

Craig J. Reynolds

THAI RADICAL  
DISCOURSE

THE REAL FACE OF  
THAI FEUDALISM  
TODAY

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# THAI RADICAL DISCOURSE

## THE REAL FACE OF THAI FEUDALISM TODAY

STUDIES ON SOUTHEAST ASIA



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## PREFACE

In this book I have tried to write some Thai history and also, at the same time, to write a critique of the historiography that is relevant to that history. The vehicle for carrying out this project is Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, first published in 1957 (Jit 1974c), my translation of which appears in chapter two. Jit's text, an original and influential work in a long sequence of Thai-language studies of the country's political economy, presents the past in a form that has been contested by those for whom the earlier historiography was satisfying. Thus I give it pride of place and try to show how it textualizes certain conflicts, tensions, ambiguities, and identities in twentieth-century Thai consciousness.

Historians, no less than anthropologists, are engaged in constructing knowledge of other cultures, in representing other times and worlds—Third Worlds, in the cases I am interested in—different from our own. The skill of the Western writer must be to make these other times and worlds both intelligible and different, perhaps an impossible task. It seems to me that historians of Thailand, whether they be historians by profession or by the nature of their writing and teaching, have not been self-reflectively interested in the activity of constructing such knowledge. More needs to be done in articulating the process of knowing and in being able to say what kind of construct results. In this context historians might take note of the epistemological worrying, "quite characteristic of the introspective, existential inclinations of modern thought generally," that now appears in some ethnographic writing. In ethnography self-reflection on meaning and interpretation has led to the intrusion of the ethnographer and his/her fieldwork experience, thus stimulating elaboration and experimentation in the ways ethnography is written (Marcus and Cushman 1982:39, 46–48).

Approaching the representation of Thai historical thought in English as an ethnographic task, I look upon my translation of, and commentary on, Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* as an opportunity to elaborate and experiment in the spirit of such concerns. The objectives of this elaboration and experimentation are outlined further in chapter one. Though it is possible for a foreign historian to say things and sometimes to see things that a Thai historian does not, I have tried to resist the conventional posture of the foreign scholar as that of someone who stands outside the society, synthesizing the past and integrating it into a larger, somehow more complete picture. I have had special access to some people and to some materials that may distinguish this book from other writings about Jit Poumisak, but I think of my own contribution as yet another fragment of a forever unfinished construction of Jit Poumisak's life/work rather than a summation of it. In writing about this life/work, I have not sought to produce a "balanced" or "objective" picture but to use the confusions and contradictory significances to display the polysemy I see.

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Phirom Poumisak, Jit's sister, gave permission to translate *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* and has spoken to me about her brother on a number of occasions. I appreciate the access she has given me to her family's history.

I would like to thank collectively all the interviewees for taking time to talk to me. The understanding they gave me of Thailand's past goes far beyond the citations to particular interviews. Many of them urged me to check their version of events against that of others, a task which, in the nature of things, was sometimes very difficult to do.

Chai-anan Samudavanija kindly provided a photocopy of the rare volume in which *The Real Face* was first published. For conversation and assistance of various kinds I am also grateful to Sunthari Asawai, Surachat Bamrungsuk, M. L. Wanwipha Burutrattaphan, Saneh Chamarik, Suphaphorn Charanlaphat, Witayakorn Chiengkul, Manas Chitakasem, Nerida Cook, Pensri Duke, Phornphirom Iamtham, Phalakon Jirasophon, Atcharaphorn Kamutphitsamai, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Nakkharin Mektrairat, Pramote Nakhornthap, Wichai Napharatsami, Chatthip Nartsupha, Waruni Otsatharom, Dhida Saraya, Suchat Sawatsi, Chalong Suntharawanit, Anchali Susayan, Saichon Wannarat, Somkiat Wanthana, and Thongchai Winichakul.

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There are three people, now deceased, who would have liked to read this book. Rex Mortimer, an Indonesia specialist who taught in the University of Sydney's Department of Government, wrote and spoke passionately about the "dis-Europeanization" of the world, a notion that I find congenial. Rex showed an interest in this research as I



began it and would have been a valuable critic had his life not ended so abruptly. Nisit Chirasophon was an activist at Chiangmai University and later in Bangkok in the early 1970s until his death in a railway accident in 1975. Though I did not know it until 1982, Nisit played a part in the republication in 1974 of Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face*. Nisit was a secondary school student of mine many years ago in his hometown of Krabi in southern Thailand, when he was, even at that young age, both critical and political. I will always wonder if he saw parallels of his own life/work in Jit's. Supha Sirimanond spoke candidly to me about what he and others were trying to do in the 1940s and 1950s. Supha, who was more than the simple newspaperman he liked to pretend he was, put the activists of the 1970s in touch with the history he himself had helped to make some two decades previously. He passed away in March of this year, and I shall always regret that the progress of this book was so agonizingly slow that he did not live to see its completion.

*Craig J. Reynolds*  
*Sydney*  
*July 1986*

# JIT POUMISAK IN THAI HISTORY

## THE WRITING OF THAI HISTORY

Thailand is represented in most histories written by English speakers as a country without radical politics and without radical writing. Negative conditions, such as the absence of a colonial past, as well as positive ones, such as geography, religion, and shrewd leadership, are summoned to defend the proposition. The country's much-vaunted escape from colonial domination meant that no group or class or party rose up to demand, and ultimately to wrest, sovereignty from foreign masters and also that the institutions that responded to the pressures of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century survived and adjusted to contend with the internal and external challenges of the twentieth. Until recently, the natural endowments of the land so protected Thai peasants against adversity that, with some regional exceptions, they did not suffer on the same scale as did the peasants of Java, Vietnam, China, and India. The dyad of Buddhism and sacral kingship still serves in the late twentieth century to legitimate the civil-military order that rules. Even after the Enlightenment, constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy, and European socialism entered Thai consciousness through Westward-looking and Western-educated minds, the resulting aspirations for political, social, and economic change never achieved their iconoclastic and epochal objectives. Thus no social revolution swept the land, no independence movement was called up to liberate it from colonial oppression, no Chairman ever moved millions with anti-feudal exhortations. By perpetuating such characterizations as all these, Western writers inevitably convey to their readers the idea of "Thailand—a conservative state" (Simmonds 1963).

One consequence of this historical discourse on Thailand is that the writing of Thai history in English is rarely taken to be problematic, or problematic only in a technical, tactical sense. Western historians worry about the scarcity of primary evidence, the problems of dating it, and the royal bias investing it. Beyond such basic matters, the writing of Thai history in English remains monumentally non-controversial. Western historians presume that the arc of continuity is intact and that "the Thai people" themselves uphold the arc of continuity as essential to their consciousness as a people. Thus many critical questions are deferred. How does Thai-language history figure in the consciousness of foreign historians? In what relation does indigenous, vernacular history stand to a foreign-language history? Only as one of the latter's sources? By what procedures does a foreign historian apprehend Thai historical consciousness? What characterizes the representations of the Thai past created by foreign historians? *Whose* history is it? Certainly not the Thai people's or the Thai state's, for the historical consciousness of a people—or a village, a class, a regime, an institution—is *its* memory of how it came to be what it is.

Historians are never in want of continuities; indeed, it is in the nature of the historian's craft to construct them. The fissures, breaks, and discontinuities are there only to be explained, bridged over, sewn together, or contextualized in larger, all-embracing continuities. All breaks are prepared for with the aid of hindsight, and by hindsight

provided with an aftermath, thus closing them. Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, first published in 1957, is known in Thai as a break (*waek naew*) in Thai historical studies, because of the way it departed from conventional historical practice. It is this break that makes the work a radical history. By means of a translation of the work into English, it may be possible to isolate this break, in a sense to inhabit it, and in doing so, to begin to answer to some of the questions above and to apprehend something of the interrelationship between modern Thai historical writing and contemporary consciousness. Jit's history has on occasion been censored—bidden to be printed—and thus marginalized. This official proscription points to the text as a break and stands as an index of the emergence of a new form in Thai-language historical writing, an index of an altered historical consciousness.

Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Thai monarchy was strongest, its power and prestige reinforcing each other without the buttress of a loyal but wary military as is the case today, two fundamental issues arose that point to changes in historical consciousness. One was the *form* that written history was to take; the other, whose *prerogative* it was to write history. In the case of the former, chronicle history by reign, taken as a specific form, ceased to exist with the composition in the late 1860s of the chronicle of the fourth Bangkok reign (1851–1868). Other kinds of chronicles—of tributary states, for example—continued to be written through the 1920s, but the chronicle of the fifth Bangkok reign (1868–1910) is a chronicle in name only. It is structured not chronologically, like the chronicles of the first four reigns, but thematically, and it is unfinished, ending for all intents and purposes just before the Front Palace revolt of 1873 that traumatized the royal family. The reorganization of the state during the 1890s, royally directed but stemming from the socioeconomic changes of the preceding decades, is left unrecorded. In fact, the chronicle—it being “beyond the mental powers” (*lua phrasati kamlang*) of the author to write about the entire reign—is cobbled together from bits and pieces from the earlier part of the reign (Damrong 1950:preface).

What was beyond the chronicler's mental powers? Was the chronicle's author, Prince Damrong, one of the chief architects of that reorganization of the state, unable to imagine a historical form adequate to comprehend in a single schema the changes that had occurred? The explanation given by Damrong's family—he told one of his sons that writing the full chronicle would have been like tearing off his own skin (Nidhi 1984)—masks the problem with anecdote and ignores the structural changes in modern Thai consciousness. The fifth reign chronicle reads as if an inchoate form of historical writing (the Thai past emplotted as narrative) were struggling prematurely out of the cocoon of convention (chronicle) only to languish and die. Simply because it enshrined the monarchical absolutism that preceded modern Thai kingship, however, the chronicle form had to be preserved, even if it could no longer textualize contemporary events. By means of modern printing technology and education the Thai elite reproduced the chronicles, thus propagating “chronicle kingship” and implanting it in the growing literate classes. In the chronicle “kings remain the central force of all historical change,” a paradigm of the “proper process of change for which the Thai elite was consciously working” (Nidhi 1982:31, 35).

The second issue was the identity of the historians: were they to be from the aristocracy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or the Third Estate? Ultimately, no committee or court clique answered the question, technology did. The printing press, used to great effect by entrepreneurial Christian missionaries who introduced it in the 1830s, enabled anyone with access, motive, and material to disseminate a history. And while the Thai monarchy did not view the new technology with the same apprehension and possessiveness as the contemporary Vietnamese emperor did, in more than one inci-

dent the enterprise of commoners and dissident nobility aroused royal ire. In 1878 the monarchy confiscated and burned a history in *nirat* verse of an unpopular military campaign when the official who ordered the troops' dispatch took exception to its publication (Jit 1975c). Later, at the turn of the century, a commoner historian who managed to get his hands on official documents was investigated and disciplined several times, and his biography of a high ecclesiastical dignitary withdrawn from circulation (Chai-anan 1979; Reynolds 1973). It is characteristic of both these incidents that the king and his officials were reacting against form in two senses of the word: social form (by refusing to defer to royal authority the authors had violated a social norm); and literary form (the authors had abused, or taken liberties with, established poetic and chronicle convention, respectively). Of the 1878 incident both Damrong and Chulalongkorn noted explicitly that the poet's statements had "gone beyond" (i.e. stepped outside) the *nirat* poetic genre (Jit 1980a:175–76).

Although the court's historical form, the chronicle, ceased to evolve as a vehicle for rendering the elite's conception of its own past, and although commoners were capable of mounting modest challenges to the court's prerogative to write history, the court continued to author—and to authorize—the writing of the Thai past until the absolute monarchy ended in 1932. And historical writing remained an entirely internal matter. No colonial power appropriated or devalued indigenous historical writing; no colonial power subjugated or compromised the Thai social and religious hierarchy, as happened in Burma, Java, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaya, and Cambodia. Until 1932 the court undertook the functions carried out by colonial archaeological services—the excavation and preservation of material remains of the past—albeit with the assistance of foreign gentlemen-scholars resident in Bangkok. This archaeological pursuit did not lead to a holistic refashioning of Thai history but rather to a resuscitation of the once-glorious kingdoms of Sukhodaya and Ayudhya. As if with sideward glances to the work of G. H. Luce in Burma, G. Coedès in Indochina, and N. J. Krom in Java, Damrong and his archaeological team created a vision of an imperial past that revived the national morale after the national disgrace of the extraterritorial treaties imposed by the Western powers. Such holistic writing as did appear in the quarter century after 1932, especially from the pen of Luang Wichit Wathakan who served the new ruling elite that came to power after 1932, rewrote "the plot" of Thai history by braiding together the plot of *dynasty* and the plot of *nation-state* (Reynolds 1984; Charnvit 1979b:166–68).

This rewriting was not a simple matter. It required that a quite different social and political order be legitimated by a fallen absolutist monarchy that could no longer speak for itself. Thai history still awaited a new form, and an author outside the power structure, and the chronicle mentality persisted—without its form—through World War II and into the 1950s. The constituent parts of the fifth reign chronicle were brought together and termed a chronicle as late as 1950 (Damrong 1950).

When an utterly innovative form, *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, appeared in 1957, it carried within it a discourse about relations of production, modes of domination, and conflict between the rulers and the ruled. The Thai people, struggling to meet the material needs of their existence, sought to become the masters of their own fate, to make their own history, to become the subject of history rather than its passive object. The primary unit of analysis was not the monarchy, for the monarchy had already been set aside as the prime mover of history in the writings of Wichit Wathakan, nor was it any other political or economic institution. The focus of the analysis was the social system, what Thai political economists now refer to as the social formation (*rup khong sangkhom*) in the Marxian sense (Reynolds and Hong 1983).

The social formation was comprised of three elements: the economic, the political, and the cultural. This social formation, be it the primitive commune, slavery, or feudal society, underwent change through a complex interaction of the forces of production (technology and labor, for example), relations of production, and class antagonisms. The resulting dynamic process propelled society from one formation to the next, with a new formation unfolding within its predecessor even as the latter was crumbling and falling away. The economic element—the productive relations of society as a whole—dominated *The Real Face*, while “culture” and “religion,” the mainstays of Thai national identity, receded into the background. This emphasis on economics, put into perspective in a postscript by the anonymous editor who explains that lack of time and funds had forced deferral of the political, social, and cultural characteristics, was a corrective to hitherto existing Thai historical writing. In his stress on economics the author of *The Real Face* could have spoken the words of Engels in his 1890 letter to Joseph Bloch. He and Marx had to emphasize the main principle vis-à-vis their adversaries, who denied it, and they had not always had the time, the place, or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their own. The project announced in Jit’s text of mapping out the economic, political, and cultural relations of Thai society was never completed, at least not in *The Real Face* or any sequel to it, although many of Jit Poumisak’s other works investigated the non-economic characteristics of feudal power.

“Today,” which appeared in the title of the work when originally published in 1957 but was dropped in subsequent reprintings, gave it a contemporary thrust, pointing to the presence of feudal remnants in the Thailand of the late 1950s. These remnants are understood by contemporary Thai political economists to persist prominently in Thai consciousness in the form of allegiance to the monarchy and the Buddhist religion. In the 1957 text feudal, or *saktina* in Thai, is broader and more comprehensive than simply monarchy, the latter being subsumed as an essential part of the feudal/*saktina* whole. Those who are feudal/*saktina* are thus not identified solely as royal or even aristocratic (“to identify the *saktina* by looking at their birth status or the size of their feet is misleading”), but the big Land-Lord of *saktina* times was the *kshatriya*, that is, the king and his “extended and extensive family” who monopolized the ruling class’s privileges and rights to exploitation. The *kshatriya*, as head of that class, was prominent in its formation, even though the monarchy is not the primary unit of analysis. By attributing avaricious, rather than pious, motives to that class, by exposing religious and cultural values as instruments of rule rather than as sources of spiritual and social security, and by demonstrating how this social formation finally stagnated in conditions that were detrimental to human welfare and production, the text links economic, political, and social backwardness to the monarchy.

Such a characterization of the monarchy is an inversion of what the contemporary Thai monarchy would claim for itself as an agent of economic, political, and social development: a force for democratic change; a model of nuclear family solidarity; the patron of simple inventions for the cultivator (water pumps out of bicycle gears), of sophisticated technology for modern agriculture (large-scale irrigation projects, and cloud seeding with chemicals), and of agricultural diversification (dairy farming). Picture books produced by the palace such as *Kasat kaset* (1980)—a title that draws on an ancient Sanskrit etymology (*ksetr* to *kshatriya* transcribed phonemically as *kasat*) and links the ruler (*kasat*) and agriculture (*kaset*) in a near homophony—advertise these claims. Since the late 1950s military regimes have restored monarchical prestige and placed the Crown at the center of official nationalist ideology. Laws defining sedition include the crime of lese majesty, and the tinkering with, or inversion of, any estab-

lished meanings of the monarchy thus risks violating these laws. To link the monarchy to a backward agrarian order comes close to a seditious act.

The legitimacy of the Thai state rests on a web of meanings that are articulated in law, in public ceremony, and in symbolism (whether it be monumental sculpture or the plan of the capital or the ubiquity of monasteries). These meanings inextricably associate the military, the monarchy, and the Buddhist monkhood as a triad that stands for "Thailand." The military and the police maintain public order and guarantee territorial integrity; they back the authority of the state with armed strength. The monarchy is at once the contemporary vestige of an ancient sacral authority, commanding awe and deference, and, in the persons making up the royal family, a domestic unit with a popular touch in tune with the times. The Buddhist monkhood is a repository of the society's ethical norms and guides the faithful to spiritual ends. When occasion requires, each member of the triad borrows core meanings from the other two to supplement or fortify its own stock of meanings. Sedition might be defined as an effort to unravel this web of meanings, to toy with the meanings, to use the meanings improperly or in an unsanctioned manner (Ryan 1982:1–8). In chapters three and four, following the translation of *The Real Face*, I will explore the seditious implications of Jit's text—how the text unravels proper meanings—and discuss various kinds of reactions against those meanings, censorship being only one such reaction.

*The Real Face of Feudalism Today* connects writing and sedition, and its publishing history illustrates the link between absolute authority and proper meaning. Since its first publication it has been pulled back and forth in a conflict over the meanings it releases, the author it evokes being one of these meanings. The work first appeared in the euphoric atmosphere of 1957, the year of the 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism celebrated by Theravada Buddhist countries. Soon after, in 1958, its author was imprisoned and it was banned. Fifteen years later, after 14 October 1973, it was republished in another euphoric moment, only to be banned once more in 1977. It was reprinted again in 1979.

In this first part of my commentary on *The Real Face*, I will offer an interpretation of Thai history after World War II and of the life of the text's author, Jit Poumisak. I will discuss what the author meant to others and will give the text a context—a time, a place—but I will defer my own reading of the text to the commentary following the translation. The text already has a place in the history of Thai historical writing; it has already been absorbed into a lineage of Thai-language historical writings. In translating the work and providing a commentary on it I intend, in some sense, to re-present this place for English speakers, at the most basic level to "report" where that place is in Thai writing. This exercise is not, however, simply one of translation and reportage. The translation and commentary also point to the relation between historical writing and contemporary consciousness and constitute my argument as to how and why this particular Thai-language text must be figured in English-language histories of Thailand.

#### THE CONSTRUCTION OF JIT POUMISAK'S BIOGRAPHY

The life of Jit Poumisak in twentieth-century Thai history is problematic in a number of ways, not least because it resists the cohesion and the summing up of the person that readers hope to find in the story of a life. Life resists biography, because a biography "represents a counterfeit integration of its subject. . . . It is logical and necessarily centripetal" and must therefore be "untrue to life" (Sturrock 1979:53). In accounts of Jit's life the many parts that do not fit, the many lacunae, and the contradictory testimony point to a life that resists integration and closure. Although Jit Poumisak is now a cen-

tral figure in Thai radical thought and although he has been somewhat tamed by formal academic discourse that gives him a place in the lineage of analyses of Thai society and history, his biography is still diffuse, dispersed in the hundred and one texts that testify to his existence. These include memoirs by relatives and friends, interviews given by them, biographical prefaces, at least one academic “life-and-work” study, autobiographical materials, and biographies crafted from such sources. The seemingly inexhaustible supply of his scholarship—three manuscripts were published for the first time in 1982, one in 1983—has helped to keep alive the project of discovering and constructing his life, though the unearthing of unpublished manuscripts has probably come to an end.

The elusiveness of the life is underscored by the occasionally anonymous, pseudonymous, and fugitive character of the materials themselves. The more that is produced to verify the life, the more complex becomes the task of circumscribing it and locating it. And the manner of his dying (he was shot on 5 May 1966 while in the *maquis*) meant that the paradigmatic Thai biography, the cremation biography, could never be written. Cremation biographies are not published for outlaws. Thus, even the formal, proper statement of the life, so welcome to students of Thailand for biographical data, is lacking. It is no wonder that the date of his death, given in some books as 5 May 1965 and in some as 5 May 1966, has at times seemed uncertain.

This indeterminacy surrounding the biography of Jit Poumisak—which is another way of saying that the life is controversial—stems in part from the episodes of exclusion in it. In 1953 university authorities suspended him from his studies for a full academic year, thus separating him from his classmates and pitching him into the category of dissident. Between 1958 and 1965 the absolute authority of the state imprisoned him without trial, removing him from civil society and making him a political prisoner. In late 1965, some ten months after release from prison, he entered the *maquis*, whether to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) or to make his way to China is not clear. Who *was* this person to merit such exclusion and separation? What circumstances surrounded these exclusions? These are the questions that have come to be asked of him. Pursuit of answers has led to the construction of a mythic life, and he has become a culture hero and a model revolutionary intellectual for the young. The story of his life is now part of a larger discourse about the struggles of youth against age, of radical thought against received wisdom, and of the marginalized against the securely entrenched. The drive to define the life that is “necessarily centripetal,” to retrieve the life from the margins and the periphery, has been constantly undermined—or reinforced—by these themes of exclusion, separation, and revolt.

In Thai language he may well be the most talked about, as well as the most celebrated and the most vilified, Thai radical thinker since Pridi Phanomyong, the civilian leader of 1932 whose economic plan of 1933 was discredited as “communist” for its socialist principles. A generation younger than Pridi and in his adolescence during the late 1940s when Pridi’s political fortunes were ebbing, Jit made his reputation in journalism, literature, and education rather than in the law and public life. Unlike Pridi, who briefly became Prime Minister in 1946 after the end of the Japanese Occupation, Jit Poumisak never held government office. Also unlike Pridi, who acquired a Doctorate of Laws at the University of Paris, Jit never set foot in a Western country. Had he been educated abroad, his imagination would have been harnessed and trained by judicious academic etiquette. He would have learned to qualify his assertions and suggest alternative explanatory models, and his project of reinterpreting Thai history would probably have lost the singlemindedness and decisiveness that endow *The Real Face* with such force.

Pridi attained mythic status in his own lifetime. As the principal intellect of the 1932 coup group and as founder of Thammasat University (The University of Moral and Political Sciences), he sought to transmit the ideals of the French Enlightenment to Thai public life. All Thai nationalists on the Left, even members of the CPT, defined their politics in relation to Pridi's, and although some CPT members urged that the party acknowledge his reputation and use it to advantage, its failure to do so divided the Thai Left for several generations into two streams: Pridi and his followers; and the CPT (Phin interview 1984). After being unjustly implicated in the regicide of the young Anan in 1946 and forced to flee the country, Pridi lived in exile abroad, first in China, then in Paris, until his death in March 1983. From these foreign outposts he engaged in long-distance litigation with courts and lawyers in Bangkok, trying to clear his name of one charge after another. Once he became accessible in Paris, many Thai students and teachers abroad made their way to his home to interview him, to partake of his political wisdom, and to locate their own ideals in relation to the history of Thai politics and political thought that he embodied. These pilgrimages increased after the mass student mobilizations of October 1973 and the suspension of military rule.

Between October 1973 and October 1976 the country enjoyed full parliamentary democracy, though it was a democracy increasingly under siege (Girling 1981; Morrell and Chai-anan 1981). And Pridi, who presided at the installation of parliamentary institutions in Thailand, was a critical reference point for young Thai activists as they constructed a history of their own consciousness. But for many of those who were in their twenties and thirties during that three-year period, Pridi was too remote and too elderly a figure to measure against their own experience. His charisma as a potential leader of a radically restructured society had hardly diminished, but his age and distance from Thai political struggles limited his ability to act as a center for a new politics.

For the younger activists, Jit was closer in age, closer in educational background, and his life had the added meanings of a martyr's death. Moreover, the search for his biography and the discovery of his work between 1973 and 1976 were part and parcel of an unearthing—a kind of cultural excavation of Thai literary and cultural history after World War II (Anderson 1985; Flood 1975; Reynolds and Hong 1983). This period, from the end of the war until 1957–58, was the real heyday of Thai socialism when many literary and historical studies were inspired by materialist philosophy, social realism, and the achievements of post-revolutionary Russia and China. Between 1973 and 1976 Jit's poems, music, reviews, essays, and scholarly studies were dug out of old books and journals (and literally out of someone's back garden in the case of one thick manuscript), assembled into collections, where before there had been only scattered pieces, and reprinted. His life/work and that of other progressive writers of the 1950s touched a nerve in the Thai youth movement, and the pursuit and discovery of that life/work became one of the activities around which the movement cohered.

Some aspects of the political change of 14 October 1973—the mass mobilizations, for example—were unprecedented in Thai political history, but with hindsight much can now be seen to anticipate the change and prepare the way for it. Nevertheless, events moved so swiftly and the change came with such a rush that *at the time* it seemed a new age was dawning. A different kind of past or history was urgently necessary for the new epoch, not a history that spoke of evolution to the present but one that spoke of *similar* conditions, authors, and activities already existent at an earlier time. Such a past provided temporal depth and the shock of recognition for an emergent post-1973 consciousness. Temporal depth here meant that youth was reviving and reanimating something that had been dormant or forgotten. To change the metaphor, something was being repeated. Jit's life—lived until his death, discovered, and retold after it—



was one such repetition that made possible resemblances between the 1950s and 1973–76, and these resemblances helped to define and fortify the emergent post-1973 consciousness.

In giving the 1973–76 period a past in the 1950s, Jit Poumisak became an author who helped to authorize the literary movement of that three-year period and to nourish the post-1973 consciousness of the people who learned about him. Yet he is a product of that consciousness as much as a cause of it. The discovery of his life/work exemplifies what Foucault has called “the author-function,” wherein commentary on a life/work lays claim to certain meanings, expropriating some meanings and excluding others. The author’s name, according to Foucault, “performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others” (Foucault 1979:147). The author functions to give unity and coherence to a body of texts in such a way that “author” and “works” are mutually defining. As a unifying principle, authorship is one of the important ways that discourse is mobilized or controlled for particular purposes (Foucault 1972).

In the case of Jit Poumisak, two works (Jit 1972, 1974c) preceded the author, in the sense that their discovery and republication set off the search for their author, almost as if the works chased after the author. When the works caught up with the author and the episodes of exclusion and separation were discovered in Jit’s life, biography and more authorial works followed. Though it had parallels with the early 1950s, the time after October 1973—and who could say for how long it would flow on?—was felt to be separate from all previous Thai history, and it was in this special, separate time that Jit Poumisak’s life/work began to function as an indispensable sign in Thai radical discourse. The youth movement and its allies constructed an author to function for their purposes, even as government and university authorities sought to control radical discourse by constructing a very different author.

In the early stages of constructing the author “Jit Poumisak” after 14 October 1973, when authorities began to relax censorship controls, Jit’s given name and family name still had to be denied—blacked out, or replaced with his pseudonyms or with the neutral pronoun for the third person, *khao*. In assembling one of the first biographies testifying to Jit’s existence and place in Thai literary history, the editors had approached former classmates and teachers to verify the author they were uncovering, but they “encountered unexpected obstacles” and were forbidden to refer to him by name (Chonthira et al. 1974b:6–31). So they referred to him by pseudonyms and *khao*, drawing attention to the crossing out of his name by having the pronoun printed in enlarged, bold-face type. The story of Jit’s life in this account included the incident in 1953 that caused his suspension from Chulalongkorn University, and it was in that university’s student journal, *Aksonsatphichan*, that this early biography appeared in 1974. The university’s own traditions had been violated in the incident, hence the reluctance of senior university people to allow the proliferation of dangerous meanings around “Jit Poumisak” even at a time of open politics. In listing the names of the writers and activists arrested in the aftermath of the October 1958 coup of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the editors did manage mischievously to smuggle in Jit’s name (Chonthira et al. 1974b:28). But there is no way of telling from the biographical text that the name Jit Poumisak lies behind the pronoun, the pseudonyms, and the blacked-out name.

The crossed-out name surrounded “Jit Poumisak” with secrecy and forbidden knowledge, thus giving it potency and talismanic power. Throughout 1974, the new generation (*khon run mai*) of students, lecturers, writers, and activists debated the meanings of 14 October 1973 and drew “Jit Poumisak” and other writers of the 1950s

into a discourse about politically committed literature (Chonthira 1974a; Lamnam 1980). "Jit Poumisak" focussed the literary and historical concerns of this new generation, for example in an exhibition on "Literary Struggles and the 14 October Incident" held at Thammasat University in August. In September the Social Science Association of Thailand organized a seminar on "The Thought of Jit Poumisak," with papers by three academics (Chonthira Satyawatthana, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Saneh Chamarik) and an older colleague of Jit's from the 1950s, Supha Sirimanonda (Suchat 1974). Much of the discussion was devoted to *The Real Face* and to his literary criticism, in an effort to bring him out into the open, demythologize him, and establish his reputation as a scholar and thinker. The seminar participants were laying claim to certain meanings for Jit Poumisak, in other words trying to determine the way the author Jit Poumisak would function. As it turned out, the discussion merely multiplied the potential meanings of the author. Was he a HUMANIST or a ROMANTICIST or a REVOLUTIONIST? The terms leap out of the Thai text in roman typeface. In that turbulent time the seminar could not reach agreement on the most appropriate label. Suchat Sawatsi, one of the many who saw resemblances between the 1950s and 1973–76 and helped to construct the comparisons, pointed out that the new generation had given Jit a prominent place precisely *because* of the secrecy and forbidden knowledge represented by the name (Suchat 1974:89). And even today secrets persist: "Mother," one of Jit's most famous poems has never been printed in full. Authority still uses the author Jit Poumisak to determine what can and cannot be said.

Throughout the three-year period from 1973 to 1976 academics and students, as well as publishers and even the CPT, contributed to the construction of "Jit Poumisak." At the end of December 1974 a dramatization of Jit's life was performed at Chulalongkorn University. Significantly, three of the four acts concerned the episodes of exclusion and separation that had come to mark his biography (Chulalongkorn University 1975). The CPT, which made Jit a party member after his death, hastily issued a brief biography and laid claim to some ostensibly revolutionary meanings for itself (Klum phithak wannakam n.d.). Publishers were quick to reprint his works (Jit 1974a–e; 1975a–c; 1976a–c), including *The Real Face* which went through five new editions. "Jit Poumisak" was good business for the book market as well as good reading. A memoir of the collective life in prison of those arrested in 1958 provided welcome details of his personality and living habits (he tended the prisoners' garden, complained about the food, and argued with the wardens about TV viewing rights) (Thongbai 1974). In 1976 the Chulalongkorn University student journal devoted an entire issue to the life/work on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Jit's death (Chulalongkorn University 1976). This issue contained summaries of Jit's writings that had not yet been reprinted, a 120-item bibliography of his works, and more testimonies by colleagues, some of whom concealed their identities behind such pseudonyms as "Friend in Struggle."

Among the many materials that surfaced in 1973–76 to construct the author and to fuel the debate on the meanings of "Jit Poumisak" was "Evidence Given by Jit Poumisak," the record of his 1958 interrogation by the political police, which at least seemed to offer some facts about his life (Jit 1978a). But the text's factualness was undermined by the fugitive manner of its circulation in photocopied and mimeographed form, and the attribution of the document to the political police was hearsay, hence suspect, though it was the correct attribution, confirmed many years later by a retired senior police officer close to Jit's case (Chat interview 1979). The evidence is in the first person and is therefore cast in an autobiographical mode that gives an effect of authenticity to the speaker's statements. What is printed seems to be the answers to questions but without the questions. Various interview sessions in transcript form may have been

strung together to construct a complete life to date, resulting in overlaps and confused chronology in places. This autobiography, which begins with the speaker's name, birthdate, parents' names and occupations, and so forth, has served other purposes apart from the efforts to clarify and define the author Jit Poumisak during 1973–76. Its first formal printing in *Athit* magazine in May 1978 was a sign that the post-October 1976 suppression of dissent and debate had lifted; and a reprint the following year contributed to the discourse about the CPT and dissident writers and intellectuals in the jungle (Kong Bannathikan Sayam Nikon 1979).

Apart from the 1958 record of interrogation, most of the information about Jit's childhood has come from interviews with his mother, who died in December 1977, and from his sister, Phirom, who has given many interviews and has also written a memoir (Phirom n.d.). "Muang Boyang," the pen name of an editorial assistant at the now-defunct literary journal *Lok Nangsu* (*Book World*), dedicated himself to the search for Jit memorabilia, assiduously collecting photographs, unpublished manuscripts, letters, notebooks, and other oral and written scraps of the life. He has used some of this material to fashion a biography of Jit's early life and school years that depends for its authenticity on personal contact with family members and access to Jit's personal possessions ("Muang Boyang" 1980). In more than one of his books, "Muang Boyang" has reproduced a photograph of Jit's desk and books, as if to present a shrine of learning and revolutionary origins much like those preserved for Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Mao Zedong in China. Interviews with family members, former classmates, and teachers figure prominently in this biographical literature; the interviewer—and the readers—make contact with "Jit Poumisak" through the direct encounter of first-person speech.

So along with fugitive, confidential, and pseudonymous materials, there are interviews and testimonies, sometimes mediated by a pseudonymous author. In fact, the activity of acquiring the oral testimony is as much a part of the story as the author it purports to clarify, and this is no less the case for myself. One of the many pleasures for me in doing research on Jit Poumisak over the past few years has been meeting the large number of people who have been more than willing to talk to me, or who have taken me aside to tell me what *they* knew, what Jit had said to *them*, what *their* association with him had been. Their speech indicated a wish to affiliate themselves with the forbidden subject, whatever their political sympathies may be. What stands in dialectical relation to secrecy and the forbidden subject is disclosure. The continuing series of disclosures—more witnesses, more works—implies there is still something left undisclosed, and here and there gaps still exist in the life or the authorial works. Thus in relating the life of Jit Poumisak in English, a life that textualizes much about post-World War II Thai history that has been related in other ways, never related, or forgotten, I shall include as part of my story the Thai-language construction of his life with all its lapses, disclosures, and polyphonic testimony. In Thai language the meanings of "Jit Poumisak" in a wide-ranging discourse on Thai politics, history, literature, culture, and radical social change resist being tied down, and so they might be allowed to disperse in English-language biography as well.

#### THE LIFE OF JIT POU MISAK

When Jit—given name Somjit, shortened later to Jit—was born on 25 September 1930 in Prachinburi, a province that stretches east from central Thailand as far as the Cambodian border, his father, Siri, was a clerk in the district revenue office, and his mother, Saengngoen, a seamstress who made clothing for the local military camp. His sister Phirom, two years older, was his only sibling. The father's position in the civil service meant periodic transfers, and it was thus that Jit received his primary and secondary

schooling in several provinces—Kanchanaburi to the west of Bangkok, Samutprakan to the south, and Battambang to the far east. Battambang, the urban center of the Cambodian territories relinquished by France to Thai control at the outset of World War II, lies in a zone of conflict that has, over the centuries, been a battleground for Southeast Asian powers, and here the family lived in the mid-1940s until France reclaimed its colonial possessions at the war's end.

The political circumstances of Jit's first exposure to Cambodia were not lost on him, even in his mid-teens. With Thailand now ruling western Cambodia and his father working as an administrator, he was perforce implicated in a colonial occupation. He and his Thai friends, many of them children of Thai officials sent to govern the Cambodian population, bore the brunt of local bitterness and were sometimes physically abused. The first entry in a diary he began to keep at this time records the evening of 22 March 1946 when he was shot at, the bullet whistling by so close that he could feel the rush of cool air against his ear (Jit 1979b:44). The incident gave him cause to curse the Khmer, and he declared that had it not been for his attachment to his mother, he would have taken up arms against the Free Khmer who were fighting for a Cambodia independent of all foreign rulers, Thai as well as French. But this personal experience with anti-Thai feelings did not prevent him from eventually seeing the justice of the Free Khmer cause; he came to express his sympathy for it, in defiance of the Thai irredentism around him (Jit 1979b:56). As the date of the return of Battambang to France drew near, his teachers gave tearful nationalistic speeches charging the students with the duty of repossessing the western Cambodian provinces for Thailand, and a newspaper celebrated the bonds of Thai-Khmer amity, promising the Cambodians they would no longer be the "scum" of French masters.

Cambodian language and civilization figured prominently in Jit's life and writing ever after. With his gift for languages he picked up Khmer quickly; he is said to have spoken Modern Khmer fluently (Phirom interview 1979) and to have known Old Khmer as well as anyone else in Thailand (preface in Jit 1979c). His scholarly essays reveal a rich knowledge of ancient Khmer society and politics, a knowledge he probably displayed to foreigners when he worked as a guide in the late 1950s on tourist excursions into Cambodia. This knowledge and his multilingualism could, however, be held against him. As a secondary school student in Bangkok, he was taunted by a teacher for being Cambodian, an accusation his sister found insulting to their Thai nationality (Phirom 1981:38).

When the Thai administrators and their families were forced to leave Battambang in 1946, Jit's mother brought her two children to Bangkok to continue their education. The father, barely discernible in any of the oral and written accounts of Jit's life, disappears from the family history at this point, with both children in their mid-teens; it was some years before Jit's sister said anything at all about the absent father, Siri (Phirom 1980:33). He had abandoned the family, leaving Saengngoen to raise the two children on her own.

She sustained and supported the family as a single parent from then on. All the interviews and biographical accounts testify to the mutual affection between Jit and his mother, to the extent that "mother" pervades the biography and authorial works and becomes a motif in them. Phirom's memoir of their mother—much of which concerns her brother—is the latest embellishment of this motif; Phirom has included a photograph of Jit standing behind his mother, his arm resting affectionately and possessively on her shoulder (Phirom 1980). Saengngoen visited him faithfully during the six years he was in prison and lived to see the recognition and fame accorded her son in 1973–76.