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WORD!

The founder of Silkworm Books is determined to bring quality English works to the Thai market - and she's succeeding

Story by KRITTIYA WONGTAVAVIMARN, Photos by YINGYONG UN-ANONGRAK



Trasvin Jittidecharak says her Silkworm Books might be small and subtle, but they are determined to worm their way along the path of the scholar.

Trasvin Jittidecharak says publishing books is like bringing up children - it's no easy task. "It's not just delivering the baby and then full stop. It's also about nurturing and giving the baby care and attention."

That's why the 49-year-old has reared her company, Silkworm Books, with patience and purpose. And raising a good, healthy "child" has become her passion and pride.

"Publishing books takes time and effort: for writers to write, for editors to edit and for us to sell, distribute and promote their works," said the publisher. "We have to make sure that each book doesn't come out, disappear and never come back. Our titles must have a long shelf life."

What started as a small publisher, with Trasvin as the only employee, grew into an international publishing company at the forefront of scholarly, academic and professional publishing in Thailand. For 15 years, the independent Chiang Mai-based publishing house has produced a series of English-language books, primarily on topics related to mainland Southeast Asia in the areas of history, politics and development studies, many of which were written by prominent scholars and have been sold internationally.

To date, Silkworm's print runs are still small: Each title has a print run of 2,000 copies or less. Sometimes sales number less than 500 copies on certain titles. Trasvin, however, is proud of the fact that her company, once a little seed, has grown into such a big, fruitful tree.

In the late 1980s Thai tourism was booming and English-language books on Thailand had increased in quantity, but not quality, she said. The young Trasvin saw there were only a few English titles locally published and the market on imported text books, general books and books on architecture and design was still small.

"I love books and had been surrounded by books of all kinds since I was born," said the publisher with a genteel, scholarly accent.

"So I was very frustrated as there was nothing in-depth and useful for serious travellers and me, myself, to read. Without hesitation, I decided to become a full-time publisher on my own."

Growing up in the book trade - her family owns Suriwong Book Centre in Chiang Mai - and trained in publication design at Parsons School of Design, NYC, Trasvin naively thought it would be easy for her to get into and be successful in the publishing business.

"I was totally wrong," she admitted. "I simply registered a company with a capital of 200,000 baht. My family didn't oppose me or give big support. I could only hire a freelance editor to handle the editing. But basically I was working alone in the office."

Silkworm was established in 1989, but the imprint wasn't founded until 1991, and the first in-house employee wasn't hired until eight years later. Trasvin recalled that in the early years authors wouldn't bother to contact an upcountry, amateur publisher like Silkworm Books.

The retail prices of imported academic books were also often high and unaffordable for Thais. Trasvin, hence, built up lists of books by licensing the ones that were already published but inaccessible in Thailand.

The very first book Silkworm licensed was Thailand: A Short History by the late professor David K. Wyatt, a veteran of Thai history who just passed away on November 14, 2006. A quality edition at an affordable price, Trasvin said the book was reprinted several times until the second edition, which is still available on the market, was released in 2003.

One of Silkworm's policies is to promote Thai authors and that's how Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation was born in 1994. Written by Thai academic and historian Thongchai Winichakul, the book is an intriguing study of nationhood, exploring the 19th-century confrontation of ideas that transformed the Kingdom of Siam into the modern conception of a nation.

In the following year, Thailand's Boom was released, and its second, expanded edition was printed in 1997 under a new title, Thailand's Boom and Bust, written by Dr Pasuk Phongpaichit and Dr Chris Baker. The book depicts issues of economic and political development, including information on all aspects of Thailand - politicians, farmers, labour, pop culture.

"This book was a best-seller and made us known on national and international levels," she said. "Such a book had never been written before. Such information was highly demanded by investors, professionals and diplomats who worked in and with Thailand. I read the manuscript [which] mentioned several 'godfather' names and I decided without a second thought that we had to do it."

Silkworm also publishes works of fiction, such as Mindfulness and Murder: A Father Ananda Mystery, the first in a murder-mystery series by Nick Wilgus, Bangkok-based writer and a Bangkok Post senior sub-editor. The book has been translated into French and German. The second title in the series, the recently released Garden of Hell: A Father Ananda Mystery, also received a warm welcome from readers, both locally and internationally.



New releases from Mekong Press: 'The Mekong Arranged and Rearranged' and 'Laos: From Buffer State to Crossroads'.

One of Silkworm's lead titles next year will be Lao Royalty by Dr Grant Evans, one of the few experts on Laos, explaining why Lao royalty did not survive. The book contains in-depth information that the author collected from various archives around the world and from interviews with members of the royal family who are still alive. It also includes hundreds of old, rare photographs of Lao royalty.

Its coffee-table size of more than 400 pages, and its small print run for a small target market, mean large amounts of money have to be invested in its publication. Why does Trasvin insist on publishing this book? Is it worth the expense?

"If we don't, who will?" she asks. "Western publishers wouldn't care about this information. The present Lao government wouldn't care, either," she said. "Once, the author asked me whether I preferred to make it smaller. I told him not to. I believe that, by publishing the book, we are not just preserving Lao history, but also our own history. We are a part of its history and it's good that we can read and understand more about our neighbour's history as well as ourselves.

"We, publishers, are information providers. It's better for us to provide information that promotes understanding, harmony and unity in the region," she said.

Silkworm recently launched Mekong Press, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Programme Foundation, which aims to encourage and support the work of local scholars, writers and publishing professionals in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and other countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The project provides a training programme for publishers and editors in the region, publishes and distributes the works produced through the book trade, and creates a network among publishers in the region in order to strengthen and improve publishing quality and to enable local publications to reach a wider readership.

The Mekong Arranged and Rearranged by Maria S.I. Diokno and Nguyen Van Chinh and Laos: From Buffer State to Crossroads? by Vathana Pholsena and Ruth Banomyong are the two titles under the Mekong Press imprint. Next year Mekong Press plans to release at least three titles and organise a publishing workshop in Hanoi, Trasvin said.

Silkworm has been on a slow, but nonetheless steady path of growth. For Trasvin, publishing books is rewarding and challenging. "But a publishing organisation doesn't happen overnight. Business has its ups and downs and there have been many obstacles along the way," she said.

Publishing books and trying to sell them in a country where English is not the first language is not easy, she said.

"There's a shortage of good, experienced editors. Not every farang with a degree in English can be an editor. Once we find one, we have to go through tedious regulations to get her or him a work permit. Every year, I have to go through the same official papers, about one-inch thick, of the same old information, for the same old editor," she said.

One of the "strange" regulations of the Thai Immigration Department, she said, is the escalator minimum wage based on nationality:

The highest paid are from Japan, the US and Canada, respectively; the second rate are the UK, the EU and Australia, respectively; while Ireland, Africa and Latin America have yet another rate.

"I'm not sure whether it's a discrimination practice towards foreigners or a double standard. Our business needs native English speakers. They could be American, Australian, Irish, British or Indian. We should be able to pay them according to their experience, not their nationality.

"When we had a CEO government, I thought it might be a chance that many out of date and unnecessary laws would be improved. Of course, nothing happened," she said.

Working with booksellers has also been an impediment, she said. "In my early years, it was hard to pursue a bookseller in Bangkok to stock our books. Their spaces were expensive and they preferred displaying international best-selling titles or popular trade titles to ours. Then they would demand big discounts, which we could not afford," she recalled.

"Now the booksellers have more sympathy and they know that to stock decent titles by local authors and publishers can add colour to the store. It boosts the image of a bookstore as being a part of the community and offering something different to readers," she said.

In the business of book publishing, if professionalism means the skill expected of a professional, a publisher has to at least understand what and who are involved in the entire process: an author, an editor, a pre-press production staff, a printer, a distributor and a bookseller - no matter whether it's a bookstore or a direct mail merchant, she said.

"The most important player in our trade is an author. We have to make sure that we deliver what the author wants to offer to a reader. At the same time, we have to do our best to get a financial reward as the author deserves.

"Silkworm would provide better service for our authors and readers if our government regulations and our domestic book trade's standards improved. We have been preparing to sail. We're only waiting for the wind."

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