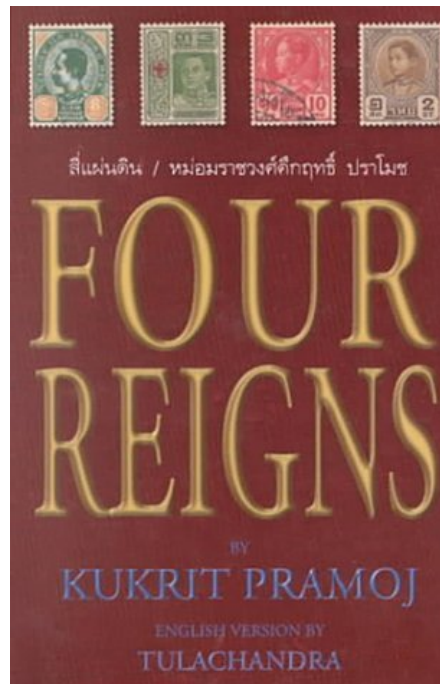




Four Reigns

????????????????????, Tulachandra (Translator) , Kukrit Pramoj

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This English version of the Thai novel Si Phaendin tells the rich and entertaining story of one woman's life both inside and outside the royal palace in Bangkok. Spanning a period of four reigns, from King Chulalongkorn to the reign of his grandson King Ananda, this popular modern classic gives insight into the social and political issues facing Thailand from the 1890s through the turbulent years of World War II.

Four Reigns Details

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Author : ?.?.?.????????? ?????? , Tulachandra (Translator) , Kukrit Pramoj

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From Reader Review Four Reigns for online ebook

Gabriela Mengarda says

A nice reading if you are planning to travel to Thailand and want to understand better Thai culture.

Subvert says

While I have been living here in Bangkok for over half a year now, I noticed I hadn't read any Thai literature at all. I came across this book on a friend's bookshelf and figured I might as well read it. I already had my preconceptions on the book before I started reading. It's a classic in Thailand that has been turned in several theatre-plays, movies and tv-series. As the monarchy is constantly in the background throughout the book (Four Reigns referring to the reigns of four different Kings), which is a very sensitive topic here and impossible to criticize, I already knew that the book basically had to be royalist propaganda. But this in itself could make for an interesting read, seeing how the Thai history is written down in novel form in the way the Thai establishment wants you to understand it. Especially when it includes the death of King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII), who died as an 18-year old in an "accident" with a gun-shot in his head. This death has never been clarified, although this didn't stop three servants from being executed on charges of conspiracy to kill the King. This incident becomes even more interesting when you take into account that the author, Kukrit Pramoj, was an important politician himself at the time. His brother Seni Pramoj, who basically became the first Thai Prime-Minister after WW2 just a few years earlier, played a prominent role in the aftermath of the King's death, as he accused then current Prime-Minister Pridi Banomyong (a socialist) for being responsible for the King's assassination, which is by all accounts extremely implausible. The Pramoj brothers, royal descendents of Rama II and part of the then newly founded Democrat Party, cooperated a year later in a military coup to oust the government, which saw Seni Pramoj rewarded with a high position in the cabinet of the new government (that ironically was ousted by yet another military coup 112 days later).

With this background the book gets another dimension. It is not just a novel for entertainment, but it also promotes an ideology that corresponds with the political viewpoints (and interests) of the author, who was Prime-Minister himself for year in the turbulent Thai mid 70s. It's the ideology of royalists and reactionary conservatives, that talk of freedom and democracy, but will gladly support a coup against an elected government when it threatens the established establishment (be it the socialist threats of the past or today's Shinawatra family), yet carefully balancing between leftist populist sentiment from the people and the visible and less visible hands that interfere in Thai democracy to this day*. The short Prime-Minister terms of both the Pramoj brothers in the 70s are most illustrative of this, particularly Seni Pramoj's last term as Prime-Minister in 1976, in which he was ousted (again) a day after the Thammasat Massacre. Since Thailand became 'democratic' in 1932 it has seen 17 different constitutions and over 20 mostly bloodless coup d'états, with more than once the military doing a self-coup against its own government.

This book explains how Thai people are meant to see the world. If Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" defines an ideology that explains modern America with all its ruthless profiteering, then "Four Reigns" should be seen as the book that defines mainstream Thai ideology or "Thainess" as they call it. The basic tenets of this "Thainess" can be summarized as loyalty to the Nation, Religion, and the Monarchy. In 1981, Kukrit Pramoj writes in the preface of this English version of the original Thai book from 1953 that he hopes that those friends of Thailand who do not read Thai, will now "gain a little more understanding towards us", implying that farang can never truly understand "Thainess", which is also the common argument from many Thais when you are critically discussing the elephants in the room of Thai politics. And indeed, the book puts out a

defense of the Thai ideology that you regularly run into when you live here. While it explains many specific details that were new to me, in general terms it confirmed more what I had already suspected. Rather than changing my outlook towards Thai society, it strengthened some of the more negative thoughts I already had.

The characters can be seen as caricatures, outlining the values that Kukrit Pramoj wants to either promote or put in a negative light. That is not to say that all the characters are flat and one-dimensional, at least not more so than other novels normally are, but the characters do tend to be the perfect stereotypes of their times and the values they hold. Some of the characters are extremely sympathetic, like the main-character Phloi for example. The story follows her life, as she is put into the Grand Palace as a 10 year old girl and later lives with together her high-society husband. The book basically explains Thai history in that period through Phloi's eyes, mostly based on her relationships with the people around her.

Phloi portrays the 'ideal' Thai woman; she is perfect, beautiful and completely flawless throughout the book. At times the book almost reads as a guide on how to be a proper Thai woman, which of course comes down to fully sacrificing yourself to your husband at all costs: being there for him at all times; being a good cook; taking care of the kids all by your own; never holding your own opinion against him, keep it for yourself when you disagree with what he says; don't dare to be insulted when he fathered a child without ever telling you; and to suggest him, when he feels depressed, to have more than one wife (or extra-marital affairs and massage parlor visits as it would be in modern Thailand); did your potential partner cheat on you? Fully forgive him in the sweetest of words (all these examples are from the book). Although things have thankfully changed quite a bit in Thailand, you can still recognize much of it. Some feminist emancipation is still drastically needed in this country.

Just as Phloi is written down as the ideal Thai woman of her times, she is also portrayed by Pramoj as extremely likeable. This trick of making all the characters that support Pramoj's ideology pleasant and those opposing not-so-perfect is used throughout the book. All the royalists in the book are virtuous, while the bureaucrats that take control after the absolute monarchy is dissolved are all clumsy, self-interested and greedy. The characters of royal blood however, from the Kings (that are always at a distance) to a minor princess like Sadet, who adopts the young Phloi in the Grand Palace, are described as absolutely perfect and virtuous, devoid of any negative characteristics. They are all handsome, well-behaved, treating everyone with affection and being perfect dutiful servants towards their subjects. From time to time, one can overhear conversations of the King or Queen talking to commoners, knowing about all their personal issues. The Queen knowing the name of this peasant she had met many years ago, the King talking with this old farmer without teeth as if they were friends, "nothing too big or small for his wisdom and compassion". It's the classic propaganda that we in the West often ridicule, think of Kim Yung-il's fieldtrips and the corresponding photo-ops. Thailand is however filled with similar photos and videos of King making fieldtrips to all corners of the country, inspecting the thousands of royal development projects, for which public accountability and assessment of success are of course completely out of question.

It's the basic outline of the Thai ideology in which all the politicians are seen as greedy and bad, while the royals are 'above politics' and keep the country on track. The King is the source of all that is good; he's selfless, never smiling or enjoying earthly pleasure, but dedicating his life to improving the Thai nation. The (current) King is portrayed as a brilliant scientist telling politicians what to do, as one who is (literally, I kid you not) capable of providing rain for the crops, and as a bringer of justice by the annual royal pardons. Politicians however can do no good and are the source of all misery. In history classes Thai children will learn of all the good things done by the royals, but young Thais are unlikely to know much of statesmen as Pridi Banomyong or Puey Ungpakorn.

Of course we also get the revisionist history of the Thai monarchs as true democrats. The role of Rama VII in the three years after the revolution is mostly ignored. In reality he stifled the democratization process by co-opting the military side of the Promoters (in opposition to Pridi and others), and attempting to create a limited monarchy rather than giving up his executive and legislative powers as in Europe's constitutional

monarchies **. In Thai ideology however, the king is ‘above politics’ and would never intervene for its own interests, so the focus instead is on how the new bureaucrats in power (including Phloi’s son An***) immediately start constricting freedom of speech (which did happen, but as if there was such thing under absolute monarchy?). Rama VII is portrayed as being as democratic “as any of them [in the government], if not more” (496). When Rama VII finally decides to abdicate in 1935 after 3 years of uneasy cooperation with the government, Ot (the most agreeable son) tells her mother “Democracy hasn’t been with us for very long, and now we’ve lost one of its staunchest champions”.

Besides the revisionist fairy-tale of Thai monarchs as true democrats, another major element in the ideology of “Thainess” is spirituality and religion. While nowhere becoming super-natural or turning into downright fantasy, throughout the book the Thai’s superstition is quietly supported. The rituals and amulets always seem to help, at least nowhere future events contradict expectations raised by their practice and usage. Many of the future events, especially the dying of characters close to Phloi, are in some way predicted by signs or feelings. The end of the four reigns in particular is always preceded by major signs, especially the death of King Chulalongkorn. The appearance of the Halley’s Comet in 1910 worries Phloi as it must be a bad sign, she is then calmed by her husband some days later, telling her that it had nothing to do with them at all, as the comet must have signaled the death King Edward VII who must have accumulated much, much, much merit, so that even they in Thailand could see it (sure enough it is always good to prop up foreign monarchies a bit, in support of your own****). But of course, less than one page later it is announced that Rama V unexpectedly died, even though he died all the way in October, five months after the death of King Edward VII and the appearance of the comet. Unsurprisingly, during Rama V’s cremation the sky darkened, thunder struck and rain came pouring down (280-284). This cliché however could really have happened considering it took place in Thailand’s rain season.

[continued in comment]

* See this brilliant article on this expression, cleverly avoiding lèse majesté charges:
<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2011/...>

** <http://khikwai.com/blog/wp-content/up...>

*** Phloi has four children in the book, all of them caricatures to explain the changes in Thai history in that time. On is the royalist soldier, banished to prison for a decade after participating in the Borawat rebellion. Praphai is the beautiful daughter who exemplifies the changes for women in the modernizing Thailand with her taste for modern fashion and hi-so parties. An and Ot are however among the first upper-class Thais to go abroad for an overseas education. An is the overly ambitious son, is a participant in the 1932 coup and becomes a powerful bureaucrat, who then slowly becomes disillusioned by the new government and regrets his past actions. Ot is the easy-going and most sympathetic son, who is less ambitious than An, but much wiser and constantly in support of the royalty. It’s worth pointing out that An went to study in France like most of the coup plotters including Pridi, while Ot went to study in England like the Pramoj brothers did. I doubt that this is purely coincidental.

**** It might be because I am more perceptive to it here, but it seems I see about the same amount of pictures of the Dutch monarchy as I do back in the Netherlands. The celebrity magazines in Thailand are all about news on European monarchies. The official pictures of the Thai monarchy often include visiting foreign monarchs. And during the British royal wedding madness last year I (and any other Caucasian in Thailand at that time) was hailed several times by Thais sharing their excitement with me, as if care.

Thailand--from age 10, when she and her mother go to live in the women's palace, until her death 54 years later. Readers see the enormous changes that happened in Thailand (and the outside world) between 1892 and 1946. The pace is leisurely, and much of the book focuses on Phloi's everyday life, but it kept my interest and in fact I read through it quickly. Despite producing more than its share of typos, the translation is very readable and does a good job of concisely explaining the essentials to foreign readers without turning the novel into a textbook. There is a lot of cultural and historical detail, presented in an engaging way.

One of the things that most stands out about this book a couple months after finishing it is just how nostalgic it is. To a certain extent, and especially since the author was himself a politician and even prime minister of Thailand, one has to wonder about its accuracy. For instance, Rama V (the book's first king) is apparently universally loved, and when he dies, the whole country feels bereaved. It's impossible for me to judge what's plausible in Thailand 100 years ago, so I'll just point out that the setting feels idealized at times, but that it's valuable to read books written for a completely different cultural sensibility than my own.

Probably because of that nostalgia, the characters feel less real at the beginning of the book than they do by the end. It's difficult to get a sense of who the young Phloi is; she can feel like a placeholder for a Thai man's vision of an ideal Thai woman. She's the sort of young woman who unquestioningly agrees to marry the man her father chooses for her, and obligingly falls in love with him; the sort of woman who joyfully adopts her husband's illegitimate son. (Her young life is still interesting enough to read about, but she doesn't have much complexity at that point.) But by the time she reaches middle age--when the culture changes and she's left hopelessly behind the times, struggling to accept her children's choices with good grace and to keep her family together--she emerges as a vivid and believable character. Across the board, the characters seem to become more complex and lifelike as they age, such that the book truly benefits from covering so much time.

The one weird thing about the book's span is that the timeline is a bit confused, with the number of years passing during each reign not quite matching the number of years that seem to pass in the lives of Phloi and her family and friends. The most obvious example: her son Ot is born at the beginning of Rama VI's 15-year reign; at the end of it he's returning home after graduating from college in England. (Wait a minute....) Meanwhile, Phloi seems to be about 22 by the end of the first reign, when mathematically she should be 28.

Overall, this is a good book.... for those who are interested in Thailand specifically, or in world fiction generally. While slow-paced, it's compelling and immersive, providing an excellent window into a culture.

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marquie says

Due to the fact that I myself, am a Thai - this book has proved to be tremendously informative on the history and culture of my own country. Spanning the period of four reigns of four Thai kings, this novel explores the life of "Mae Ploi" as she confronts with radical changes and social conflicts. It is a novel that digresses from usual historical fiction, as it fully plunges you into the themes of emotions, loss and suffering. And more importantly, it is a novel that impresses and never ceases to touch the heart. And it is because of this piece of fiction, that I can proudly say to myself that Thai Literature is worth reading, worth loving, and worth cherishing.

Tony says

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Chris says

One of the best English language translations of a Thai novel, this engaging story (which was originally a serial published in a Bangkok newspaper) tells the story of Mae Phloi, a woman who lives through the reigns of four Thai kings - Kings Rama V through VIII. The story traces her life from the daughter of the minor wife of a mid-ranking nobleman through her childhood working in the inner court of the Grand Palace, to her eventual marriage and raising of a family. At every step, Mae Phloi's experiences are captured in such detail that the reader shares her emotions, joy when happy events happen and sorrow when life's inevitable losses occur. A must-read for anyone who wants to see 20th century Thai history through a "real life" perspective.

Fern says

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Rhiannon Grant says

Roughly, this is like Dickens but Thai. It follows the central character, Phloi, through all the stages of her life. Like many other books in this genre, that gives it the advantage of a viewpoint from which to explore historical changes in society, but the disadvantage that some bits of a life aren't very interesting. Overall, it's well written and the characters (and social changes) are interesting, but it requires a certain amount of dedication - I probably wouldn't have read it if it hadn't been given to me as a gift.

Andrew says

If Thailand has a quintessential novel, this is kind of it, complete with the big, Dickensian scope over the course of pivotal points in the nation's history. And it's popular and much adapted, with the most recent version being a horrific-looking big Andrew Lloyd Webber-type stage show featuring whatever Thai soap opera actors weren't doing much later -- the TV spots showed lots of people weeping and prostrating themselves before radiant golden light.

Regrettably, the widely available translation is a condensed version of the classic version, and my Thai reading skills aren't quite at the level that I can read a 500 page novel in the original. My goal was to read this, then use that as a template so I could read the whole thing in Thai later on.

Equally regrettably, this sucked. Firstly, the translation sucked. Large numbers of easily translatable Thai words were left untranslated and Romanized (I guess to retain local flavor), but as a result each character sounded rather like a Bangkok expat retard showing off the 10 Thai words they know. And the story itself is mostly just clunky, moralizing garbage, even if the beginning showed some signs of a potentially interesting book. Pass.

Rene says

In all honesty I must say that I have read an abridged (English) version. It is the only English version I ever saw in Thailand, by the way.

This book gives an excellent insight in the life at the Thai court during the reigns of King Rama 5 up to King Rama 8.

We follow a girl that starts to live there with her mother, while still very young, until her death as an old woman. She leaves the court when she marries, but she stays in touch.

From the time of her marriage the book concentrates on her family life and that of her children.

Highly recommended to get acquainted with Thai culture and history. This is a powerful novel, written by a former Thai prime minister.

