

# **The Life of this World:**

## **Chaiwat Satha-Anand—Scholar, Activist, and Humanist**

These three papers by Saroja Dorairajoo, Carool Kersten, and Raymond Scupin were presented at a panel organized for the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies at Northern Illinois University on April 4, 2005. These papers were presented to honor and evaluate the oeuvre of the Thai Muslim scholar Chaiwat Satha-Anand.

There were several major reasons as to why we decided to organize this panel and present the papers that highlight the significance of Chaiwat's work. First, following the tragedy of 9/11/01 and the distorted discourse about Islam and Muslims within the Western media, there were the repetitive questions regarding the invisibility of reformist or moderate Muslims in denouncing the radical forms of Islam that produced the disaster. Despite the fact that many Muslim leaders and officials within Islamic countries had publicly deplored the violent actions of the radical Muslims who had carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Western media continued (and continues) to ask "Where are the moderate or reformist Muslims who condemned the actions that led to 9/11?" In reality, as is well known, the Western media tends to focus on the sensationalistic violence produced within the Muslim communities while remaining silent on peaceful activities within these communities. As will be discussed in the following papers, Chaiwat's combined role as a Muslim reformist intellectual and a non-violent activist represents one of the many individuals within the public sphere who have produced a body of significant work condemning forms of radical Islam and actively promoting peaceful dialogue between the West and Muslims and non-Muslims. In particular, the essay by Carool Kersten emphasizes how the Gandhian tradition of non-violence was incorporated into Chaiwat's thought and practice and differs from the French Orientalist Massignon's engagement with Ahimsa and Satyagraha. Chaiwat is an example of a

Muslim scholar who is devoted to peaceful dialogue and practice. Thus, we wanted to present our papers as one of the means of debunking the essentialist and Orientalist stereotypes that were reinforced by the late Samuel Huntington and promoted through the Western media regarding the inevitable violent clash between Muslims and the West.

The second major reason for organizing the panel and presenting the papers stressing the importance of Chaiwat's work is that since the "War on Terrorism" following 9/11/01 by the U.S. administration, the Muslim minority in Thailand have become prominent within the international media. In October of 2001 following the U.S.-led strikes in Afghanistan, thousands of Muslims in Thailand gathered for demonstrations against these actions. Activists within the Muslim communities in Thailand organized boycotts against U.S., Israeli, British, and German products and businesses to protest the campaign against Afghanistan. Young Muslim leaders have encouraged their peers to steer clear of McDonalds, Pepsi, Nike, KFC, Citibank, computers, telephones, fax machines, as well as discount stores owned by European and American allies. Muslim NGOs collected donations for relief for victims of the war in Afghanistan. A group calling itself *Muja-hideen Islam Patani* (MIP) in South Thailand distributed leaflets calling for a "holy war" or jihad against the US and its Western allies. The *Chularajmontri*, the religious and government representative of the Muslims in Thailand, and other Muslim leaders spoke out against the Thai government's support of the U.S. "War on Terrorism" and the invasion of Afghanistan. Following the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003, massive demonstrations led by young Muslim activists continued in Bangkok and South Thailand. Chaiwat wrote about these activities in order to produce a less sensationalistic more nuanced and analytical portrait of these events (Chaiwat 2004a, 2004b).

Eventually, the situation for Muslims in South Thailand became much more acute. Various terrorism experts have alleged that since 2002 the al-Qaida linked *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI) planned the Bali bombing in Southern Thailand and media interest has been intense. Four Thais with alleged JI connections were arrested by Thai officials between June and July 2003, followed by the arrest of JI operational head Hambali on 11 August in Ayudhya, in Central Thailand. However, since 2004, sustained violence has erupted throughout South Thailand resulting in more than 3,200 deaths of both Buddhist and Muslims. An enormous literature in anthropology, history, political science, international relations, and religious studies has been produced since that time regarding this southern insurgency (Aphornsuvan 2004, 2007; Askew 2007, 2009; Dorairajoo 2004; Funston 2008; Jerryson 2009; Kersten 2004; Liow 2004, 2007; McCargo 2006, 2008, 2009; Pitsuwan 2008; Yusuf and Schmidt 2006). Chaiwat has been an influential analyst and activist within the international arena as a result of this South Thailand insurgency. He served on Thailand's National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) that was created in 2005 to bring Buddhists and Muslims together to facilitate peaceful negotiations for South Thailand. Saroja

Dorairajoo's essay places Chaiwat's work within the context of the violence that has disrupted southern Thailand. She writes about how Chaiwat explores the religious motivations for the violence that has erupted from time to time in southern Thailand.

Finally, all of the papers by Kersten, Dorairajoo, and Scupin deal with general questions regarding theory and praxis, and the relationship between research and activism. One of the standard premises within some forms of academic discourse is that there is a rigid dichotomy between applied and pure research in the social sciences. However, Chaiwat's work demonstrates a true synthesis of theory and praxis that shows that this dichotomy between applied and pure research is unjustifiable. He argues against the standard premise antipraxis orientation that is inherent within much of the social sciences. Chaiwat's research and activism remains on the cutting edge of a growing group of praxis-oriented social scientists who want to change the existing arrangement of the social and political world. Within the traditional positivist orientation, with its assumptions about epistemological objectivity, social scientists were socialized within the university setting to distance themselves from the applications of their research projects. This positivist tradition that employed the language of objectivity and social disengagement was a product of the European enlightenment. Invoking impartiality this positivist tradition became embedded within the discourse and practices of academic research in the social sciences. The positivist credo assumed that the social and political research is no different from the study of atoms, molecules, or other physical phenomena. The Cartesian ethos separated mind from body, science from social action, *phronesis* and praxis from theoretical reflection, reason and abstraction.

Of course, more recently the constructivist, poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of Foucault and others have devastated the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of positivism. However, the recent development of the postmodern auto- poetic and self-referential agendas has also resulted in a distancing between action and research. Although this postmodern movement has supported more intellectual freedom from the constraints of traditional positivism, it has simultaneously opened the door to useless research and academic careerism divorced from attention to important public, social, and political issues. Most of the postmodernists and poststructuralists argue that all knowledge is so epistemologically compromised that it is impossible to know or do anything about anything and one is left with a nihilistic self-removal of the social scientist from the field of social engagement. These forms of research often results in the yawning abyss of endless subjectivity.

Chaiwat, as an important public intellectual and activist, has shown that neither the traditional positivist nor the postmodern reactions to positivism have provided a foundation for improving the social and political world. He has drawn on what Scupin has emphasized in his piece as the *phronetic* tradition of Aristotle to combine theory and praxis. Chaiwat's overall project uses action based on the validity of knowledge acquisition to increase fairness, wellness, and less violence in the political world.

He strives to bring in the stakeholders within the Muslim and Buddhist communities as well as others to collaborate with the researchers to produce positive social and political change. He is realistic enough to realize that these changes will not be easy to bring about and that change will not produce a smooth outcome in every case. Nevertheless, Chaiwat's scholarship and activism crosses the boundaries between academia and society and transcends both the disengaged positivist social researchers and the postmodern interpretivists. The following essays explore how Chaiwat Satha-Anand has challenged the standard premises of the professional organizations and the traditional academic division of labor to combine pure research and applied research to generate knowledge and action in support of liberating humans from the disabling monstrosities of violent politics.

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