Rose (1986), which shows rows of medieval scribes hunched over parchment, and Game of Thrones," his arguments feel weakened by not only the uncharacteristic lack of clarity and images (which scenes in Game of Thrones?), but objections immediately spring to mind. Any fan of horror can easily recall scenes of a camera swivelling across a quill etching out some demonic contract, Danny Torrance scratching out "redrum" on a door in childish strokes of lipstick, or some hapless victim scrawling a final message in blood. While some of these may not be calligraphy in the traditional sense, they are all akin to acts that *Brushed in Light* recognizes as calligraphic in East Asian cinema. I similarly doubt that someone can watch an entire period piece film or TV show set in the premodern area without at least one shot of an aristocrat sitting down to put quill to paper. At the very least, the parodic use in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* comes to mind. Importantly, beyond just being potentially specious, the forced separation here prevents the book from communicating with deep analytical celebrations of calligraphy outside of Asia like Florey's *Script and Scribble* (2009) or Trubek's *The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting* (2016). This bounds the book's final claims about the humanistic, cinematographic, and artistic importance of written acts to a specific geographic region in a way that feels artificial, unnecessary, and heavily limiting. Indeed, it even seems in some ways contradictory to the text's own opening forays against conservative definitions of calligraphy and "East Asia" as static constructs.

Ultimately though, these two critiques are in many ways personal reflections of what I – as someone outside the field and the book's construction – wanted to see the book expand upon and discuss. Neither of my critiques are so large that I would hesitate to recommend this book to almost anyone, and neither prevent the text from being a rousing success at what it sets out to do. Rather, I just feel that the book provides data and arguments that can be used by a broad range of scholars and fields, but unfortunately limits its framing to prevent advertising this potential as well as it could. No critique I have outlined changes the fact that *Brushed in Light* opens an understudied and overlooked world to a broad audience in a way which is immediately grasping, visually stunning, and highly accessible. The ultimate result is a text that ensures any reader with an interest in cinema, writing, or Asian Studies as a field can enjoy the experience. Without a doubt, they will absolutely find some arguments, data, images, or just clever turns of phrase that will be of use to their own work. The book may not end with conclusions as daring as I think it could, but it accomplishes every goal it sets forth with aplomb, and provides an incredibly original reminder that there is always something human, social, and artistic behind a written act.

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Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand

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Aim Sinpeng's *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand* is a valuable volume for readers who want to make sense of Thailand's post-Cold War 30-year (1991–2021) struggle

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between democratic and authoritarian forces, and more particularly the last 15 years of violent swings between regime forms. The volume features empirically informed theory building around the anti-democratic mobilisation by the "yellow shirts," the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, 2006–2008) and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC, 2013–2014).

Sinpeng argues that two critical periods of contentious politics (2005–2008 and 2013–2014) represent the emergence of anti-democratic movements that played a crucial role in bringing down democratic governments. To define "anti-democratic," she draws on a hollowed-out political science definition of democracy:

> I adopt the minimalist definition of democracy advanced by Przeworski *et al.* (2000). This is a procedural definition that focuses on the issue of "contestation." According to Przeworski (2000, 19–20), democracy is defined as followed: 1. Ex-ante, a possibility that an incumbent may lose an election; 2. Ex-post irreversibility, an assurance that an election winner will take office; 3. Elections must be repeated. Democracy is thus "a regime that fills executive and legislative bodies through free and contested elections; has more than one party and the opposition has some chance of winning" (Przeworski *et al.*, 2000, 19). Given that this is a minimalist definition of democracy that largely focuses on the mechanism of free and fair elections, it becomes an "easy" test to determine what would constitute an anti-democratic movement (p. 26).

Perhaps, the test is both too easy and too difficult. Too easy because too neat. Too difficult because democracy is, of course, the most contested of concepts. Some democrats would argue that democracy needs more than the minimal definition offers. They would willingly organise against a regime aggrandising for itself democratic credentials based on electoral authoritarianism – as indeed some in the PAD saw themselves doing against prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. How then to decide who the democrats are? For Sinpeng, the PAD and others crossed the anti-democratic threshold by opposing elections to decide who should hold power.

Sinpeng is quite sympathetic to the early anti-Thaksin movement and acknowledges that many of its cadres had previously played a role in supporting political liberalisation, albeit on the basis of highly moralistic politics. Sinpeng might have offered a more extensive examination of the movement's internal discourses and rationalisations centred on calls for reform before elections that were issued by various actors. In this book, these are perhaps judged as sideshows to the main game of authoritarian convergence in the coups of 2006 and 2014. That convergence happens, so the argument goes, because Thaksin's opponents faced institutional blockage (see below), leading them to a willful embrace of extra-constitutional solutions. Another way of saying this is that democracy breaks down when a loyal opposition is not fully allowed to operate and when opportunity structures allow them to call on undemocratic institutions such as the monarchy and military in response to such blockage.

Arguably, *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand* is two short volumes in one.

Part 1 comprises five chapters covering historical context, theorisation of democratic breakdown, and detailed empirical analysis of the PAD. Despite the book's title, and apart from the Introduction, this part does not focus on digital politics or social media. PAD's lifespan, Sinpeng tells us, predated social media (p. 19). Even so, Part 1 is an essential reference for readers wanting to understand the complex factors that enabled the broader Yellow Shirt movement. It productively draws on interviews and Thai language writing of activists to offer significant insights.

Part 1 uses a case study of the yellow shirts to contribute to the international literature on democratic breakdown that has emerged now that the so-called Third Wave of Democracy is in recession. Central to her theoretical approach is the concept of "institutional blockage," which essentially holds that if political voice is blocked, anti-incumbent and pro-reform movements can morph, given other conditions, into anti-democratic movements (p. 39–40). This is undoubtedly an important element to focus on in recent democratic backsliding. The section also places strategic emphasis on anti-

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democratic actor's choices and decisions in the context of structural propensities that enable authoritarian solutions. These are important observations and should inform future debates.

Part 2 gets to the title proper and consists of two chapters. It offers new insights into widespread support for authoritarianism by analysing Facebook interaction, including that of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which played a role in creating the conditions for the 2014 coup d'etat against the erstwhile Yingluck Shinawatra government (2011–2014). Sinpeng goes data-mining on Facebook to produce some fascinating insights into anti-democratic groups, leading to a not surprising conclusion that social media aids political polarisation. Moreover, she finds that in places where political settlements are not struck or stable, social media can contribute to autocratisation. Part 2 offers an important original analysis of the support base of the movements behind the 2014 coup and their varied backing of authoritarianism in the years after. Sinpeng's essential contribution is to show a range of political values and ideas, and motivations in the different groups that vied for impact against Yingluck and in the post-2014 period. She resists reading these movements as mere ultra-royalist military sycophants because her analysis finds a range of motivations, some royalist but others advancing interest-based policy agendas. Sinpeng advances our understanding of the popular support base behind anti-democratic mobilisation and offers new insights into why people may support authoritarian regimes. The use of various methods in digital media studies are vital to this contribution, and she usefully explains those methods, empowering the reader to be equipped to at least question whether the claims and findings she claims are credible. She makes astute use of the data to illuminate the political diversity within the anti-democratic movements.

There is a lot to like about this book. However, in the spirit of engaging rather than ignoring ideas that I disagree with, the following observations are made.

Some readers will be attracted to how Sinpeng formulates the theoretical or conceptual framework of Part 1. This reviewer found this aspect less convincing. Sinpeng advances the claim that both the PAD and the PDRC and their anti-democratic politics were choices taken after "institutional blockage" occurred or was perceived. Sinpeng spends considerably more words on how reformist political forces unsuccessfully battled Thaksin for political space and access during his tenure as an elected prime minister than she does exploring PDRC's institutional blockage under Yingluck. Consequently, the case for institutional blockage as a factor in democratic breakdown is arguably more apposite in the case of PAD than that of the PDRC.

There are two logical problems with institutional blockage as a theoretical argument rather than an empirical one. The first is that Sinpeng builds the theory of institutional blockage and develops a series of supporting concepts by the observations she obtains from the case study of the PAD and the PDRC. She then takes these observations and makes them function as abstract propositions when they are just generalised summaries of the case under observation. For example, take the following:

> In order to determine whether my concept of institutional blockage adequately explains the rise of the PAD and the PDRC movements, the following implications should be observed. Opposition actors must lose access to power relative to what they used to have. Channels for demands by organised groups and key political actors are closed off in the formal democratic institution. Means for opposition, such as a no confidence vote or Question Period in parliament, for instance, are closed to or rendered ineffective for the opposition. Organised groups are unable to lobby for support from the formal institutions, nor can they bargain with the government to provide them with a platform to voice their grievances. This clogging of opposition channels should drive the various groups to form an anti-incumbent mobilisation. We should observe an upsurge of antigovernment protest activities over time, increasing in frequency and intensity as the opposition forces become more desperate. The opposition should be calling for the resignation of the current government or leadership.
>
> The viability and availability of powerful nondemocratic institutions are crucial to the success of democratic collapse. First, nondemocratic institutions ought to be present in a polity to which anti-democratic movements can appeal. These appeals are more credible if such nondemocratic

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> institutions are powerful and politicised. This means that countries with historical legacies of strong nondemocratic institutions are far more likely to see a successful creation of anti-democratic mobilisation. By orchestrating support for anti-democratic solutions, through the mobilisation of a largescale movement, the costs of extraconstitutional interventions are effectively reduced. This makes it even more likely for nondemocratic elites to intervene successfully (pp. 41–42).

Rather than a series of abstracted propositions necessary to theory building, this reads more like a generalised account of what happened in Thailand because that is what it is. It is not surprising then that Sinpeng finds the required implications (observations) in the Thai case that her theory of institutional blockage requires and by which its utility is tautologically confirmed. The observations cleave so tightly to the Thai case that institutional blockage may play out differently elsewhere.

Perhaps, more fundamentally in question is the attribution of "anti-democratic" to any movement that faces a purported circumstance of institutional blockage and which opposes elections. We are told that the test of identifying an anti-democratic movement lies in showing that it wants to bring down a democratic government (minimally defined above). In the Thai case this raises the following question: is an elected government to be described as democratic that so convincingly produces institutional blockage against an opposition, as Sinpeng details extensively in the case of the Thaksin government? Arguably, by advancing the concept of institutional blockage, Sinpeng – we might venture – inadvertently argues that Thaksin's government was no longer democratic even on the terms she sets. Indeed, the description of institutional blockage and the extensive details she provides of this condition are, in effect, a description of an emerging competitive authoritarian regime in which elections are not fair. This reviewer doubts that a competitive authoritarian regime meets even the minimal criteria of democracy. Also, it is not at all convincing that Yingluck's government presented the same institutional blockage as Thaksin's. The short of the criticism is this: it is not the case that an anti-democratic movement is necessarily one that seeks to bring down a democratic government.

On a final note, unsuspecting readers will be given the wrong impression of the events and key actors during the 2006 election crisis if they were to accept as fact -and worse, circulate -a statement that is mis-attributed to King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

When Thaksin called an election for 2 April 2006, he did so in defiance of calls by the PAD and opposition parties for him to resign and for a new round of political reform to take effect before elections. There were also calls for the king to appoint a new government based on Article 7 of the constitution. Key opposition parties boycotted the election, leading to an impasse. In response, on 25 April the king gave two addresses to the judiciary. He repudiated calls to appoint a new government, saying it would be undemocratic for him to do so, thus safeguarding his purported role as a last resort for arbitration in political crises. Instead, he asked the judiciary to decide whether convening parliament without a full quorum (resulting from the election boycott) was democratic. He thought it was not. The Constitutional Court later annulled the election, largely on technicalities. Sinpeng quotes Bhumibol's 25 April speech thus,

> As for the [April 2, 2006] election, [Thaksin] who did not even get 20 percent and that person was running for election by himself … this is not a legitimate election… . What Thai Rak Thai did was an act done to gain power to govern the country that was unconstitutional – a danger to national stability and illegal or contradicts the moral ethics of the people, contradicts democratic principles, blatantly violates the law and thus should not be able to maintain its standing as a political party for the sake of Thailand's overall political system (p. 125).

For the most part, the king did not utter these words in either of his 25 April speeches. He did not condemn Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party nor did he call for its banning. If he had made the statements attributed to him in this book, the protracted struggle and strategic gaming around royalism by the yellow-shirts and the pro-Thaksin red-shirts that persisted until 2014 would have been cut

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short. Things would likely have worked out differently. Fundamental opposition to monarchy would have been more pronounced from the onset of the political crisis. The red-shirt movement, as might Thaksin, would have chosen not to dither and flatter the monarchy as they so desperately did. The unprecedented protests in 2020–2021 against Bhumibol's successor would likely have happened a reign earlier. The mis-attribution potentially cascades into a fundamental misreading of events and forces. The first sentence in the quotation is sourced from the king's speech to Administration Court judges. The remaining part of the quotation discussing TRT is not part of the original speech. Instead, it appears to be a summary of the judgement made by the coup-appointed Constitutional Tribunal in May 2007 to dissolve Thaksin's TRT party for its electoral manipulation in the April 2006 election.

Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand is a key text for understanding Thailand's tragic descent into authoritarianism. It brings an openness of mind to the question of political polarisation. Its use of social media analysis offers new insights. Its attempt to bring theoretical order to the messy realities of the unsettled state of Thailand is something to welcome and engage.

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