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Noise at the Edge of Silence

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Professor Thongchai Winichakul has struggled to find words to describe the horror of Thailand's darkest day, but the photographs taken by a UW alumnus have spoken volumes.

When news of the riots reached his village in rural Thailand, Jinda Thongsin rushed to Bangkok to find his son. Jaruphong was a student there, at Thammasat University, and on October 7, 1976, he was one of perhaps hundreds of students whose whereabouts were unknown. In the wake of a bloody massacre that had erupted on Thammasat's campus the day before, with the nation's government in upheaval, information was tenuous. It was not clear how many people had died, how many had been arrested, and how many had escaped into the hills. At Jaruphong's apartment, Jinda found an unfinished plate of food and a cup of cold coffee. He went to the police, but his son had not been arrested. He checked every hospital, but his son had not been admitted. Nothing told him Jaruphong was alive, but neither did anything confirm that he was dead. With a parent's hope, he searched on.

Twenty-six and a half years later, Thongchai Winichakul runs his fingers across the gloss of a black-and-white photograph that lies on his desk, on the fifth floor of the Humanities Building. A UW-Madison professor of history, he has the furrowed visage of a man who constantly battles the past — one who unearths it, who turns it in his hands, who works to discover its textures and blemishes. He speaks with a seriousness that conveys that history — his history — is not always pretty to behold.

The image on the page beneath Thongchai's finger tips is just visible. It depicts a young man being dragged across the ground by a piece of cloth around his neck. Somehow you know before the professor says a word that this is Jaruphong, that this is the evidence that Jinda hoped to find — and desperately hoped not to find. It is a hurried photograph, somewhat overexposed, no doubt taken on the run. But there is no denying the fate that it reveals.

In all the years since the photograph was taken, Jinda and Lin Thongsin have not seen it. For decades, even as it circulated among Thongchai and the other survivors of the massacre at Thammasat University, Jaruphong's friends could not bear to tell them it existed. They heard news that Jaruphong's parents were still looking for him, were still hoping that one day he would return home. Their hearts broke, yet they still could not share the photograph.

Some truths are too painful.

Thailand is a generally beautiful country, populated by generally beautiful people — a self-described "land of smiles," where grace and serenity are closely held facets of the national identity. Thais, most of whom are Buddhists, strive for emotional pacifism as a religious and cultural ideal. As one Thai expression maintains, they seek always to "keep a cool heart."

In the middle of the 1970s, however, this proved difficult. Thailand, which shares a peninsula with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, was a political island surrounded by a Communist sea. Its own democratically elected government, established in 1973 after a long series of military coups and dictatorial regimes, was hardly a rock of assurance. Insecurity led to fear, and fear led many Thai hearts to turn severely uncool. In 1975 and early 1976, the headlines were rife with political assassinations, power grabs, propaganda, and innuendo.

Factions on the left and right swelled in ranks and rhetoric. Leftists turned to Marxism, while the forces of the right eyed a return to military control.

The political gale that swept up Thailand was particularly strong at Thammasat, one of the country's most prestigious public universities. A crucible during the 1973 uprisings that brought democracy, the campus maintained an activist image during the years following, and its walls were often peppered with fliers announcing demonstrations, lectures, and rallies. At the center of it all was Thongchai, then a nineteen-year-old sophomore and a native son of Bangkok. Thongchai emerged as a student leader, and by 1976, he had become vice president of Thammasat's student union.

Thongchai recalls a certain euphoria of those days. "We wanted to change the country, to uproot the social suffering and all the bad elements in society. The feeling was that we had power," he says. However, not everyone shared their idealism. The military establishment — deposed, but hardly defanged — circulated rumors about student protesters being evil and having mystical powers. The stories tapped into a deep-rooted fear of Communism, as well as age-old superstitions common in rural Thailand. "The line was that they were blood-sucking vampires," says Katherine Bowie, a professor of anthropology who was a research assistant in Thailand at the time. "And that fed right into a lot of village folklore."

Meanwhile, it looked to those on the left that the ousted military government was plotting a coup. Two exiled leaders returned to Thailand under dubious rationale. Thongchai and his colleagues sensed a trap. "It was a kind of lose-lose situation," he says. "If you don't protest, that means symbolically that the dictatorship is back. But if you protest — that's what they wanted us to do."

They went ahead with plans for a rally, but on September 24, two activists were seized and hanged as they posted leaflets for the event. "This is conspiracy," Thongchai says.

The students staged rallies on October 4 and 5 — docile events, featuring speeches, music, and skits. In an unfortunate coincidence, one of the students who performed a re-enactment of the hangings bore distinct resemblance to the Crown Prince of Thailand. Word spread, primarily over military-controlled broadcasting networks, that the students had hanged the prince in effigy,

an act that would have been both criminal and hugely divisive in a nation that reveres its monarchy. Anger followed rumor much as fire burns through fuel. At dusk on October 5, Thai police and members of various paramilitary groups descended on Thammasat, trapping nearly four thousand students inside its walled campus.

Throughout the night, the students huddled in the relative security of Thammasat's soccer field. The surrounding campus buildings sheltered them from the bullets that police periodically fired through the campus gates. At five-thirty in the morning, however, the shooting intensified. Someone fired a grenade over the buildings, onto the middle of the field. Eight students were killed, triggering a raid against the penned-in students that lasted nearly four hours.

From the speaker's platform, Thongchai leaned into a microphone and urged calm. He pleaded with the police to stop shooting, repeating the message perhaps several hundred times as the hours passed. A few students who had guns tried to return the fire, but Thongchai says that he knew from the sound that almost all of the shots came from military-style weapons. Eventually, the raging masses, now numbering several thousand, encroached the gates and entered the campus. Thongchai repeated his plea.

"At first I thought that they could not hear me," he says. "But when they came onto campus, I knew that they could."

According to official reports, forty-three people died on October 6. Most eyewitnesses consider that number appallingly low. One Chinese charity, which came in to tend to the dead, claims to have collected more than one hundred bodies. In the chaos of the attack, students were shot and hanged, pulled through gates and beaten, dragged across city streets, and bludgeoned with sticks and poles. A few escaped. More than three thousand were rounded up by police, stripped to their waists, and told to lie on their stomachs and await incarceration. By evening, the democracy was overthrown and martial law was enforced. Many of the bodies were cremated en masse. The true count of those who died will likely never be known.

Forty-three is an important figure, however, because it symbolizes the reluctance of Thai officialdom to consider the more horrifying possibilities of the massacre. A government investigation of the event has never been undertaken, nor has anyone been charged for the students' deaths. More than two decades passed before the victims were publicly memorialized, and then only by Thammasat, not by the Thai government.

Even today, with a stable democracy that has embraced openness in many ways, October 6 remains a story significantly untold. Eight of ten textbooks that Thai schools use to teach their nation's history make no mention of the massacre. In a country where children are raised on the triumvirate pillars of nation, crown, and religion, the events of 1976 still cut deeply into the very marrow of what many Thais believe it means to be Thai.

"It is a difficult event for them to remember because of the cruelty involved," says Katherine Bowie. "Thais generally like to see themselves as easygoing, gentle, hospitable people, and it is very hard for them to be able to explain how their fellow Thais could have committed such inhumanity." Even many Thais who supported the students at that time have resisted efforts to unearth the past. "Thailand has not, and may not be able to, confront it," says Thongchai. "The event could be forgotten entirely."

Yet it is not merely those who were outside the gates at Thammasat who leave the stone unturned. For decades, the former radicals themselves did little to raise the specter of October 6.

Captured that day as he tried to escape campus, Thongchai spent two years in prison, held without trial, and denied pen and paper during his first year in captivity. When he was freed, under pressure from international governments and human rights groups, it was into a changed nation. The radical movement had collapsed, and the military government was giving way to a democratically elected one. Although he returned to Thammasat and tried to resume his routines, Thongchai fought doubts about what had happened earlier. His friends had scattered, and he often felt invalidated and alone. Like many others who survived the massacre, he wrapped himself in a cocoon of guilt and shame, feeling somehow responsible for it all.

"The massacre was so bitter ... lots of my friends blame themselves," he says. "Me, too. Not in the sense that we made people die. We are rational enough to know that. But still, we are part of it." Fear and indecision kept them from resolving past issues, including telling Jaruphong's parents that their son was dead. "We were cowards," he explains. And even if they had had the courage, they couldn't find the words.

Although Thongchai did not know it at the time, on October 6 he was within several yards of someone who could help him fill the silences. Neal Ulevich '68 had spent four years in Vietnam, taking pictures for the Associated Press before catching one of the last helicopters out of Saigon in 1975. Long before he set foot on Thammasat's campus, he was used to capturing history with a camera lens.

A journalism graduate and former staffer for the Daily Cardinal, Ulevich hopped from Saigon to Bangkok after the war, working for the AP's regional bureau. The call to cover the goings-on at Thammasat came at seven o'clock on the morning of October 6, after the AP's reporter had already come and gone from the campus. Ulevich was initially annoyed that he hadn't been notified sooner. He couldn't have known how opportune his timing would become.

When he arrived forty-five minutes later, he found a scene unlike anything he'd seen in combat. Mobs lined the gates of campus like frothing dogs, calling for flesh and blood. With the crowd in the grip of madness, he found it surprisingly easy to move around. It was like he was invisible — but not impenetrable. When a spray of gunfire sent him sprawling onto the grass of the soccer field, he understood the danger. He'd been around gunfights in Vietnam, but there they were shooting at enemies. This ... this was just wild. "They were just firing off at everything," he says.

For a man who knew war, this was more bedlam than battle. Even considering Thailand's history of political turmoil, the violence "was so un-Thai," Ulevich recalls. As the melee deepened, packs of fiery-eyed youths dragged students off campus and hanged them from tree branches. One of his pictures captured a man attacking a garroted student, clearly dead, with a wooden chair. In another, a crowd watched as a student was beaten to death, seeming as approving and enthusiastic as if they were cheering on a soccer team. When he returned to the bureau, the Thai editors blinked disbelievingly at his account. This couldn't be true, they said. Not here, not in Thailand. "Okay," Ulevich said. "I'll develop my film. If you need proof, I'll show you the pictures."

Photographs can be like the mortar of history, holding it solid where words can't be trusted. And in the months and years afterward, photographs taken by Ulevich and others there that day became invaluable documents in what was otherwise a conspiracy of silence. Once it assumed power, the military government closed every newspaper in Bangkok to halt information from leaking out. Photographers were ordered to hand over their film, and reporters told to destroy their notes. Fearing suppression, Ulevich developed his film quickly and sent seventeen images by telegram to Tokyo. They appeared in newspapers around the world — but not in Thailand. A year later, when the collection won a Pulitzer Prize, the Bangkok Post reported Ulevich's honor, still without publishing the photographs that earned it.

As important as their official distribution, however, was the unofficial circulation. Slowly, surreptitiously, the photographs made their way back into Thailand. Students collected and shared dog-eared prints and fuzzy copies, held onto them like evidence. When the first underground accounts of the Thammasat massacre were published in the 1980s, they were essentially just pictures. No words, no testimonies. The images said enough.

"The photos are the one important means by which people know about the massacre," says Thongchai. Their existence — the proof they provided — helped to embolden the former radicals, who began to comprehend that they were not alone in trying to keep the record of the massacre from being expunged. By 1991, Thongchai had earned his doctorate from the University of Sydney and was hired at UW-Madison. With the comfort of both academic and geographic distance, he took on more serious contemplation of the massacre. As the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy neared, he called for a public commemoration, and, surprisingly, found many ready to reconcile the past.

On October 6, 1996, the survivors of the massacre gathered at Thammasat to publicly acknowledge the tragedy for the first time. It was in many ways a cathartic release of old demons. Several hundred people attended, listening attentively to speeches, and slowly circling a large funeral urn erected on the soccer field to honor the dead. In the day's keynote address, Thongchai stood on a platform, near the spot where two decades before he had begged police to stop shooting, and praised the dialogue. The commemoration, he said, was a "loud noise at the very edge of silence."

In the years since, Thongchai has not allowed the silence to linger. He followed the commemoration with a book chapter exploring his country's — and his own — ambivalence about remembering the massacre. He continues to doggedly turn up documents and push, albeit gently, for the full history of the events to be recognized. Two years ago, he uncovered seventy boxes of previously hidden material, and he plans eventually to write a full book about the massacre — a work that will flow both from academic and personal experience.

"I know what to write," he says. "I just don't know how to write it."

In the course of his research, Thongchai had become well acquainted with the name Neal Ulevich. He had seen it hundreds of times — in books, in newspaper articles, and attached to the dozens of old photographs that the professor keeps filed in his office. So it was with some surprise in March of this year that Thongchai saw Ulevich's name again — this time on the UW's calendar of upcoming events.

Ulevich, who now lives in Denver and works as a semiretired freelance photographer, was scheduled to speak to journalism students just a few hundred yards from Thongchai's office. The two had nearly crossed paths in 1976: when the photographer first arrived at Thammasat, Thongchai was trying to get away from the campus, heading toward a river that ran alongside the university. Thongchai doesn't appear in any of Ulevich's photographs, and he doesn't recall knowing that photographers were present. Yet here they were, brought together again on a university campus, more than eight thousand miles and nearly three decades removed from Bangkok. It felt like the closing of a circle.

Thongchai says he wanted to meet Ulevich, in part, to thank him. "I just feel like he was part of that event, that he helped people know about what happened," he says. "Ten, twenty years later, people still see his pictures, and they're much more powerful than stories. I know that he wants people to know."

On the day of Ulevich's visit, Thongchai arrived at Vilas Hall an hour before his scheduled talk. The two exchanged a Thai greeting, and set immediately to reminiscing. It was a bit like two middle-aged chums, talking about the old days. Even though they had never met, they felt the bond of shared experience.

"I don't have to ask him — he knows how terrible it was," Thongchai says.

Thongchai brought a pile of underground publications, which over time have been cobbled together using photographs from Ulevich and others. As the two paged through them, they spoke sparingly, nodding and gesturing in a language that they implicitly understood. After several minutes, Thongchai reached into his pocket and unfolded an envelope containing a slide image of Jaruphong's death, a picture that still pains the professor, reminding him of past inaction. It has been more than seven years since one of Jaruphong's friends finally told Jinda and Lin that their son was gone. Thongchai has met with them, as well, to share his regret. But these meetings were like the noise at the edge of silence. There is much more to be said about Jaruphong's life and his sacrifice. With time, Thongchai hopes he can say it.

Thongchai handed the slide to Ulevich. "Did you take this?" he asked. Ulevich considered the photograph, then said that it wasn't his. But it hardly mattered. To each, the photograph said something about courage. For one, it was about having the courage to record history. For the other, it was about finding the courage to live with it.