

THE
THAI BOOK
A FIELD GUIDE TO THAI
POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

THE HISTORY OF THAILAND'S FUTURE: PROTEST,
DEMOCRACY, BIG MEN, COUPS, IDEOLOGY,
BOMBS, KILLING PEOPLE, AND FORGIVENESS

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BIG MEN ALWAYS GO TOO FAR

Ungratefulness is, for the Thais, the worst crime, which even the notorious bandit was unable to commit. Gratefulness is one strikingly characteristic trait of the Thai people, who have this quality not by education but by instinct; the Thais are born grateful.

—Luang Vichitr Vadakarn, *Thailand's Case*

The dynamic that comes with power and influence can lead to dangerous places. The Thai world in particular affords a heady mix of fealty and adulation to the leader of men, the business tycoon, and the scion. This is the curse of the Thai “big man.” Big men, whether succeeding or failing, can expect only praise and unwavering encouragement of their loyal minions.

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Inevitably they overplay their hand even in the face of total dominance and cause their own downfall. The higher one gets in Thai culture, the more pronounced this phenomenon becomes. Understanding that big men inevitably go too far is useful in predicting the way events ultimately play out.

To appreciate this dynamic, it is again necessary to start with one's own non-Thai cultural assumptions. Assuming all are equal and that chumminess between people is proof of a laudable sense of egalitarianism is integral to Western belief. That assumption does not hold true in Thailand.

Thais use the term "big man" to describe leaders in a social, business, or political environment. There are big men in every political party, family, and bureaucracy. All the political party leaders, as well as top generals, live the life of big men. It is a dynamic repeated not only in the formalized structure of business and politics, but in every social grouping.

It is possible to be an underling in one group and a big man in another. The lowly follower who bows and scrapes to his big-man boss becomes the big man himself within the company of his family as his wife and children dutifully bow and scrape for him. Everyone seeks to be a big man.

Well-mannered Thais must know the relative status of the people they interact with. This allows them to know the proper etiquette to use for each individual. Is this person a big man who must be afforded extra deference, a pal who can be spoken to on equal terms, or an underling who naturally desires to be lectured to?

Those who are not sure of the proper social station of one

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they meet feel uneasy in interacting with the person until the proper understanding of that person's level can be determined. Much of the shyness that foreigners think they perceive when Thais meet them for the first time derives from uncertainty. This is the need of the Thai to identify the social level of those he interacts with and thus know the proper level of deference and etiquette to employ.

Big men are never criticized but are afforded the utmost respect and deference. They are rewarded with favors and feted at gatherings where devotees pay their respects.

The big man must reward the respect he is shown by using his power and influence to intervene on behalf of his followers when they are in need or in trouble. These are the kinds of important social bonds that offer individuals protection and influence beyond what they could personally muster or from which they could derive from a corrupt and compromised legal and bureaucratic system. This is wrapped up in the patronage that permeates every level of society. No man stands alone. Proper loyalty is rewarded by job security and being part of the extended family led by the big man.

The impulse to create and cater to big men is governed by a number of social impulses including the cherished and deeply ingrained notion of *grewng jai*. A precise and descriptive translation is hard to come by, particularly since the concept flies in the face of the Western impulse to speak up without regard to others and the belief in the equality of all.

The phrase "respectful fear" can be employed to describe what the term implies. This is the desire to show respect to one's

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superiors with deference coupled with a belief that questioning them results in annoyance and displays one's own stupidity for not understanding in the first place. It is considered a laudable sentiment one should feel when dealing with a person in a superior position. With a *greng jai* attitude, one is consciously expressing respect and accommodation for the big man's feelings.

Political big men are about personality, not ideology. They speak at length about themselves, their frantic activities, their generosity, their personal charisma, their money. The style of Thai political speechmaking is quite unlike that which a Westerner might expect. English translations therefore tend to be an approximation and explanation of what the speaker meant rather than a direct translation. To the Western listener, political speeches in the Thai language seem rambling, starting with a historical background, frequent references to HM the King's projects and views, an emphasis on economic development and government reforms (achieved mainly by transferring "bad" officials), and an assurance that all is under control (regardless of whether it really is). The speeches often center on how hard the big man works and has suffered for the cause or his business. The listeners appreciate this as they find common cause that their leader deigns to work as hard as they do.

Another avenue for the underling to pay tribute is the face-to-face meeting. Even in the age of the SMS and email, face-to-face entreaties are highly valued. This is what is behind Thai political figures flocking to Hong Kong, Singapore or Cambodia whenever deposed Prime Minister Thaksin was visiting in order to plead for cabinet posts. The power of asking for a personal audience to

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broach a consequential subject should not be underestimated. It strengthens and affirms the personal relationship and the deferential nature that is believed to be at the heart of all proper relations.

The bubble that surrounds the big man—the lack of criticism and continuous praise—also affords him the boon of not losing face. It creates a reality in which truths need not be faced. Combined with societal unease with free speech or other pronouncements that might offend another, it means that in the face of uncertainty, one always lies. Examples of this occur often in politics, such as when the government denies the existence of health risks like SARS, or makes blanket assurances about the nation being untouched by terrorism, or that flooding will not occur. While the hearers of these claims are able to read between the lines with their own cultural understanding, it is easy to see how this dynamic can quickly lead a big man into delusional territory.

Pledges to reform tend to be only in terms of better public relations so people can be made aware of the good job they are already doing. There is no admission that anything really needs to change or that a mistake was made. This is part of a general unease with not only confronting, but also being confronted. An appreciation of constructive criticism is unknown.

A typical Westerner might think they know a few big men. They may point to the fact that they can approach them directly and are in turn treated with a Western sense of universal equality. This treatment is likely the exception the big man makes for a foreigner who does not have the good sense to play his societal

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role like a normal person. Also, by virtue of his non-Thainess, the Westerner can be seen to exist outside society's rules. He might even be viewed as a high-status person by virtue of being a foreigner, assumed to be rich and modern, both of these being laudable qualities.

The big-man phenomenon naturally leads to isolation. The greater the power and the higher the elevation, the less open feedback they receive and thus the greater the tendency for missteps and overreaching. This sort of dynamic means those in power will tend to cling to power beyond what is prudent. Once in power, the desire to divvy up the spoils of power among one's friends and allies will be overwhelming. Laws must be changed to guarantee additional advantage. All the while the big man is cheered on and shielded from criticism.

The big-man dynamic can also result in capriciousness. This can mean intimidating or even physically assaulting others. This manifestation of the big-man syndrome is not uncommon among politicians and businessmen well known for their public violence against family members and staff.

In the Thai mindset, all activities are first judged by the fun or pleasure they provide at the moment. This is a powerful trump card over other impulses. The desirability of pleasantness, or perhaps more accurately the undesirability of anything not pleasant or fun, results in lives with little sense of self-examination. There is no propensity to see oneself from another's perspective and little value placed on this concept.

Combine these traits with the extreme unease of a big man's underlings to confront or point out errors and the role of the big

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man becomes fraught with danger. This virtually guarantees that the adventures of a big man with ever-growing power leads to self-destruction. This is even true of those who appear to have no external enemies or forces acting against them.

Thus, an individual, particularly in politics or business, who finds himself in a seemingly unassailable position can generally be expected to go too far and place himself and his fortune in an untenable position. Even those who are savvy enough to avoid this psychological trap often find their children—feted and spoiled commensurate with their parent's greatness—falling prey to spectacular excesses and arrogance that can impact a family's standing.

These are undoubtedly broad generalizations about people. There does exist the rare Thai who is wisely able to maintain his status among his followers as well as solicit and absorb impartial advice. However, the dynamics of the culture flow against this.

The principle of big men always going too far or overreaching is a principal dynamic that can be relied upon. The momentum of their own sense of power and their immunity to counsel and criticism pushes them into untenable situations. The big man, convinced of his rightness, tends to fight tooth and nail to resist giving up power even in the face of obvious wrongdoing. He makes emotional quotes to the media and has tearful meetings with supporters who gladly keep up their end of the bargain with undying commiseration. Even the normally shrewd big man misses strategic moments to step aside gracefully. The mix of emotion, fear of losing face, and avoidance of being blamed makes the big man his own worst enemy and guarantees a fall.

