic America represented by students protesting against the Vietnam War in Washington DC. He receives a booklet about Vietnam which features “Viet Quiz”—different sets of questions mocking academic exams on Southeast Asian countries (see example below).

Matching

Instruction: Suppose you are an American pilot on a bombing mission. If you were flying over the following countries, where would you drop your bombs?

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| a. Vietnam | 1. Weapon depots and farmers |
| b. Laos | 2. Enemy villages and farmers |
| c. Cambodia | 3. Strategic roads and farmers |
| d. China | 4. Archaeological sites, where enemies are hiding, and farmers |

(Wongthes, 2004: 90).

The narrator highlights “the American students’ frustration and sense of humor” (Wongthes, 2004: 89) in the quiz, which sarcastically criticizes the US government’s international policy, especially in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 9 reports President Richard Nixon’s monthly press release on national television, the students’ hostile reaction, the circulation of anti-Vietnam War printed materials, and the preparation for the May protests proscribing violence, weapons, and vandalism. The narrator depicts the students’ rights to disagree with their government and protest against it; he throws into sharp relief the concealment of truth and suppression of dissents in Thailand. He reflects that even if some of these students know nothing about Vietnam, at least they learn from the American media that their government is responsible for the killings of a lot of people there. The chapter ends on the last day of April, when many students are leaving Ithaca for Washington DC. The final sentence—“Certainly, they’re all prepared to be arrested by the police” (Wongthes, 2004: 102)—wraps it up.

Chapter 10 depicts Sujit’s road trip to Washington DC with his Thai and American friends. It also highlights harmless disturbances such as marching, blocking the streets, and stopping traffic executed by protesters in order to call public attention to the Vietnam War. The narrator points out the openness of both the demonstrators’ disturbance plan and the government’s suppression plan. Each side is well aware of the other’s strategies and responds accordingly. He is puzzled by the transparency of this confrontation and wonders: “Is this the *bad karma* of the US, or the *sins* of the American people? [...] I don’t know. No idea. And I don’t want to think about it” (Wongthes, 2004: 109, my emphasis). His rhetorical question and dismissive response show that he is unable to conceive civil disobedience as a strategy, nor the state’s civil obligation toward its citizens. The demonstrators want to get their voices heard and express disagreement with their government, whereas the latter has no right to harm them just because they disagree with its policy. This extent of active democracy is so alien to him that he tries to make sense of it through the Buddhist concepts of “bad karma” and “sins.” As a matter of fact, in Thailand, the ruling elite has always exploited these “universal answers” to justify social injustice and to subdue calls for equality. Once the demonstration is underway, the narrator and his Thai friend part with the protesting American students: “We shouldn’t be with them, we work on different things” (Wongthes, 2004: 110). His remark emphasizes an assumed “journalistic distance”; he does not want to get involved with the demonstration and observes it only as a witness.

In the last chapter, the protagonist walks around Washington DC to watch the protest and talk to some residents. Some agree with the demonstration, some do not, and some express their anger due to the disturbance. *Made in USA* ends with students leaving Washington DC after the protest. The dialogue between Sujit and George, his American friend, marks the end of the novella.

“Those enraged Washingtonians are the students’ success,” George explained.

“I don’t get it.”

“The students wanted to warn the Washingtonians of what’s going on in the world. Before our protest, they had no idea of what’s happening in Vietnam.”

“Don’t forget that they’re furious.”

“They’re furious... yes,” George confirmed, “from now on, they’ll think, think, and think why they’re furious. Why did we have to do it? In the end, they’ll know what’s happening in Vietnam.”

“What would it entail then?”

“Well, what would it entail if you did nothing?” (Wongthes, 2004: 121)

The novella is concluded by this rhetorical question, appropriately coming from George, a politically conscious American student. It directly engages Thai readers, in the same way as the protest troubled the Washingtonians. It gets the readers to think not only about the Vietnam War but also about Thailand and its political situation. By the time *Made in USA* was published in April 1973, Thailand had been under military dictatorship for almost 15 years.

Made in USA does not simply report information to the Thai readers. It combines a personal experience with a journalistic style of reporting news and interviews. This particular narrative enables Sujit to effectively convey his personal and political views. He expresses his anxiety, uncertainty, even self-mockery as a Thai who is “lucky” enough to see America. At the same time, he implicitly criticizes Thailand’s political situation and explicitly questions the anti-communist fervor that conceals information and controls public knowledge.

A Complete Idiot: Anti-Communist, Therefore Thai?

Although *A Complete Idiot (Made in USA 2)* deals with the same themes as *Made in USA*, that is, disclosing the truth about the Vietnam War and defying the hype of “made in USA”, it is not a sequel. Sujit in *Made in USA* openly and defiantly criticizes the military government’s “stupidification” of the Thai people. Departing from the knowing journalist Sujit, Thongboem Bandan in *A Complete Idiot*, is an understated character whose overtly old-fashioned name denotes a rural, unsophisticated background. The name implies naivety, not defiance.

A Complete Idiot, contrary to the “journalistic distance” of *Made in USA*, looks at the US government’s policy to establish diplomatic relations with China from the point of view of Thongboem, an “anti-communist” Thai. Like many of his generation, Thongboem’s adversarial attitude toward post-1949 China came from an extensive pro-American, anti-Chinese, and nationalist propaganda.

Considering the novella’s socio-political context, the characterization of the protagonist, and the title, I would like to suggest that the text uses the military government’s “stupidification” of the people as a metaphor for Thailand’s repressive social and political environment. Thongboem’s ordeal triggers his process of undoing his indoctrination, which could be repeated in the experience of the readers. His bewilderment and naivety become a narrative device to question the new American policy toward China and juxtapose the American *Sinophilia* with the Thai *Sinophobia*. This shocking clash depicts a psycho-political condition resulting from decades of propaganda that bifurcates “democratic” America and “demonic” communist China.

A Complete Idiot comprises four chapters; each opens with an international or national political event:

- July 15, 1971 – President Richard Nixon announces that his official visit to the People’s Republic of China will take place before May 1972.
- October 26, 1971 – The United Nations recognizes the PRC as the representative of China in place of Taiwan.
- November 17, 1971 – General Thanom Kittikhajon stages a coup seizing power from his own government.
- February 21, 1972—Three leading American television channels broadcast live from Beijing (Wongthes, 2004: 124, 172, 200, 238).

The first event illustrates Thongboem’s failed attempt to understand it through his indoctrinated knowledge of the relations between the US, China, Vietnam, and Thailand. New information increasingly challenges and disproves his belief. As the story progresses, he learns to see the complexity of international politics. Chapter after chapter, Thongboem observes American students’

reactions to the events, asks Thai students about their opinions, discusses relevant issues with them, and contemplates everything on his own. Interior monologues allow him to freely express his confusion, anger, and frustration over the “state of ignorance” created by the Thai government through continued propaganda campaigns.

Like most Thai people of his generation, Thongboem grew up believing that China caused the Vietnam War, while the US is the hero that saves Vietnam from Communism. Learning of Nixon’s plan to visit China, he is stupefied, if not shocked. He admits:

I’m confused because I don’t have the slightest idea about Mainland China. Newspapers in Bangkok only gave me tidbits about Mao Zedong – all I have learnt is that we, the Thais, must be anti-communist and condemn Red China. To be honest, I’m an anti-communist without knowing what it means. If I’m asked what communism is, all I can answer is that I don’t know. I only know that it destroys our nation, religion and king. (Wongthes, 2004: 127)

Thongboem cannot make sense of Nixon’s plan. He does not understand why the president of the US, the “leader of the free world” and a great ally of Thailand, would go to China, the home of the communists, who would “maliciously destroy Thailand, those evil communists” (Wongthes, 2004: 130–131). Once again, Thongboem’s interior monologue reiterates the belief that Communism is un-Thai. Only now, he becomes doubtful and questions himself.

The myth that China caused the Vietnam War and the US is saving Vietnam is demythologized by Than, a graduate student from South Vietnam who is finishing her PhD in political science at Cornell. For the first time, Thongboem is meeting someone from war-torn Vietnam. Than tells him:

We don’t know communism. We neither hate nor love democracy. But Western countries and powerful countries never let us solve our own internal affairs. Why do they always have to tell us what to do and be? [...] Ho Chi Minh loves our country and our independence – of all the Vietnamese. Communist or not, that’s no major issue for us. [...] America endorsed Ngo Dinh Diem’s government and tried every possible way to obstruct general elections because most Vietnamese do indeed respect Ho Chi Minh. And he has become an enemy of the Western countries. [...] We want to [get rid of poverty] by ourselves, with a leader who would really lead us. Not a leader backed by America to suck the people’s blood. [...] While I am studying and working in my room here, I can hear the sounds of gunshots, bombs, war helicopters, people’s cries, the farmers’ cries for help, and the crying of bomb-injured small children. (Wongthes, 2004: 150–151)

Saddened by Than’s story, Thongboem’s sympathy fuels his anger toward the US, then toward himself and his own ignorance, and ultimately toward the Thai government who “stupidifies” the people. His old black-and-white world turns into an expanding grey area. His initial doubt and self-questioning, combined with anger, ignite the process of undoing the indoctrination. The characters also discuss the US government’s propaganda that manipulated American people to supporting the war, and how it was later subverted when the truth about operations in Southeast Asia came out (Wongthes, 2004: 163–166).

Once Thongboem’s process of undoing the indoctrination is underway, he and other Thai students discuss political situation in Thailand and how the pro-American, anti-Chinese “Thai identity” has become problematic because of the new US policy toward China. The *New York Times* even suggested that Prime Minister Thanom Kittikhachon’s coup against his own cabinet was an effect of this new policy, Thongboem reports (Wongthes, 2004: 206). However, the Thai students conclude that the coup was caused by the conflict between the Parliament and the Prime Minister over the distribution of the budget Thanom promised during his campaign in 1969⁷ (Wongthes, 2004: 212). They continue on an inconclusive and unreconcilable debate about the best form of

governance for Thailand. The scene puts the students' freedom to gather and discuss politics into sharp contrast with the ban on political gatherings of more than five people after the imposition of martial law during the 1971 coup.

This animated debate about the coup, democracy, communism, and Thailand in relation to the US policy toward China is followed by a discussion of Nixon's visit to China. Americans in general are embracing the hype of "Chineseness," especially in arts and culture. Two students mock a jingoistic student and the Thai government for antagonizing China:

"...well, what do you think now that Nixon's going to China and the country has joined the UN? Isn't half of the world, including America, stupid [for accepting China] and only the Thais and the Thai government smart?"

"Before long, you'll have to be anti-American too as America is about to establish diplomatic relations with China. Nixon and Mao Zedong are having tea together soon" (Wongthes, 2004: 216–217).

The sarcasm here plays on the anti-Chinese "logic" fostered by the Thai government that is since communist China is evil, any country that has relations with China must be evil too. Following this logic, now that the US is normalizing relations with China, Thailand has to become "anti-American" too. The comment captures the inadequacy, if not the crisis, of state-defined modern Thai identity, that intertwines "Thainess" with being anti-communist and anti-Chinese.

Awake and Contemplating

The crisis of the state-defined Thai identity is dramatized by Thongboem, whose naivety serves as a narrative strategy to criticize the military government and enable readers to see the effect of the Thai anti-Communist propaganda. However, the Thai identity is still in a catch-22 situation. While it runs into a political dead-end when the US befriends China, the author seems to propose an alternative outlook, through a historical narrative of trade and cultural exchanges between the kingdoms of the Chao Phraya basin and pre-1911 Revolution China. A narrative of a Buddhist monk is also interjected into the story as a way out of the "crisis," since Buddhism, despite its Indic origin, is perceived as a constituent of "Thainess".

In chapter three of *A Complete Idiot*, while Thongboem is listening to his friends talking of Nixon's plan to visit China, his interior monologue goes back in time to a pre-American past. The narrative turns to depicting an account of the good cultural and commercial relations between Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, down to Rattanakosin kingdoms and China, especially during the reign of Rama III (1824–1851) when relations were strong and beneficial (Wongthes, 2004: 217–218). Another Thai student also asserts that the Chinese have lived in Siam/Thailand in peace and with less conflict than in other places. It is only recently that China means threatening communism. The historical account of pre-modern Siam-China relations inserted in the chapter discloses the inadequacy of a state-defined modern Thai identity.

Chapter four describes the live broadcast of President Nixon's visit to Beijing on the 21 February 1972, American news analysis of the event, and its possible impacts the Vietnam War and the international politics. Against the heated discussion of the international political issues, an anecdote of a humble, traveling Buddhist monk is inserted into the conversation as a hopeful final image. An unidentified character tells his friends that the monk was spending the lent season in a cave near the northern Thai-Burmese border. The monk did not preach reincarnation, the Five Precepts (*pañca-sila*) and the Eight Precepts (*attha-sila*), merit, and *karma*—the "staple" concepts that Buddhist

people are taught since childhood. Instead, he preached *mak paet* (the Noble Eightfold Paths or The Ways to the End of Suffering) and the *Kalama sutta*.

The Noble Eightfold Paths comprises wisdom (*panya*: the right view and right intention), ethical conduct (*sila*: right speech, right action, and right livelihood), and mental development (*samathi*: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). The *Kalama sutta* recounts an incident when the Buddha gives a discourse on 10 principles that discern truth from falsehood and safeguard against false belief. The 10 principles are that no one should believe something on the mere ground that it (1) has been passed on for many generations; (2) has been traditional practice; (3) is widely accepted as true; (4) is cited in a text; (5) is logically consistent; (6) is in accord with one's philosophy; (7) appeals to one's "common sense"; (8) is the idea that one likes; (9) seems acceptable, or the speaker seems trustworthy; and (10) comes from one's teacher.

A Complete Idiot refers to the *Kalama sutta* at the close as if to suggest that it is a potential defense in this ideological war. It soothes the intellectual and emotional turmoil of Thongboem. The Noble Eightfold Paths complements the *Kalama sutta* as a set of practices to alleviate human suffering. Although they do not directly solve the problem of modern Thai identity, especially since the core of Buddhism is "non-identity," the novella seems to suggest that they help defy indoctrination and false belief.

Conclusion: an Alternative Thai Identity?

This article illustrates how the two novellas juxtapose the Thai government's propaganda with the changing American international affairs policy during the Cold War. The incongruity between them explains the crisis of the state-defined Thai identity. Facing this crisis, each protagonist begins to undo the Thai military government's stupidification of the people and recognizes that "whether it's the US or any other country, ... no one is better than the others" (Wongthes, 2004: 233). The analysis of both *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* shows that the problem of Thai identity stems from the state attempt to define cultural identity in political terms and from the denial of "an original mixed-ness within every form of identity" (Huddart, 2006: 6–7), such that Homi Bhabha (1994) emphasized in his proposal of the hybridity of cultures. Hybridity refers to the fact that "cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixed-ness" (Homi Bhabha, 1994: 7). In this context, the two novellas look critically at American people, "Americanness", Thai people, "Thainess", and how each informs an understanding of the other. In *Made in USA*, Sujit, the narrator, defines himself as an observer of cultural phenomena and behaviors enacted by both the Thais and the Americans. In doing so, and despite his "reporter's distance," he is actually engaging in what is going on by interpreting it according to what he has learned at home and away, just like Thongboem in *A Complete Idiot*.

In both *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot*, the unfamiliar is selectively perceived, deciphered, negotiated, and defined in relation to the familiar through negative and positive identification (Winichakul, 2004: 1-6). The two texts display a dynamic interaction, negotiation, and interpretation between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Such activities can only take place when one is removed from one's familiar context and placed in a "betwixt and between" state, on the borderlines of cultures. "Americanness" is mediated through the eyes of Thai characters while "Thainess" is unsettled and put under rigorous scrutiny in relation to "Americanness". It is at the border of these two cultures that *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* emerge. In this way, traveling and writing in a liminal space unsettles the concept of "home", especially in its capacity as the source of the "self."

Understanding the two novellas as the liminal is to see that "what is in-between settled cultural forms or identities...is central to the creation of new cultural meaning." Therefore, the identity

crisis that the protagonists face actually enhances “the constant process of creating new identities” (Huddart, 2006: 7). Both *Made in USA* and *A Complete Idiot* show fluid cultural contacts and interactions. They actually pave the way for new Thai cultural identities: identities that are evolving, alive, dynamic, and pluralistic because they are under constant challenge and redefinition. They open up new possibilities of imagining an alternative to a rigid and narrowly defined identity, imposed by the state authority.

Notes

1. This article is a revised edition of my thesis chapters in Feangfu (2011).
2. According to a conventional Thai practice, authors are referred to in this article by their first name.
3. The American Era (1940–1960) was marked by an expansive American influence and patronage in Thailand, an ally, military base, and client-state of the US for countering the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, especially in the 1950s and after (Anderson, 1977, Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 140–167).
4. For the role *Sangkomsat parithat* played in Thai cultural politics and formation of anti-war movement among students and intellectuals, see Kongkirati, 2005, Phetprasert, 2006.
5. There were also demonstrations against American and Japanese goods in the early 1970s. The National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT) organized a weeklong campaign on “Boycotting Japanese goods” in 1972, see Tangjaitrong, 1986 and Kongkirati, 2005.
6. The word “farang” is generally accepted that it derived from the Persian word “farangi”, which means “foreigner” in Farsi as the Siamese traded with the Persians. It is commonly used in spoken Thai to designate foreigners and Westerners in particular.
7. Baker and Phongpaichit (2009: 186) explain that although the 1968 constitution formed a parliament dominated by an appointed Senate, MPs were using the parliament as a forum to critique the military rule: “They blocked the military budget, demanded more funds for provincial development, and exposed corruption scandals. The Prime Minister ... seemed deeply shocked by these intrusions on the generals’ power and privilege.”

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