

# *Explorations* in **Southeast Asian Studies**

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[Contents](#) [Article 1](#) [Article 2](#) [Article 3](#) [Article 4](#) [Article 5](#) [Article 6](#)

## **Bangkok Postcard**

Forgetting and Remembering "Hok Tulaa", the October 6 Massacre

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Bangkok, October 6, 1996- I met a friend, Darunii, near my house for coffee and to mull over what we would do that day. My plan for the day was to listen to the speeches and music at the 20 Year Commemoration Ceremony of the October 6 Massacre at Thammasat University (or Hok Tulaa as it is called in Thai). Thais do not normally discuss the events of *Hok Tulaa* in public. Additionally, Darunii is a village girl who had to drop out of school early to become a seamstress, so I was a little reluctant to drag her to something which might be either too dry, or too academic. I said something neutral like wouldn't it be "interesting" to go.

To my surprise she was excited to attend. "Hok Tulaa is very interesting", she agreed. "For Thais it is difficult to remember. It was so horrible it seems like it was not part of our history or our culture. Maybe it is something we would prefer to forget."

At the time I was surprised to hear this, dumb struck in fact. Darunii stated clearly and succinctly a set of ideas that were just forming in my mind. That many Thais would prefer to forget the massacre of 6 October was clear, many cultures have events and incidents that they would prefer to forget. But what is it that makes a historical event "difficult to remember". Algebraic equations and your mother's birthday are difficult to remember, how so a historic event?

But Darunii's words would prove themselves true. For a few memorable days this October, during the country's first major remembrance of its darkest moment, many Thais were forced to struggle with their historical memory and, more importantly (and dangerously), the cultural ideas which undergird that same history.

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Twenty years ago, on October 6, 1976, between four and five thousand college students and their supporters gathered inside the gates of Thammasat University in preparation to protest the return to Thailand of Thanom Kittikachorn, the dictator ousted by a student protest three years before in 1973. In the dead of night the campus was surrounded by the Thai military, police, and rightist vigilantes making exit impossible. Small arms gun fire was exchanged infrequently between the two groups in the tense hours that followed. At 5:30 AM a rocket propelled grenade and several anti-tank missiles marked the beginning of an assault on the campus.

The year or so preceding the massacre witnessed the sharp polarization of Thai society. Following the successful popular student uprising of October 1973, which established democratic rule in Thailand, an emboldened, activist left emerged on the political scene. Students, artists, activists, and other liberal groups moved throughout the country trying to organize land and labor reform in Thailand. On the international level, they worked to extricate Thailand from the Vietnam war effort and Western political influence. Still heady from their success in 1973, much of the political left felt that it was only a matter of time before major social change swept through Thailand.

The political right was also organizing and was made up of militarists, right-wing Buddhists, and anti-communists. This group inundated the Thai populace with a particularly virulent form of propaganda which played strongly on ethnic and nationalist themes. They painted the left as Marxists sympathizers and radicals (only some were). The radical reformers, they argued, were not even Thai; they were Vietnamese and Chinese in ethnic origin (particularly despised minorities in Thailand at that time) or, at the very least, completely indoctrinated by foreign ideologies. Right-wing Buddhist groups, particularly those led by a monk named Kitti Vutho, argued that killing communists was, in Buddhist terms, a meritorious act as it freed society from suffering. Thailand was a slightly destabilized country in a completely destabilized region. With news of the killing fields in Cambodia and the fall of Saigon added to this toxic mix of fear and insecurity the right-wing's propaganda fell on many sympathetic ears. When a picture, later discovered to have been a forgery, appeared in two Thai newspapers depicting college students hanging the Crown Prince of Thailand in effigy, many people believed that the students had committed an unforgivable act of lese-majesty.

The atrocities which followed the assault on Thammasat are sobering and the total number of dead is still unknown today (46 is the very low official number). The desire of the forces gathered outside the campus was to both crush and humiliate the students and their supporters. Weapons of war were used indiscriminately; students were hung; some female students were

reportedly raped. Several people, alive but unconscious were gathered into a pile and burned with tires and gasoline. Captured students were forced to take off their shirts (women included) and crawl across the campus to the awaiting police vans and buses; many were kicked and beaten along the way. As social critic Sulak Sivaraksa pointed out, the military's aim was to treat the students as if they were pigs.

Awful, unexplainable, and savage, like some primitive scapegoat ceremony, bodies of the dead were dragged to the park across from Thammasat and mutilated in front of cheering crowds. The horror of the right-wing propaganda came to fruition on that day. Those who participated in the assault seemed convinced that the students were the direct opposite of all things good and all things Thai: they were evil, Marxist, *a-dhammic* (anti-Buddhist), Chinese and Vietnamese in origin, and anti-royal. When rightist crowds, stoked as they were with the fire of righteousness, strung several corpses to trees and took turns beating and pounding them with chairs, they were not striking out at the Thai students, they were striking out in defense of the Thai Id.

The end result of the massacre is fairly well known. Survivors fled to the hills to join the Communist insurgents, went into hiding, or fled the country. Thailand itself lurched to the right and tight press control prevented public discussion of the massacre. Yet, as time has passed and press control has all but vanished, the issue of the massacre has still not been publicly taken up...

A recent review of Thai high school history and culture textbooks showed, disturbingly, that 80% do not even mention the Hok Tulaa events. Of the few that do mention the massacre most use very neutral language (e.g., their was an "uprising" that was "suppressed" and many students fled to the jungle as a result). One textbook even takes the rightist side suggesting that the students were indeed anti-royalist and infiltrated by Vietnamese revolutionaries. The only textbook which tackles the 1976 massacre in any depth is (not surprisingly) published by Thammasat University, but even that book dodges the issue of the atrocities. As tame as the Thammasat book seems to be, it still has trouble with the Board of Education censors: a group which must give clearance to all the country's schoolbooks, and whose membership and membership criteria is still, to this day, kept secret.

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The Hok Tulaa Commemoration was held on the soccer field inside the Thammasat wall. As participants entered the field they came upon the commemoration's centerpiece/memorial, a 12 to 15 foot golden funeral urn. Surrounding the urn's base were pictures of students killed during the massacre. Many of the pictures would have been familiar to Western students of Thai history or politics, but most had not yet been published or displayed publicly in Thailand. The photos were gruesome and one had to step back from them occasionally and take a breath before continuing around. One elderly woman discovered the true fate of one of her children while circling the urn.

The urn's symbolism was complex. Great pains were taken to give it, and the whole commemoration ceremony, a religious overtone. Six hours of religious rights preceded the

opening of the ceremony including food and robe offerings to 106 monks and wreath laying for the dead. Having been secretly disposed of in the wake of the massacre, the bodies of many students killed at Hok Tulaa had not received a proper cremation (considered an awful misfortune in Thailand). The urn itself was thus meant to give closure to their deaths. Subtly adding to the political meaning was the urn's design: being royal in shape rather than of the commoner's design it attempted to elevate the deaths of Hok Tulaa and give them the image of noble purpose. However, the main message of the urn was to shock open memories-or plant them in the minds of those too young to remember-more like the Jewish Holocaust memorials I frequented as an undergraduate than anything I have ever before seen in Thailand. It spoke clearly to those who could bear to make a full revolution around its base. "Look at this horror and remember," it seemed to say. "Do not ever forget."

The atmosphere of the event hovered somewhere between Woodstock 2 and a college teach-in. On a large stage opposite the urn, aging political rockers and folk stars sang the popular protest songs from the 1970's era, or *dontrii pua chiwit* (music for life) as it is called in Thai. Between acts, Thammasat academics gave speeches about the importance of the day while all around the field booths sold books and video tapes about the 1973 to 1976 era. A first year Thai language student who did not know the phrases "You must remember" and "Don't forget" would have had them down cold by the end of the day. Each person who took the stage spoke these two phrases passionately and emphatically, and all about the field the words "remember" and "don't forget" were written on posters, t-shirts, and placards. One particular booth sold postcards with the face of a murdered student leader on the front and the words "Don't forget Hok Tulaa" on the back. For the price of a postage stamp a fervent rememberer could spread memory to the provinces. The event itself, and the several mini-events that surrounded it, were a great success by almost every standard. Attendance was high and the print media coverage, which lasted for several days, was excellent. For many of the victims the ceremonies were cathartic. For the first time they could share their stories publicly and talk about the events of Hok Tulaa to sympathetic audiences. Yet on the most official level of Thai society, the desire is still to forget-or to propagate forgetting. Even though the event drew both the major candidates for prime minister, Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and Chuan Leekpai, who laid wreaths and spoke to the audience, none of the three state controlled television stations ran a story on the event. Nor was it covered by the state run radio news services. Royal participation in the event was also absent.

More importantly, to date no perpetrator of the Hok Tulaa violence has come forward to discuss the days events. The right-wing mobsters, policemen and soldiers have kept their jaws clenched tightly for twenty years and, in all likelihood, plan to die that way.

So even with all the new and flourishing discussions which surrounded the Hok Tulaa remembrance, the massacre has yet to be understood as a historical event. Only the victims' stories are now known. A journalist might say that the *what*, *when*, and *where* of the story have come to light, but the *who* and *why* are nowhere to be found. More poetic is the summary of Professor Thongchai Winichakul who stated that the Hok Tulaa remembrances succeeded in "making a loud noise at the very edge of silence."

Yet the cry of the remembrance ceremony, "Don't forget" and "Remember," begs a rejoinder that very few seem prepared to answer, and which the first historian brave enough to set the event to paper must struggle with: namely, "Remember what?"

Why have Thais so meticulously avoided discussing the massacre for twenty years? The Thai cultural emphasis on avoiding fractious debate and public arguments may serve as the Introduction to Asian Culture 101 answer to the above question. It is an answer worth mentioning, but avoids the more complex, deeper and darker issues involved in both forgetting and remembering Hok Tulaa. About one week after the Hok Tulaa remembrance, in a packed hall at the Thai Studies Conference in Chiang Mai, Professor Thongchai presented his paper on the ambivalent narratives of the Hok Tulaa massacre. His paper was powerful, direct, and bluntly honest. His whole mode of presentation seemed to be the opposite of what one might call the standard mode of Thai academic address. He named names, zeroed in on the areas of real conflict, and spoke with passion and conviction. Thongchai captivated the audience, and it was clear why he has come to mean so much to people in the field of Thai studies.

In the middle of his talk Thongchai began to list many of the unanswered questions surrounding the Hok *Tulaa* massacre: Why was ex-dictator Thanom Kittikachorn let back into the country? Who OK'd this? Why was he allowed to enter the monkhood at Wat Bowarniwet: the royal monastery? Why did the head monk of the Wat, who was the current King's private teacher and in 1987 became the Supreme Patriarchy, allow Thanom to ordain there? Who produced the doctored photos of students hanging the Crown Prince in effigy (the spark which led to the massacre), and why did the Bangkok Post and a Thai language daily choose to run them? Who ordered the shooting to begin, and did anyone at the top at all try to order the soldiers to stop? At some point in the middle of these questions (there were more which I do not recall) a number of people in the audience began crying, and most participants that I could see were visibly moved.

The gross brutality and wanton torture of Hok Tulaa strikes out savagely at a particularly cherished myth about Thailand: that a fortuitous fusion of Buddhism and culture has created a land of peaceful, smiling people. Yet, this alone does not cause the turmoil that the above questions can stir.

The finger of blame for Hok Tulaa points in all the most troubling directions. It points to a middle class, terrified by the fall of Saigon and the stories seeping out from the killing fields of Cambodia, that could acquiesce to a violent silencing of a strident left. It points to a civilian government too weak or too unconcerned to stop the violence in its midst. It points to a military more than willing to kill its own. It points to the highest religious figures who allowed themselves to be co-opted by political schemers.

And much worse, all the questions beg for another question which simply can not be asked in Thailand: Why, unlike 1973 when the King intervened on the students' behalf, did the palace gates not open? All Thais are taught when they are young, and the vast majority believe, that the three pillars of Thai identity are belief in Buddhism, a love of nation, and love and respect for the

Thai King. One's love for these three pillars is the essence of one's Thainess: it is the very thing that makes one Thai. For many people, questioning the validity of these symbols is a kind of treason and, at the very least, a badge of inauthenticity. So, just asking questions about Hok Tulaa is for many Thais a painful experience. The question of blame casts doubts on the most cherished figures and institutions in the country; figures and institutions which many people both love unconditionally and seek comfort in. To ask these questions is tantamount to shaking the pillars of Thai identity, and possibly bringing the roof down on one's head. Small wonder then that most people find it easier to forget Hok Tulaa.

In my opinion Hok Tulaa will be officially re-remembered. The twenty year remembrance seems to have been a great success in this regard. Academics, journalists, and civic leaders vowed to make the story known. And the massacre, probably one of the most pivotal historical events in the last forty years, can not, it seems, escape from the high school textbooks for too much longer. Hok Tulaa is the axis on which an entire 10 to 15 year piece of history turns; one can not hope to understand the political changes of the 1980's without at least a cursory understanding of Hok Tulaa. How much longer can it be avoided?

Yet, if I had to guess at the future (and here I can only draw on my feelings), I would have to say Hok Tulaa will remain only partially remembered in the textbooks of tomorrow. The rememberers at the Hok Tulaa ceremonies sought to pair the tragic events of 6 October 1976 with the democratic victory of 14 October 1973. Many pleaded for the victims of 1976 to be held in the same high esteem as those who died in 1973 and who are today considered great martyrs for democracy. Their desire seems to be to create a line of continuity between the two events and the present. In this structure Hok Tulaa would become the middle portion of a much larger historical trilogy. Part one of this trilogy would consist of the events of 1973 when the ideals of an egalitarian democracy struggled against the odds and eventually triumphed. The year 1976 becomes the second, and traditionally dark portion of any three-part story, in which democracy faces a terrible set back. The third portion of the trilogy, which is yet to be written, sees egalitarian democracy return even stronger than before. In other words, 1976 is the Empire Strikes Back to 1973's Star Wars in which the forces of democracy, like Han Solo, become deep frozen.

It gives one hope to interpret the events of Hok Tulaa as the nadir of an otherwise rising and irrepressible movement towards democracy. And, it may well even be true. But what is perhaps more important is how much easier the massacre becomes to understand. By contextualizing 1976 inside the event of 1973 the story becomes another (though much more violent) case of an anti-democratic military force trying to crush pro-democratic students. This view, however, minimizes the historical mood characterized by a palpable and, in view of the events in Cambodia, somewhat reasonable fear of the socialist left and the very real de-stabilization and resultant anxiety that de-stabilization was causing in Thailand. It shrinks the ideological forces at play to that simply of anti-democratic militarism and avoids the much more intellectually troubling ideologies of right-wing Buddhism and militant royalism (both of which played significant roles in the massacre). Finally, it shrinks the roll-call of bad guys to the military alone, and avoids looking at the not-so-good-guys and the guys-who-should-have-been-good-

but-weren't.

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Vasan Sitthiket, a leading contemporary artist in Thailand, remembers *Hok Tulaa*. His show, entitled *Blue October*, hung in a small, largely political gallery hidden in the back of the Weekend Market. His series of twenty paintings recreated the graphically violent photographic images from the massacre. Painted in black and white, the nearly life-size images of violence were set over a deep blue, flat background. Three small gold-leaf offerings have been placed over the bodies of the dead as a traditional signal for reverence. The titles, block printed by the artist near the outside edge of each painting, are upside-down. Invitations to the event asked viewers to "preside" and "witness."

The use of the color blue, at first, appears to be a rather primitive artistic touch, but Vasan is much more clever than that. In Thailand, the color dark blue has two generally understood symbolic meanings: as representative of royalty, and/or happiness. By choosing this color I think the artist's work takes on a much more powerful and ironic feeling. Mechanically, the blue works to draw the eyes towards the shocking violence. And for meaning, because one always searches for a meaning in violence, the viewer is left only with Vasan's upside-down, sharply barbed commentary.

"The way to look at *Blue October*," a sign instructed, "bend your body, turn your head and heart upside down-then you will see."

I was first drawn to a painting near the center of the room. In the newspaper a few days before, a Thai artist described the death of his best friend, Manas Siensingh, at the October 6 massacre. Manas, also an artist, was shot to death by soldiers while trying to hide in a Thammasat building. Manas' body was later dragged from a pile of the dead and, in front of a cheering crowd of onlookers, pierced through the chest with a four foot iron rod. Vasan's painting captures this horrific scene and is titled, "Today if you still take pride in your infamous deeds, please come to take the gold necklace from me."

Other paintings lined the walls:

- a shoe being forced into the mouth of a hanging corpse titled, "For the Nation's Identity" ([Figure 1](#)),
- a naked dead woman and female students forced to stand in their underwear, "Whoever raped and killed, please come forward and accept a medal of courage,"
- a long row of corpses, "For the State Security" ([Figure 2](#)),
- three burning bodies, "For the High Culture,"
- a man beating a hanging corpse with a chair while a crowd watches smiling, "This is a Buddhist Country." [Figure 3](#).

In some ways, viewing Vasan's work emotionally parallels the problems which surround the Hok Tulaa massacre and memory. To look at both is like looking at the dark heart of Thailand beating. You search for meaning in the paintings or the event when none is apparent. You wonder why, though all the whys are painfully difficult to consider. (You may even begin to feel a little dizzy and sick to your stomach, as I did.) In the end you leave the exhibit, and the memory of Hok Tulaa, wishing very much to think about something else. If thought about long enough Hok Tulaa will turn your head and heart upside down. This is precisely why it is an event which is so difficult to remember.