

Importantly, Zhang concludes with a call to rethink our understanding of meritocracy. So far, in the Chinese context and elsewhere, meritocracy has been conceptualized as the selection of an elite governing class by use of supposedly objective standardized exams that were in principle open to men from nearly all backgrounds. Based on Zhang's analysis, there is little evidence that the performance of officials who had purchased degrees or purchased their appointments was inherently better than that of exam degree holders or officials appointed without purchase. Indeed, the relative merits of the different categories of officials were actively debated in the eighteenth century. As the Yongzheng emperor recognized, what may have been more important was not the credentials that were the basis for appointment, but rather the rigorous evaluation of their performance after appointment, and good judgment in decisions about promotion, transfer or termination.


This is an important study, with implications for our understanding of Qing officialdom and society. As a critical assessment of the role of the examination system, it joins a long line of now classic studies by Robert Hymes and Ben Elman. These and other studies focused on exam degree candidates and holders and showed that they were not as socioeconomically diverse as proponents of the exam system claimed. Zhang moves beyond these studies by decentering the examination system itself and showing that it was but one part of a more complex and potentially flexible system that offered multiple paths to appointment and promotion. One clear implication is that quantitative social scientists studying the late Qing need to move past their fixation on the examination system and exam degree candidates and account for the role of degree and office purchase in their analyses.

Power for a Price and other recent work on purchase will hopefully inspire new lines of work on the implications of degree and office purchase in the late Qing, and meanwhile deflate some of the more exuberant claims made about the implications of the examination system by social scientists and contemporary commentators. A variety of questions emerge as ones that merit further attention. Are there other ways of comparing the career outcomes and performance of officials according to whether they held exam or purchase degrees, or purchased office? What were the social and institutional consequences of the vast increase in the numbers of degree purchasers that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century after provinces also began to sell offices, competing with each other and driving down prices, and what happened after the central government reasserted control over the sale of offices? How did the emergence of other economic opportunities in the late nineteenth century affect the calculations of prospective purchasers?

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Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok

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Thongchai Winichakul's monograph *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* is both an academic and personal work, written through the experience of

one of the most acclaimed Thai academics, and a survivor of the said massacre when he was a second-year undergraduate student at Thammasat University. To this day, there has been no official investigation into the incident, no perpetrator has been punished, and the topic is generally treated as a taboo, a blemish of the past best left untouched.

Being untouched, however, does not equate to being forgotten. Indeed, “silence, [the] book argues, is not forgetting” (p. 9). Thongchai’s central claim is that “between the binary opposition of memory and forgetting is at least another condition of memory [...called] ‘unforgetting’” (p. 17). This silence has been enforced, whether by the state or voluntarily.

The book consists of 10 chapters, with a separate Prologue and Epilogue. This review will cover them in order, separating them into four sections based on the functions each of them serve. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the background discussions to place the following chapters into context. Chapters 3 to 6 trace the changes in memory in chronological order, from immediately after the incident up until 1996. Chapters 7 to 9 explore the different patterns of unforgetting through interviews with relevant actors. Chapter 10 and the Epilogue both discuss the ramifications of these memories to contemporary Thai politics.

The Background (Chapters 1 and 2)

The first chapter lays down the conceptual foundation of the work regarding silence and memory, with important theoretical implications beyond the case of Thailand. Silence, to Thongchai, is more a “symptom of the inability to remember or forget, the inability to articulate memories in a comprehensible and meaningful fashion, or to depart from the past completely” (p. 9). This leads to Thongchai’s primary argument, that, contrary to the popular and linguistic impression of the words, silence is not opposite to remembering, but it is an alternative form of remembrance he terms “unforgetting.” The term “unforgetting” is used interchangeably with “silence” throughout the book, indicating that silence can also be a voluntary choice of resisting erasure (pp. 17–20).

Thongchai also suggests that the line between history and memory are not as clear-cut as some make it out to be, as “individual memory is usually also shaped by history and ideology rather than personal experience” (p. 11). Individual memory is also not merely a “part to the whole” of collective memory, as the broad narrative of collective memory “provides a structure or a frame for the individual ones, recognizing some as more meaningful and some less so” (p. 12). Memory requires a narrative form, and precisely because of that reliance on narrative – on the use of language – memory, even in its most individual formulation, is inherently socially framed (pp. 12–14).

Chapter 2 serves as a brief overview of the massacre, as well as the questions the incident raises, some directly about the massacre itself, many about Thai politics in general. Many of these thirteen unanswered questions (pp. 36–52) should be common knowledge to students of Thai politics. Some information, such as Thongchai’s claim that Nawaphon, one of the major right-wing organizations at the time, was “a phantom organization” (p. 44) may be less well-known.¹ It is important to keep in mind that, as Thongchai remarks, “[m]ore than forty years later, despite the photo’s worldwide distribution, we still do not know the identities [...] of the Chair Guy, and the victim” (p. 50). The state of academic knowledge of the incident does not reflect the state of public silence Thongchai speaks of.

Chronology of Memories (Chapters 3 to 6)

In Chapter 3, Thongchai explores the memory formation immediately after (some during) the massacre, how “the initial moment [...] was the beginning of memory and would have a lasting impact on the perpetrators and the public alike” (p. 53). By examining witness accounts in the October 6

¹When discussing the October 6 massacre, it is almost customary to refer to the tripartite of right-wing organizations consisting of the Red Gaur, Nawaphon, and the Village Scout as the perpetrators. Puangthong Pawakapan has also made a similar claim regarding Nawaphon with strong evidence – in her case, documents of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) of Thailand (Pawakapan 2020).

trial², Thongchai highlights the discrepancies and inaccuracies of their testimonies that point to “the influences of the right-wing collective memory” (p. 58) over their individual memories of the incident. Although the state’s narrative was the first (and only one) to reach the public, it was not the only collective memory present. The victims and their sympathizers created an alternative collective memory outside of the state’s reach, most notably around the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) expressing sympathy and swearing vengeance against the Thai dictatorial regime (pp. 62–66).

Most important perhaps is Thongchai’s exploration of what he terms the “nonradical memories” – the silent expression of those who sympathize with the victims but did not subscribe to the CPT’s armed struggle. Thongchai in turn shows the ideological diversity among the radicals (pp. 66–67), the plight of the liberal intellectuals epitomized in Puey Ungpakorn’s life (pp. 68–70), and the short story of “Khunthong Will Return at Dawn” – a story that painfully captures the memory of a family who awaits the return of their children (pp. 70–71). This “third” strand usually does not have a name, as it does not neatly fall into the binary category within the common depiction of “modern Thai history as an epic clash between the sovereignty of monarchy and democracy” (Connors 2023, p. 89). Thongchai’s conceptualization of silence provides them with a name in the most humanistic way, neither placing them as disengaged centrists complicit in the crime, nor viewing them as passive subjects completely under state control.

Chapter 4 discusses how the previously silent memory became more “public” during the October 6 trial, and subsequently went silent again afterwards. Thongchai’s recounting of how his changing fortune in prison reflected the change in national political climate is a worthy read on its own, and it lends credence to the ostensibly contradictory notion that a military coup ousted a civilian far-right cabinet that was appointed immediately after the massacre. Such apparent contradiction is also present in the ambivalence of “the public” referred to in this chapter, which was at once highly interested in the previously taboo massacre but were also more than ready to “let bygones be bygones” (p. 81).

Indeed, Chapter 5 is all about the ambivalence found in “the general atmosphere of silence for almost two decades” (p. 115) after the incident. The victims experienced grief, sense of responsibility, and disillusionment from the CPT. The perpetrators turned evasive and silent (p. 104), some sympathetic and almost remorseful (p. 108). Thongchai focuses on how these point to “modified memories among the authorities and the perpetrators” (p. 116) to fit the more liberal, “semi-democratic” period of the late 1970s onward. This development does not suggest more transparency or justice to the massacre, however, as this was also the “period of hyperroyalism³ that saw the rise of royalist politics and culture” (ibid.), resulting in state-imposed censorship and self-imposed taboo.

The chronology of silent memory ends at the commemoration event held in 1996, the focus of Chapter 6. The event was “huge, attended by many thousands” with much media coverage, bringing imagery of the massacre into the public (p. 121). The chapter is written both from the perspective of the initiator of the event and a historian retelling a key moment in a history of massacre and its aftermath. There was still a limit to acceptable discourse of commemoration: remorse over the brutality and condemnation of intolerance was acceptable, as long as “no serious probing for truth was undertaken” (p. 132).

Different Faces of Silence (Chapter 7 to 9)

Chapter 7 begins the oral history half of the book by expanding on the “nonradical memories” mentioned in Chapter 3. Thongchai explores three forms of “voluntary silence” (p. 142): the silence of a father searching for the body of his son, two examples of Buddhist virtuous silence, and the silence of the academic Puey Ungpakorn.

²The October 6 trial, which started in a military court on September 5, 1977, was a trial of the 18 leaders of the protesters, not of the perpetrators of the murder. The trial ended when the government granted amnesty on September 15, 1978. For a detailed discussion of the nature of the trial and the amnesty bill, see pp. 80–87.

³Hyperroyalism, to paraphrase Winichakul (2016), is a political, cultural and ideological condition in which the monarchy oversaturates various aspect of life, from the public sphere, the legal and political institutions, and historical understanding of the nation.

The story of Jinda Thongsin, father of Jarupong Thongsin, Thongchai's close friend whose body was dragged on the ground (photograph on p. 30), is too rich to be summarized in this limited space. What is most poignant, and perhaps most relevant to the study of memory and the concept of unforgetting, is Thongchai's observation below:

After our 2001 meeting, I believed I knew why Jinda had never finished his memoir. He probably did not want to. For Jinda and Lim [Jinda's wife], as long as Jarupong's body was missing or unidentified, their hopes remained alive. [...] The abrupt termination of the memoir was [...] a suspension of time to [...] allow a life to remain frozen in time, what we usually call memory (p. 154).

In other words, the act of silence, usually associated with forgetting or suppression, was the very thing that enabled the practice of remembrance. Thongchai deeply regrets that “[i]n my search for truth about Jarupong's body and for answers about the memoir, I put an end to this good silence. Tears replaced silence; truth is unbearable” (p. 155).

The Buddhist response of forgiveness and letting go, so-called “reconciliation,” is often used by the perpetrators to impose silence and resist calls for transparency and justice in Thai society. Here, Thongchai examines the memoir of Mo.tho.ko.189 (MTK189), a Buddhist activist from Thammasat, and Thongchai's conversation with Paisal Wisalo, a prominent scholar-monk who has been his friend since 1972. In both examinations, Thongchai focuses on “the mental and intellectual resources that are influential [...] in dealing with the traumatic past” (p. 156), and contrasts them to the legal-secular assumptions of truth, justice, and accountability dominant in broader discussion of transitional justice. Thongchai concludes the chapter with Puey's “mute soliloquy on the massacre” (p. 166) which may be less about the content of his silence, and more about the public idolization of him that overlooks the silent protest.

Chapter 8 focuses on the cultural and ideological factors that define the acceptable range of memories worthy of remembering, leading Thongchai to conclude that “no narrative frame in Thai cultural history [...] can accommodate the memory of the massacre” (p. 170). Because of hyperroyalism, according to Thongchai, “these ordinary people may sympathize with the victims but would never cross the line to question the monarchy even slightly. Their faith in the monarchy makes them blind to any facts and allegation that are incongruous with it. In this environment, even some former victims are willing to forget the palace's roles in the past” (p. 182). This has led to a “memory slide” (p. 170), somewhat comically captured by the term “October 16⁴” (p. 183) – a mix-up this author likely also committed while growing up in Thailand.

Chapter 9 turns to the silence of the perpetrators whom Thongchai interviewed with full disclosure of who he is. He points out that “[h]ad the interviewer been somebody else, the encounters and the responses from these people might have been different” (p. 189). Most noteworthy is perhaps the consistent insistence by former Red Gaurs (one of the three main right-wing groups) that they were not responsible for the violence, a claim seemingly corroborated by other perpetrators Thongchai dubs “the Patriotic Goons” (pp. 191–195). Nevertheless, Thongchai also points out that some of the interviewees' remarks were inconsistent with other document research, pointing to either the possibility that those documents are fabricated, or that these perpetrators have modified their memory over time – once again showing how the collective and individual memory merges and shapes each other.

Memories and Politics Today (Chapter 10 and Epilogue)

In Chapter 10, Thongchai engages with the topic of “Octobrists⁵” by critiquing *The Rise of the Octobrists* by Kanokrat Lertchoosakul. This critique seems to be a proxy for his criticism to the “high expectations

⁴This term stems from the fact that there were two historic student protests in the 1970s: one in 14 October 1973; another, the subject of this book, on 6 October 1976. In the Buddhist calendar (BE) used in Thailand, 1973 is 2516. The numbers 14, 16, 6, 19 leads to the confusion.

⁵The Thai term is *khon duan tula*, literally “people of October.” It is a term adopted by former student radicals in their activism during the turn of the millennium. For a detailed discussion, see note 3 in p. 268.

and the admiration” (p. 227) younger activists and intellectuals had to the Octobrists. The Octobrists are, in his word, not “real people in actual history” (p. 215), and were merely “a broad collective identity mediated by the past, like a school alumni identity, rather than a social movement” (p. 218). The identity offered no program for collective action, because it was based on the distant past characterized by a collective of young students holding an eclectic range of ideological dispositions, “from liberalism to conservatism, from royalism to the New Left” (p. 216; also see Kongkirati 2005). This chapter also reads like an introspection of the author, also directed at his “old friends,” as he harshly criticizes the “shameless behavior” of Octobrists who “expressed delight and provided justifications for the brutal suppression [of the 2010 Red Shirt protest]” (p. 225).

Although the Epilogue does not contain substantial analysis, Thongchai brings up a number of contemporary art works referring to the October 6 massacre, notably the internet meme of *Mani mi chae* (Mani has a chair), which depicts a girl in various situations with an artistic style reminiscent of Thai primary school textbook, with a caption of a Thai poem alluding to various political topic of the day. While for Thongchai the meaning of the comedy appears ambiguous (pp. 235–236), for people of this author’s generation, whose “political awakening” involved the use of the internet and social media (for instance, Sinpeng 2021; Lertchoosakul 2021), the intention is clear. It is a code for those who are “in the know,” who have taken interest in political history outside of the officially sanctioned textbook. It is a transgressive act, displaying the taboo chair in a childish and comical way, laughing at the absurdity of not being allowed to know about it when we were kids. Another work mentioned in this chapter, the *Rap Against Dictatorship* music video on YouTube (p. 239), is in some way a culmination of this brewing online political knowledge and “memory” of October 6. It could perhaps be said that these new forms of media represent a sort of “reverse-sliding” of memory, offering a more optimistic outlook to the state of unforgetting in Thai society.

It should be stressed, however, that the last remark cannot be properly substantiated, similar to some of Thongchai’s broad claims regarding Thai society. Without independent evidence of societal perception such as opinion polls, some of Thongchai’s assessments may appear too assertive to readers less familiar with Thai politics. This is perhaps why the focus of this book becomes even more relevant – if the voice is nowhere to be heard, then we must turn to silence itself.

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