

วิสัยทัศน์ของกวีร่วมสมัยไทย

“ The Third World War ” :

Vision of a Contemporary Thai Poet



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## Abstract

The present paper is based on the comprehensive “Postscript” in Thai, which the author wrote for the volume of collected poems, *History Without Killings: Lighthearted Verses on the Theme of the Frog and the Coconut Shell*, by Saksiri Meesomsueb (2022). It is intended to forge a coherent system of thought out of the volume containing the poet’s multifarious reactions to, and musings on, contemporary problems, whose seriousness is deliberately clad in what may be called “an aesthetics of frivolity”. Steeped in Buddhist thinking, the poet demonstrates that social ills as well as devastating atrocities occurring in the world of today are not conditioned by external factors but by impurities and defilements from within human beings, known as *Kilesa*. Although he never conceals his antimilitarism and remains mindful of past and present aberrations, his *History Without Killings* strives to look forward to an ideal society, in which we should all be engaged in fighting “A Third World War”, namely a war against our own base instincts. To propel our quest for that goal, the poet draws on a plethora of knowledge and wisdom – Thai, Eastern and Western – which he embodies in verses of exuberant virtuosity and reflective, critical and thought-provoking challenges. The result is an entertaining reading that at the same time enables the reader to overturn his/her “coconut shell” in order to achieve self-discovery.

**Keywords:** Contemporary poetry; Third World War; Buddhism; Ideal society; Aesthetics of frivolity

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้ปรับปรุงจากต้นฉบับภาษาไทย ซึ่งเป็น “บทส่งท้ายเชิงวิพากษ์” ขนาดยาวที่ผู้เขียนเขียนไว้ให้กับหนังสือรวมบทกวี *ประวัติศาสตร์ไร้หน้า : วรรณคดีศรีสะเกษ* ของ ศักดิ์สิทธิ์ มีสมสืบ (Meesomsueb, 2022) ผู้เขียนตั้งใจที่จะชี้ให้เห็นถึงระบบคิดอันเป็นแบบแผนของกวีที่แสดงออกมาในรูปของปฏิกิริยาทางความคิดอันหลากหลายที่มีต่อปัญหาของสังคมร่วมสมัย โดยที่ความเข้มข้นทางความคิดนั้นแฝงตัวมาในรูปของสิ่งที่อาจเรียกได้ว่า “สุนทรียศาสตร์แห่งความขี้เล่น” ด้วยความต็มด้าในพุทธธรรม กวีชี้ให้เห็นถึงความฟอนเฟะทางสังคมและความโหดเหี้ยมนานัปการของโลกปัจจุบันที่มีได้มีที่มาจาก “โลกภายนอก” แต่มาจาก “โลกภายใน” ซึ่งก็คือ กิเลสมนุษย์นั่นเอง จริงอยู่กวีไม่ลังเลที่จะแสดงออกซึ่งความชิงชังที่มีต่อพ่อค้า/แม่ค้าสงคราม และก็น่าเสียดายถึงสิ่งเลวร้ายที่เกิดขึ้นจากความขัดแย้งอันรุนแรงและสงครามในโลกของอดีตและปัจจุบัน แต่ ประวัติศาสตร์ไร้หน้า พยายามที่จะมุ่งมองไปสู่สังคมอุดมคติที่จะผลักดันให้เราทำร่วมกันทำ “สงครามโลกครั้งที่ 3” เพื่อต่อต้านสัญชาตญาณใฝ่ต่ำของมนุษย์ การที่จะผลักดันให้ไปถึงจุดหมายดังกล่าว กวีต้องพึ่งคลังความรู้และภูมิปัญญา จากแผ่นดินแม่ รวมทั้งโลกตะวันออกและตะวันตก ซึ่งเขานำเสนอในรูปของกวีนิพนธ์อันบรรเจิดที่มาพร้อมกับการทำทนายให้เกิดการครุ่นคิดพินิจนึกและการคิดเชิงวิจารณ์ งานกวีเล่มนี้น่าจะสร้างความหฤหรรษ์ให้แก่ผู้อ่าน โดยเป็นการเชิญชวนให้เราทำร่วมมือกันพลิกกละกว่าให้หายเสีย เพื่อที่จะไปให้ถึงสภาวะของการรู้จักตนเอง

**คำสำคัญ:** กวีนิพนธ์ร่วมสมัย; สงครามโลกครั้งที่ 3; พุทธศาสนา; สังคมอุดมคติ; สุนทรียศาสตร์แห่งความขี้เล่น

## Preamble: Mission of a Contemporary Poet

The present essay is based on the Thai version of my “Critical Postscript” to the volume of collected poems by Saksiri Meesomsueb (2022), called *History Without Killings*. It is not conceived as a scholarly paper and the author professes allegiance to the tradition of “criticism”, which in the Western context is a very broad term. The main title of the book (in Thai: “*Prawathisat Rai Kha*”) is marked by a certain seriousness, but its subtitle, *Lightedhearted Verses on the Theme of the Frog and the Coconut Shell* (in Thai “*Hasakawi Sikala*”) is an overt contradiction in tone to the main title. There is a saying in Thai about “a frog caught in a coconut shell”, alluding to an ignorant person revelling in his own prison-house. The mission of the poet is therefore to free the frog from the coconut shell, in other words, to liberate his fellow human beings from the confines of (often) self-imposed ignorance. In this sense, he comes very near to Immanuel Kant’s (1784) *What is Enlightenment?* without realizing it. All this is deliberate. We are living in a poetically arid age, and a “profession of faith” in a pacifist world view has to be tempered by occasional excursions into frivolity. It is too soon to judge whether the poet’s strategy to attract contemporary readership will work at all, considering the new reading habit (or demise of reading habit) of our digital (il)literacy. Be that as it may, the poet remains uncompromising in his aspiration to wage a “Third World War” in the sense of a self-willed conquest of defilements (*Kilesa*) in spite of his frequent concessions in the form of humorous interludes.

Allow me to recount my and my colleagues’ discovery of the young poet of great promise. We were engaged in an ambitious research project, supported by the (now regrettably defunct) Thailand

Research Fund, under the title, *Poetry as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society: Experiences from Thai, British-Irish, American, French and German Literatures*. At the annual conference of 1998, a poetry reading session was organized at Tabkwan House, Sanam Chandra Palace, Nakhon Pathom, on March 14, 1998, and the young poet Saksiri Meesomsueb was invited to act as the first presenter. He opted to *chant* his poem, using the traditional mode of “*Sepha*”, normally associated with verse narrative of epic dimensions. The poem was called “Retracing Footprints on the Path”, written 2 years earlier to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the tragic event of October 6, 1976, in which right-wing fanatics brutally murdered students and falsely accused them as “Communists”. The audience was stunned by the subtle poetic treatment of this intractable material. The poet knew how to transcend crass realistic depiction of the atrocities by way of metaphors of traditional children’s war games and concluding the poem by having recourse to the Buddhist principle of forgiveness (*Abhaya Dana*).

Not killed, not dead, we’re alive  
The wounded cured, the dead revived  
Not killed, we’re still here to stand fast  
Hope and dreams are beacon-bright  
We select, analyze and put away  
Keep this, discard that, to find the win-way<sup>3</sup>  
(Nagavajara, 2004, pp. 256-257)

Saksiri exploits the sounds of the Thai language to the full, and in the first line quoted, one word in Thai with the same sound

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<sup>3</sup>Translated by Chamnongsri Rutnin. The ensuing translations from *History Without Killings* are mine.

“*Kha*” is repeated 3 times in 3 different ways with 3 different meanings, namely “to kill”, “value” and “I”. This has probably become one of the most memorable lines in the entire corpus of contemporary Thai poetry, because the richness of the language enhances, with absolute appositeness, the subtlety and profundity of the philosophical message.

The intervening years have seen the poet diversify and deepen his artistic prowess. He grew as a painter (having had formal training in this field); he began to compose songs, sang and accompanied himself. But it is in the realm of poetry that his maturity shines out. His command of the Thai language is beyond any doubt, but he does not just indulge in poetic virtuosity *per se*; he is awake to contemporary problems at home and broad, reflects deeply on them, tries to relate them to his own cultural and philosophical background and proposes solutions that represent “the middle path”, commensurate with Buddhist thinking. Having been a teacher for several decades before deciding to pursue his calling as a freelance artist, he does not shy away from being didactic, but there is humility in his didactic communication. He never pontificates. Living a modest life in keeping with the “philosophy of sufficiency” propagated by the late King Bhumipol whom he highly respects, he is what I would call “a curator of Thai life”, in tune with the natural environment at his home by the river Yom and nourishing himself with the variegated flora and fauna of the locality that enriches his daily cuisine, which his “friends” on Facebook can also enjoy (at least visually) along with his almost daily new poems. Here is a man who keeps abreast of contemporary global developments while preserving firm roots in his native soil.

*History Without Killings* very well reflects Saksiri’s position in contemporary life. As the poem “Retracing Footprints on the Path” can attest, the poet is well aware of the cruelty of the past (though he was too young to take an active part in the event of October 6,

on whichever side.) That poem testifies also to the feeling of responsibility on the part of an onlooker or observer. His Buddhist pleading has been taken by radical factions of the warring protagonists to be an act of condonement (if not connivance) with the murderers, and such accusations have disturbed him. Yet he remains unshaken in his Buddhist sobriety. He knows that some historians have been re-reading Thai history and have even turned our national heroes, such as King Naresuan and King Taksin, into bloodthirsty rulers. That is why Saksiri has turned away from looking at history as chronicle of things past, but has been trying hard to look forward to “making” or “creating” history from an ideal point of view, hence his conception of “World War III” which we shall discuss later.

## Horizontal Relationship

I have adopted a Buddhist interpretation of Saksiri’s poetry and hope that I shall not be far off the mark, because the text does substantiate it. Buddhists willingly accept the concept of “*Sattaloka*” (literally, the world of living creatures or beings). Buddhism does not posit the superiority of human beings over animals, and the *Jatakas* relate tales of several previous births of Buddha in animal forms prior to his exemplary lives as a human being. Human beings and animals are caught in impurities in the cycle of birth and rebirth (*Samsara*), and only through self-betterment can one attain *Nirvana*. This is the only privilege reserved for human beings: being born a human being and leading a life governed by the Dhamma is the only gateway to *Nirvana*. So the basic attitude of a poet who is ambitious enough to engage in a didactic project is to foster a horizontal relationship among living beings.

The breath of the sylvian wilderness  
Is the breath of the entire world,  
The breath of all living creatures,  
For human beings and their animal fellows  
are equals.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 232)

Transposed from the metaphysical to the social domain in the “Land of Smiles”, the poet will have to seek allies in his efforts to subvert the old hierarchical thinking. He shows no small measure of audacity in the poem “Mother, a Genuine Fan of Suntharaporn”, referring to his mother’s love of the modern Thai popular song, represented by its protagonist Suntharaporn, a composer who has been recognized by UNESCO as a one of the world’s important personalities.

The last tune of the day, “It’s late, My Dear”,  
Time is up and I have to say good-bye.  
Mother cast away her paint brush, Embracing  
death that put an end to her earthly life.

Mother has since become a chef up in heaven.  
“Dear Mother, are you close to Bhumipol?  
Whatever dishes are to his liking, I am sure you  
do your utmost to serve him”.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 285)

A conservative among the Thai people could get jittery about the poet’s addressing the late King Rama IX as “Bhumibol” *without any honorific*. (The present appellation that the Thai officialdom has concocted for him after his passing away is almost one line long and very difficult to memorize!)

The late King is thus brought down to the same level as ordinary Thai people. Is this disrespect? Some royalist diehards might even accuse the poet of “*lèse-majesté*” in line with Article 112 of the Penal Code, which is now being overused. Besides, what had the King to do with Suntharaporn? The answer is very simple. King Bhumibol was a composer and needed a band to try out his compositions, and the best band available at that time was the Public Relations Department Big Band under the directorship of Suntharaporn (Nagavajara, 1996, pp. 142-154).

In actual fact, the late King was during his long reign very close to his people, especially to the rural underprivileged whom he helped to establish themselves through “sufficiency economy”. A new research project on the arts in contemporary Thailand reaches the following conclusion.

The King was the foundation of the native soil, not its summit. [...] When the King passed away, that foundation did not disappear. [...] The long reign strengthened that horizontal relationship. [...] The common folk<sup>3</sup> called him “Father”, an appellation that he gladly accepted.

(Sumniengngam, 2022, p. 7)

In the context described above, we can never say that “familiarity breeds contempt”. Saksiri is demonstrating how a “classless society” might look like in spite of the persistence of traditional formalities. If the once consecrated divine status of kingship has, of its own accord, become one with its people, one may ask why it has fallen upon a poet to take a bold step to demonstrate this “horizontal relationship” by way of a commoner having almost the courage to “*tutoyer*” a constitutional monarch?

The status of a poet in Thai society before the advent of the new “prosaic” age had been high. I have dealt with this issue fairly extensively in my plenary lecture at “The 5th Thai Studies Conference” of 1993 in London. (Nagavajara, 2004, p. 142-157). Thai scholars have a tendency to ascribe cultural issues of great import to Indic origin. The same applies to the notion of “*Ahankara*” or egotism of poets. An explanation might be necessary when we deal with traditional poets from the Ayutthya to the early Bangkok period. But the late poet and painter Angkam Kalayanaphong (1926-2012) has ushered in a new trend inspired by the western conception of the apotheosis of the arts. Face to face with the materialistic erosion of Thai society, Angkam was intent on proving the intellectual and spiritual power of the arts, and with regard to the role of a poet, he did not retrain from the ambition of being a seer. (Nagavajara, 1996, pp. 213-228) His younger colleagues have all been alerted to a sense of mission, whether they individually succeed in fulfilling that aspiration or not. Saksiri, for one, is deeply conscious of where he should stand as a poet.

You asked for the price, or were you talking about desire?<sup>4</sup>  
How did I answer you just now? The painting is worth as  
much as the poem. Its value is measured by the number  
of my breathings. Breathing in and breathing out costs one  
bath each, no bargaining. Another way to reckon is the rate  
of my pulse. Just add up my heart beats during my whole  
life. That is the price I quote.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 166)

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<sup>4</sup>The word play exploits the phonetical richness of the Thai language to create a semantical ambiguity by way of varying the tonal registers of “*Raka*”, one meaning “price or value”, the other, “desire or craving”. This unfortunately cannot be reflected in the English translation, because English is not a tonal language.

The bizarre arithmetic is symptomatic of the poet's estimation of his role in society. While the horizontal relationship among *Sattaloka* is postulated, the path towards *Nirvana* is via enlightened individual human life. There can be no collective entry. In the end, horizontal relationship does not preclude leadership, a leadership that has to be earned. The task of a poet becomes all the more challenging.

## Contemporary Society and the Native Soil

The word "native soil" might have, to some people, a conservative ring in the sense of an attachment to traditional values, but Saksiri's position as a "contemporary poet" is quite secure. He is aware of the interrelationship between past, present and future.

Slumbering and dreaming in the womb of the sky, Don't grumble that mother earth has not taught you to stand up. When night is falling, don't delay the passage of the setting sun. When darkness envelops all things, don't get angry at the evening hours.

At the edge of the horizon, the waxing moon hangs from the stars. The fireflies pass by in parade. Soon dawn will light up the purity of the soul, While the wind will freshen up the world, adorned with morning dew.

Don't tarry, but hasten to take your battle outside. And don't fail to carry your battle inside too. Outside and inside are your battlegrounds. Your future waits for you in the present.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 142)

Poetically, this is a virtuoso piece. The imageries drawn from the human and the natural worlds conspire to concretise a basically philosophical stance. Accept things as they are; start from here and now, for the future is shaped by your *Karma* (to use a Buddhist terminology). The poet speaks often of the battle *outside*, and the battle *inside*, implying that to make conquest of the outside world – in whatever form – depends on one’s conquest of the inner self, the subjugation of impurities. Is this the way to write didactic verse? Saksiri presumes much on his readers. I have volunteered to write a fairly lengthy postscript (in Thai) to the collected volume, *History Without Killings*, because I feel that in our intellectually and spiritually impoverished age, a voice of conscience of this nature should be heard, and the critic should help elucidate the merits of such an enterprise.

Readers will notice another “fixation” on the part of the poet, namely the relationship between the individual and society. Collective measures or even legislation will fail, if individual conscience is not upheld. Saksiri follows his elder colleague, Angkarn Kalayanaphong, in developing “green” poetry and campaigning for environmental protection. Some of his poems may stun his readers by their meticulous details. The poem, “Much More Frightful than Death Itself”, is a catalogue of the pernicious damages perpetrated against the natural world that make one gasp in disbelief in the extent of human callousness. The poem concludes on a philosophic note

Small they are, as viruses are wont to be. They spread  
out so far and wide that one can feel their presence.  
Those that still hide inside are eager to surface.  
(Much, much more frightful than death itself).

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 177)

If outward measures to combat social ills are ineffective, the only way out is to turn to the *Dhamma*. The spiritual wealth of the world is so rich that one should look beyond one's own traditions. Combatting *Kilesa* (defilements or impurities) requires infinite persistence. Saksiri radicalizes Buddhist iconography by starting off with a standing Buddha with both hands up in the posture (*Pang*) of forgiving, but he weaves a lesson from the Christian Bible into the Buddhist original. The "forgiving Buddha", once slapped on one cheek by the evildoer, invites the latter to slap his other cheek (a reference to St. Luke 6: 29). The newly created dramatic scene goes even further, for the evildoer hits him so hard that his head falls off onto the ground, and the sinful man does not hesitate to tread on it.

The headless body still stands upright. Buddha has stopped but the evil man has not, His two hands remain in the posture of forgiving, Totally unperturbed, even when his head is trodden under the feet of the evildoer.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 90)

Acerbity almost to the point of grotesquerie, one might say! The present age may have become so insensitive to improprieties of various kinds that people have to be shaken out of their moral numbness. Our poet is always ready to respond even to the call of a barbaric society! Is there no more room for gentle persuasion? The question remains to be answered.

Environmental deterioration of the physical and the human worlds may be a slow process and not always easily noticeable. In the poet's opinion, war is an interminable feature of human

history that cannot be easily rooted out. “History Without Killings” is a plaidoyer for a new awakening, and the poet does not stop at pleading for a better future, but identifies the root cause of wars as militarism.

All soldiers in the world, do listen to me. [...]

    If there is no enemy within yourself,  
If there is no enemy, there is no need for soldiers.  
Life will be blessed with incomparable purity.  
We can kill without the help of soldiers. [...]

    If the duty of soldiers is to kill,  
You soldiers are just worthless. You are worthless  
because you don't see your enemy. Who remains  
perpetually elusive.

    Gadflies swarm over your eyes,  
They swarm over your ears, but you can't see them.  
They swarm over your mind, so that it corrupts,  
The mind that breeds worthless history called war.  
Verily, worthless history is called war.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 69)

This ethical project is extremely demanding. It is the sum total of individual efforts. Saksiri is consistent in his appeal to individual conscience. This is not elitist thinking that shuns the common run of the rabble, but it is based, as we have seen, on Buddhist philosophy. This volume of collected poems was published on January 1, 2022, three months prior to the outbreak of the invasion of Ukraine. The message has automatically gained in global validity. But who is going to listen to this small man from the far, Far East? Yet he remains adamant.

Whenever collective actions turn into chaos,  
Then individual strength must prevail. When  
false logic of the crowd threatens to dominate,  
The free mind must stand undaunted in the midst.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 268)

It cannot be denied that whatever universal tidings may emerge from his writing, the poet's reactions to the problems besetting his own society often serve as a starting point. Political factionalism has for the past few years eroded this otherwise cohesive society, with young students and even school children taking to the streets in the name of what they take to be "democracy". The poet tries his best to mediate and to provide clarity by offering a new interpretation of the Buddhist concept of "the middle path".

They become divisive, clinging to the Left or to  
the Right. To which side does the river belong?  
Black or white, good or bad, as people may  
imagine, But the river continues to run its course.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 246)

Saksiri never hesitates to attack those false prophets who are corrupting the youth with facile indoctrination.

The enlightened ones can recognize who are enlightened.  
It is the same with democracy, my dear fellows.  
Have you really lived it, are you sure?  
If you have, please enlighten us without prejudice.

Do speak your mind with honesty.  
Don't just quote from this and that text,  
Or parade quotations from this and that  
thinker. That's too easy. We won't buy it.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 234)

The poet reverts again to the Buddhist practice of individual quest for knowledge and purity. Ordinary, rational individuals count more than heroes. Echoing Bertolt Brecht, whose *Life of Galilei* was staged in a Thai version in 1985 with much success, and especially the Brechtian conception of a new society without heroes proved to be very thought-provoking. The poet is unequivocal.

If society is in need of “heroes”,  
It certainly degenerates beyond redemption,  
Unable to stand on its own feet. That is a  
society robbed of its own strength. Let us  
create a new breed of heroes. Growing out  
of the soil like mushrooms. Endowed with  
strength from without  
And shining bright  
from within.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 107-108)

The lesson learned from Brecht (1988, p.93),  
“Unhappy is the land that has need of heroes”, (Bertolt  
Brecht, 1988: 93) is here carried a step further.

If collective thinking is the hallmark of democracy, the poet does not deny that. But one must begin with the individual, and the cultivation of self-betterment guided by the *Dhamma* at the individual level should contribute towards fostering a collective force. This may be Utopian thinking, but it is based on a philosophy that has proven its worth for the past 2000 years. *Dhammic contemporaneity* is what the poet proposes.

## Curator of Thai Life

*History Without Killings* is studded with word plays of all sorts that demonstrate the richness of the Thai language which the poet manipulates with great imagination and virtuosity. This is in consonance with his professed “aesthetics of frivolity”, but as we shall see, such playfulness does not merely serve the purpose of comic relief or alleviating the gravity of the poet’s message. There is a philosophical potential embedded in the Thai language itself that the poet wishes to explore and bring to the fore. Although the improvisational nature of Thai poetry that lies at the root of traditional Thai performing arts is never abandoned, Saksiri is a protagonist of “close reading” and even pleads with his readers to “read slowly”. (Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 229) He deliberately writes in such a way as to make his readers stop and think. He believes that the Thai language itself engenders a certain degree of “critical literacy” that does not need to be propped up by any academic discipline called “critical thinking”. He cites as an example one line from the epic romance, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*”, followed by the following commentary.

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this subtle turn of phrase cannot be reflected in the English translation and can only be expressed via a double negative.

“My reticence does not mean I don’t love you”  
Our language is filled with more tricks than other languages.  
Westerners cannot easily catch up with the Thai language.  
That’s food for thought: how can an affirmation be expressed  
by a negation?

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 157)

Yet our poet never proceeds dictatorially: he never presents himself as “master” of the mother tongue. In the poem “Dejected” (Slod), he demonstrates the uses of lexicography by acting as a good student of the dictionary of the Thai language, examining the meanings of those multifarious words whose sounds are akin to one another, thereby evoking a series of associations of ideas that somehow point to the fragility of both human and animal lives on earth. The poem, though characterized often by frivolous word plays, in the end turns out to be an illustration of Buddhist teaching on the impermanence and transiency of all things. The work can be taken as a warning against heedlessness (Pamada). It is quite an achievement to start off with lexicography and then turn the act of haphazard search for meanings into a coherent moral lesson. In this way, the Thai language can be used in multifaceted ways to convey a serious message. Poetry works implicitly to bring about edification.

To move from language to the Thai way of living, Saksiri has been fortunate to be familiar with various facets of Thai life. A country boy who went to train at the Arts and Crafts College (known as “*Poh Chang*”) in Bangkok where he had the opportunity to study Thai as well as Western art. Even more fortunate was his tutelage under that great autodidact, the poet and painter Chang Sae Tang (1934-1990),

who had his pupils living in his household and coaxed them into independent-minded thinkers as well as practitioners. Saksiri finally decided, after serving as an art teacher, to settle down as an independent artist in the district of Chum Saeng in the province of Nakhon Sawan, living modestly in an idyllic rural ambience, imbibing the natural environment to the full, while maintaining contact with the modern sector of society both directly and via the social media. This decision has proved to be a boon to himself and to the literary and artistic circles. His liberal voice represents both Thailand at a crossroads: while we are looking forward and looking around, we must not forget to look back. Saksiri also represents historical continuity in a highly constructive sense of the word, because knowledge of traditional Thai life is cultivated as a source of wisdom, not in a static but in a dynamic manner.

The poet has a strategy of his own. As a first step, he amazes you with the breadth and depth of his knowledge. The poem with the English title, “Powder Power”, captures your attention right from the start, as it offers an extensive catalogue of powder of multifarious categories sub-categories, and brands, including medicinal powder, in order to arrive at the most potent of all, “the white powder”, namely heroin. The readers are suddenly hurled into the current controversy in Thailand about a court ruling concerning a politician who had been accused and jailed in a foreign country for drug trafficking, which should disqualify him from any political appointment in Thailand. In this case, the court verdict was that Thailand is a sovereign country and does not recognize sentences passed by foreign courts of justice, a judgement that seems to contravene prior sentences in Thailand itself and would theoretically annul the viability of such international bodies as the INTERPOL to which Thailand is a signatory.

The politician further had the impertinence to claim that his case had nothing to do with drug, but with culinary powdered ingredients, hence the title of the poem that is meant to signify “the power of powder”, on which present-day Thai politics thrives. This national ignominy, though presented in a humorous garb, becomes a moral judgement of grave and great import.

How come that this powder of utmost evil can willfully  
Crush our justice system into infinite particles,  
Such that the powder will spread far and wide, With its  
infernal potency, penetrating into every human breath?

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 169)

Surely we cannot say that the poet is merely using his command of the intricate encyclopedia of Thai life to dig at the enemy of the people. Rather he “reads” contemporary phenomena in full consciousness of the role of the poet, in his own words, as an entertainer who aspires to become a voice of conscience to society. The more he is steeped in traditional Thai life, the better he can “read” contemporary society. In the reverse direction, Saksiri can run off an encyclopedic series of objects of bad omen (according to traditional Thai beliefs) in order to disarm them all in an unexpected *coup de théâtre*. The poem, “Water Monitor’s Egg”, deals with animal superstitions, especially those associated with reptiles: the poet again exhibits his erudition in this very subject (which as he confesses, is drawn from Google). While reptiles are believed to be bringers of bad luck, the water monitor has to bear the brunt of the harshest invectives, and the word water monitor (“*Hia*” in Thai) has become the most common

swear word. The poet is highly critical of this bad habit of putting the blame on others by calling them “*Hia*”. He reminds us that the abject status of the water monitor is redeemed by our Thai culinary art, for the most delicious Thai pastry originally happens to be called “water monitor egg” (*Kai Hia*), which by and by has acquired a new appellation of “swan egg”, as its tastiness elevates its ranking!

Thus goes the saying that we eat the egg of the creature  
we hate. We hate the eel but love to eat eel curry.  
We hate the water monitor but love to eat *Kai Hia*.  
Looking at the egg does give us pause.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 174)

The poet picks up a Thai saying about “hating the animal but eating its eggs” and elaborates it in his own way in order to make us stop and think.

So hypocrisy is rampant, ubiquitous, ingrained in our daily life. The curator of Thai life is not a blind celebrant of Thai values. His critique becomes a call for self-criticism, hence self-betterment.

## Epilogue: On the “Third World War”

Ideologies should feed on lofty ideals, Just like young  
petals that grow from within a flower. Blossoming is  
followed by withering only to blossom again.  
That is a solid foundation for perpetual flowering  
...

Let us purify our rebellious soul, Carrying our fight  
beyond all malediction and all derision. Let us begin  
giving a new meaning to wars. Let us make our Third  
World War into a thing of beauty.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 199, 201)

The poet proposes a dynamic process of self-betterment and purification of the soul. He does not abandon the notion of being “rebellious”, that is rebelling against “*Kilesa*” or defilement. The metaphors of this fight against base instincts that manifest themselves in the form of war are clad in fairly pugnacious terms. But deep down, *History Without Killings* is a kind of “*littérature engagée*”, as that prevalent during the mid-20th century. As a heir to the *Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho*, initiated by King Rama III in the 19th century, it has no qualms about poetry assuming a didactic role. But it does not preach directly. It is contemporary in the sense of being aware of what is going on in the world. It knows how to draw its strengths from all sources of wisdom, of different ages and cultures, while acknowledging the home-grown Buddhist thinking as the pillar of our philosophical and ethical system. Coming on the eve of the Ukrainian War, its currency cannot be denied. The ideal of a “history without killings” is now being challenged, as daily reports in the media bear testimony to the unimaginable atrocities of the war. But the charge of facile optimism cannot be levelled against our poet, for he has made it clear that he is thinking long-term, setting his hopes on future generations in very far distant temporal dimensions. He speaks about a “new spirit growing out, more refined, of the old spirit”. In this sense, it can be assumed that he does not subscribe to the orthodox Buddhist preaching about the 4 categories of lotus flowers (familiar to most Buddhists), the lowest being those under the mud that never will rise above the water level, meaning those human beings who cannot be taught to

better themselves at all. How this dogma came about is unclear, but it runs counter to Buddha's teaching about the possibility of self-betterment through good Karma. Implicitly, our poet is rebellious also against conventional Buddhist dogmas, and rightly so, if he takes his proposition about the Third World War seriously and is not merely playing with big words.

In summary, we can perhaps identify certain leading principles that account for the viability of the powerful message emanating from *History Without Killings*.

First, it can be noticed that while Saksiri is open to experiences and wisdom coming from multifarious sources, he is steeped in Buddhist thinking.

Second, he stands on firm ground because he can capitalize on the cultural capital of the native soil.

Third, he knows how to benefit from the literary legacy of the Thai nation, upon which he deeply reflects and whose richness enables him to innovate all the time.

Fourth, he follows his ancestors in cultivating the principle of "mutual illumination of the arts". Verbal fluency is enhanced by sharpness of vision, and being a musician, he enriches his poetry with rare musical qualities. It must not be forgotten that his knowledge of Western and Eastern art has contributed much to his own creativity.

Fifth, he has been a teacher and is quite adept in communicating his thoughts and artistic visions.

Sixth, he is alert to contemporary problems and does not remain passive, but tries to offer his solutions. In the current conflicts in Thailand between the self-anointed protagonists of democracy and those branded as "dictators", he steers the middle course, and his Buddhist-based sobriety sounds very much like a voice of conscience.

In the final analysis, his humility shines through. The poet does not claim to have the final say on all issues brought forward in his poetry.

Let us ponder well the ten precepts of the Kalama Sutta.<sup>6</sup>  
Do not trust the words of those superior speakers.  
And I might add number eleven to the existing ten:  
Do not trust the speaker because he is a poet.

(Meesomsueb, 2022, p. 252)

As a critic, I would like to reserve my right to contradict what the poet says about poets.

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<sup>6</sup> The Kalama Sutta is Buddha's discourse in support of the spirit of enquiry and in opposition to facile beliefs, whereby a reasoning individual should subject directives, including those coming from people of superior status, to critical examination. The teaching does, however, counsel giving a hearing to advice from wise men, and is not a propagation of absolute freedom of thought as some people simplistically make it out to be.

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