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The pathfinder



Style :Homage in shining leaves



Flush with success

The pathfinder

David Wyatt opened new vistas on Thai history. Four who knew him share their personal memories and assess the legacy of a pioneer in Siamese cultural studies

Seldom can an outsider have done so much to further the understanding of another country's history, especially an outsider whose home was half a world away. But from his unparalleled study, "Thailand: A Short History", through to his last book unravelling the mysteries of Thai murals, Professor David Wyatt did just that, and, according to many Thai historians, a whole lot more. Wyatt's work helped clarify our view of Thailand's past, while exuding a passion for Thai culture every step of the way.

Four Thai insiders gave The Nation their thoughts on the tremendous impact of this man from afar, and the legacy contained in more than 60 books that he left behind when he passed away two weeks ago. Wyatt, 69, died of emphysema and congestive heart failure in a retirement home in Ithaca, New York. He is survived by his wife, Alene, three sons, Douglas, Andrew and James, and five grandchildren.



Dr Charnvit Kasetsiri
Founder of Southeast Asian Studies Programme
Thammasat University

David Wyatt wasn't just a "professor", he was a teacher for us all, and his name and work will survive for as long as Thais feel the urge to learn about their past. Ajarn Wyatt left us with more than 100 writings but his famous opus, "Thailand: A Short History", has become the definitive introduction to Thai history. It was a leap forward from W A R Wood's book, "A History of Siam", written 56 years earlier, and it was another 23 years before Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit attempted a similar overview with "A History of Thailand" in 2005. Among his important contributions to historical knowledge were his doctoral dissertation on King Rama V, eventually published by Yale University Press as "The Politics of Reform in Thailand" in 1969, and his paper "Family Politics in Thailand" dealing with the Bunnag dynasty. This writer can still remember discovering Thai history as a student in America, where Ajarn Wyatt's tutorials brought to life the conflicts, trials and trepidations of the Rama V period. The lecture-room portrait of a young and vigorous King Chulalongkorn inflamed his students' interest so much that the professor was persuaded to continue the story at a local watering hole called Johnny's Big Red. Wyatt's last contribution to the study of Thai history was as the editor of "The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya", with Richard D Cushman as translator. Towards the end of his life, this writer received a request for a letter from Wyatt's wife, Alene. The following is an extract of the letter she read out to him on November 13.

Just to say "Hi" from Bangkok (under strange and amazing military rule).
I am teaching modern Thai politics and history at Chula and Thammasat... using your long "Thailand: A Short History", as usual.
Best wishes my dear productive Ajarn,
Charnvit

PS: Our Ayutthaya has been partly underwater for some months now.

David left us on November 14.
He can't have imagined how much Thailand, his second home, has changed in the past few months. Ajarn Wyatt took pains to remind us of the "Thai virtues" that the Father of Thai history, Prince Damrong, explained as love of independence, tolerance, and the power of assimilation. Just how relevant these virtues remain is being tested by recent historical events.
Chiranan Pitpreecha
1989 SeaWrite award winner

O Captain! My Captain! Rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up – for you the flag is flung – for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths – for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning ...

I rendered this poem by Walt Whitman in Thai ten years ago, but I learn the true meaning of it with the departure of my Captain – David K Wyatt.
For four decades, the man we remember as "Ajarn Wai-aat" ("Mighty Age" – his own Thai translation for his surname) has contributed enormously to Thai studies in the wider world.
Those who are familiar with Wyatt's early works may view him as an expert on Thai dynastic histories, but in fact, his knowledge took in everything from the history of Southeast Asia's mainland to local histories and social issues in the region's countries.
For him, the "historical evidence" had to encompass more than documents in archives, which couldn't

provide an insight into the culture of the largely illiterate masses. He proposed that temple murals were a key to the mindset of people in the past. His two recent books "Siam in Mind" (2002) and "Reading Thai Murals" (2004) may read like anecdotes from a lifetime spent in the field of Thai research, but they have already set an unprecedented course for study outside the mainstream.

As to my personal memories, I was honoured to have been both his student and part of his "extended family".

When I returned to Cornell in 2002 to continue my dissertation, "The Three Horizons: Politics in Sipsong Chuthai Borderlands 1880- 1910", Wyatt and his wife Alene invited me to stay with them for almost a year. Inside those four walls I learned that yam woon-sen (glass noodle salad) formed the basis of his love for Thai food. Normally, Alene took over duties as chef, but occasionally he would do the honours with his speciality, spring rolls.

At home, he was wise and witty, encouraging me to exercise my brain with funny words and idioms in English and Thai.

My "Ithaca Daddy" also guided me through difficulties, both academic and personal, while Alene showed me the exceptional inner strength and heart of a woman.

This Captain's pioneer spirit has landed here, and will continue to inspire Thai students to devote their intellect and passion to their homeland.

The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!

Dr Sunait Chutintaranond
Director of Thai and Southeast Asian
Studies Centre,
Chulalongkorn University

It is not too much to say that Southeast Asia's academic circle has lost a great linguist. David K Wyatt was one of the few Western academics able to translate ancient documents into English for the international audience. His translations, "Crystal Sands: The Chronicles of Nagara Sri Dharmaraja" (1975) and "Local Legends of Chiang Mai" published by Suriwongse Book Centre (2000), were testaments to his linguistic genius. His translation of the "Kong Bong Chronicle" that details the loss of the capital in BE2310 deserves to be much more widely known.

Students who worked closely with him realised he was also an expert in the Lao and Burmese languages.

Wyatt laboured all his professional life to foster a new generation of academics and raise the study of Thai history to an international standard. In this regard, he was a master in the grand tradition, sowing seeds of wisdom in Thailand.

Wyatt was tutor for my master's and doctorate degrees at Cornell University, and as I look back I can't help but appreciate the burden that he carried on his shoulders. Building up people is more difficult and time consuming than building a body of academic research. As a teacher, I now see how perceptive Wyatt was - he could read his students' minds like his own palm, encouraging those characteristics that would serve them in good stead. He preferred to stimulate their native creativity rather than have them slavishly imitate their teacher. The result was that some even went against his works. But he respected this academic freedom, realising that any development of ideas took time - even monitoring his students' growth and development from afar.

To many, Wyatt's reputation is cemented as a great historian, linguist and international pioneer in Thai history. But for his students, he will remain the master who worked tirelessly to sow seeds of wisdom for the study of Thai and Southeast Asian history.

Trasvin Jittidecharak
Founder and publisher of
Silkworm Books and Mekong Press

Onward to glory I go

My publisher-author relationship with David Wyatt began in 1991, when Silkworm published his "Thailand: A Short History".

After that, we saw each other every time Wyatt visited Chiang Mai. I have no idea when and how we became so close. For my part, I thought this Ajarn was unique. He knew many languages, including Tua Mueang, a northern Thai script. He knew books, computers, typefaces and fonts. He liked maps. I remember him drawing up King Mae Ku's trip for the Chiang Mai Chronicle. He said, "Ha! Mae Ku went round in a circle! A good map explains things better than a thousand words." He was also open to criticism. Often he would smile and retort, "Well, I'm waiting to read a better one than mine."

At one time, he was selecting student's dissertations to go on my list for publi-cation. I was touched - not just because he wanted to help me, but also because he always remembered and supported his former students in their academic careers.

It is no overstatement to say that Wyatt's bond with Thailand went far beyond words.

Long ago he gently pushed me to reissue "The History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani" by Ibrahim Syukri. The original book was written in Jawi, and although the authorities banned the last chapter of the Thai edition, they weren't so concerned about the English version. Later I was able to publish the full text in Thai. Wyatt always wanted us Thais to be able to access the information we deserve to know.

Unlike his students and colleagues, I got to know Wyatt better in his twilight years. If any of you enjoy the sunset as I do, you will understand how I felt - Wyatt gave me lessons one could never learn in a classroom. He showed me the virtues and qualities of a true scholar - humility, discipline, openness, an eager-ness to learn from the learned and a willingness to guide the younger generation.

I thought we would lose Wyatt after in 1999. It was a miracle that he survived his operations then and was able to revisit Thailand several times.

In recent times we talked more about our great love of music. Wyatt once performed on stage in "Man of La Mancha", playing none other than Don Quixote. It seems fitting to me, then, to round off these fond memories with a few verses from the musical:

Don Quixote:
I am I, Don Quixote, the Lord of la Mancha,
My destiny calls and I go,
And the wild winds of fortune
Will carry me onward,

Oh, whithersoever they blow
Onward to glory I go

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