Book Review

Sopranzetti, Claudio; Sara Fabbri and Chiara Natalucci. *The King of Bangkok*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2021, 233 pages.

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The *King of Bangkok*, by Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri, and Chiara Natalucci, is a graphic ethnography. That is, an ethnography that harnesses the comic squares and speech bubbles of graphic novels to visually communicate anthropological data in story form. Much like the famous graphic novel *Maus*, which recounts the horrors of the Holocaust, this book too is about political violence. Specifically, it is about the violence endured by a marginalized group within Thailand much beleaguered and abused by elite political forces—in *all* their varied forms.

The people of Isaan—the impoverished, northeastern periphery of Thailand that borders Laos and Cambodia—have historically been neglected by the centre: Bangkok. Whether for a few months or a few years (or sometimes even permanently), many who live in Isaan seasonally migrate to the capital. There they work menial jobs—taxi drivers, janitors, construction workers—and send their hard-earned money home to support families. All the while they suffer countless indignities from Bangkokers who unfairly deride them as "backwards villagers," unknowing of city life and worldly affairs.

To tell the story of this group, the authors relied upon years of ethnographic research conducted by Sopranzetti. They used this data to create a small cast of composite characters representative of this group's thoughts, views, and life choices, spanning Thailand's economic boom in the 1980s all the way up to the Red Shirt demonstrations of 2010 and beyond. In doing so, the story centres upon the life of Nok, an elderly blind man who sells lottery tickets in Bangkok.

Consequently, the story has two intersecting timelines: the fictional (but ethnographically informed) timeline of Nok's life and the historical timeline of Thai political events, including but not limited to the political turmoil of 1992,

the 1997 financial crisis, the rise of the billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister, the military coup waged against him, and the demonstrations carried out in his defence by those called the Red Shirts—mostly comprised of those from Isaan.

To tell Nok's story (and how he eventually became blind) the book uses flashbacks to recount his life from early adulthood onwards. The flashbacks start with how he first moved to Bangkok in the early 1980s, young, naïve, and hopeful of a prosperous and glimmering future.

All good stories, however, are about change, a realization of some sort within the main character towards the end. The Thai title of this book better grasps this essence and that of Nok's story. In Thai, the book is called *Taa Sawang*, literally meaning "bright eyes." Figuratively, the phrase refers to an awakening: the realization of a crucial aspect of reality. In Thai culture, it is generally a Buddhist aspect/realization that one awakens to. However, more recently, the phrase now also implies an awakening to a (negative) political reality indicative of Thailand's longstanding state of affairs. In this regard, the phrase shares parallels with Black Lives Matter's usage of being "woke."

But what is it that Nok awakens to? I do not wish to tell, for two reasons. Firstly, as this is a story, to speak of Nok's realization would spoil it. There is a special place in Hell reserved for those who ruin stories. Secondly, to speak of this realization directly—especially in print—is dangerous. In Thailand, there are human-made hells for those caught speaking about it: jails.

One of the great powers of this book is its unflinching gaze at this one social reality, which most scholarship on Thai culture skirts. Though scholars of Thai culture are keenly aware of it, they know there are some lines that cannot be crossed without stately repercussions. For readers new to Thai culture, this skirting creates an invisible barrier that blocks awareness of this crucial dimension. *The King of Bangkok* exposes this barrier, making it invaluable to junior scholars and students of all things Thai.

Another great power of this book is its ability to infuse historical and cultural events with lived experience. While national histories generally talk about elite power moves, covering the broad strokes deemed to have shaped a given nation-state, this book focuses on non-elites and how they have lived through and made sense of such events. This power adds lustre to histories, making them feel real and knowable at a personal level.

The drawback, however, is that the medium of graphic novels, of storytelling more generally, means that much of the historical and cultural context that informs and impinges upon the lived experiences of the book's characters is backgrounded. It goes largely unmentioned and remains relatively implicit. For that reason, for those new to Thai studies, I recommend this book be read alongside a history, like that of Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit's noteworthy *A History of Thailand* (2014).

The King of Bangkok is also valuable for those looking to experiment with new forms of ethnography and how to communicate anthropological data to wider audiences beyond academia. This book is a crucial contribution to such directions—which anthropology must further embrace if it is once again to become relevant beyond universities.

In this regard, the book also contributes to the perennial discussions of "what is ethnography?" For those interested in these discussions, they will note that conspicuously absent from this text is an anthropologist. The story's main character, Nok, narrates his own life.

For me, ethnography is predicated not only upon participant observation, but also writing oneself into the text to demonstrate critical reflexivity: a means of objectifying one's account to explain how they came to understand in their own limited ways the complexities they experienced. As an ethnography, *The King of Bangkok* shifts from this approach.

While readers are presented with a distillation of voices, condensed into evidenced, informed characters, just how this process was carried out goes unregistered. Gone is an understanding of how the authors came to understand the complexities they encountered. As a result, the presentation of their story—and their characters—occludes this (subjectively informed) process and presents readers with a result that looks like it largely stemmed from positivist approaches (where data is assumed to stand as self-evident, and the researchers as "objective" and thus neutral, invisible lenses unto culture).

This is but a minor critique. It should by no means be used to dismiss the power and beauty of this book. Both of which are embedded within the poignant prose of the characters' dialogues and the wonderfully detailed—both literal and figural—illustration of their lives. Having been captivated by Nok's story—and Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci's ability to tell it—I could not

imagine how an anthropologist could have been added into the mix without taking away from Nok's experiences. Though I would like to see this addition in future forms of this sort of ethnography, for this story at least, I am glad they did not.

Savour this book for its artistry. Read it for its story, and let its power sweep you away within an emotional resonance that further galvanizes its unflinching insights into Thai culture.

Reference

Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. 2014. *A History of Thailand.* 3rd ed. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.