



18 Puey

IN Dirck Jayanama's *Thailand in World War II* Puey has written the following account of his capture on an intelligence mission behind the Japanese lines:

I find it hardly possible to believe that, within less than a second at that time, so many different thoughts came flooding into my head. From the time that I became conscious that there were people surrounding me, to the time that they reached me, so many different thoughts and images passed through my brain that I do not know which came before, which after. I thought of my lover in London; I thought of Mani Sanasen's last words to me before we left England; I thought of my friends still in India; I thought of my two friends still hiding in the grove near by; I thought of my friends and relatives living in Bangkok; I thought of the official letter from the High Command to 'Ruth' that was still in my wallet; and I thought of the poison that lay in a pouch against my chest. This last thought was the last to come to me. Ought I to swallow the poison? Or should I let them capture me alive? Better let them take me dead! For there

were many, many secrets that I carried with me; and if I were captured alive I should be forced to betray these secrets. Better yet not to let them capture me! As for these documents which I carried on my person, I should still have the power to protect them as long as I had life. If I died, how could I protect them? Life is a thing so fresh and beautiful; and so long as life lasts we may still hope. If the Japanese do torture me, I suppose it would be more comfortable to die now. Yet I saw that there were no Japanese in the group coming to capture me. Don't do it then! When you meet a tiger you might as well face a fight to the death. Better let them take me alive! Don't die yet!

Since I read this very moving account of his capture I have often thought how different the recent history of Thailand would have been if he had taken the poison which the army had provided for him in case he was captured. There might well have been no loans from the International Bank to Thailand, and hence no rapid rural development. The influence of the Bank of Thailand might have disappeared with the death of its founder, Prince Viwat, in 1959, or even earlier. Without either the loans or the steadying integrity of the Bank, Thailand might well by now have degenerated into the hopeless corruption of some of its neighbours, and perhaps been overrun by communism.

There is, however, for me an even stronger reason for thankfulness that he faced the prospect of torture and decided to survive. In a time when heroic qualities in the West seem paralysed by the smallness of men in comparison with the greatness of events, Puey has lived his life—in a comparatively small country—on a heroic scale. His bearing is so modest, almost to the point of diffidence, that in his presence it is difficult to believe the scale and the range of his achievements. He once privately reproached me for extravagance in comparing him with Prince Viwat. For anyone who knows the Thai scene this is as if Winston Churchill accused one of extravagance in comparing him with Robert Menzies.

After an outstanding undergraduate career at Thammasat University he was a postgraduate student at the London School of

Economics when Thailand was invaded in World War II. Giving up his studies to join the British army, he was selected as the leader of the first party to be air-dropped into Thailand behind the Japanese lines. Though the drop was a complete failure (most of the equipment fell in the middle of a village) and he was almost immediately captured, his influence on all the Thais he encountered was such that he was able to establish a complete secret network in Bangkok, while still nominally remaining a prisoner-of-war. He was even sent back by air to London, before the end of the war, to try and negotiate with the British government on behalf of Thailand.

All this, however, was merely a preliminary to his career. Within a decade of taking his higher degree he had mobilised enough influence to bring about a major reform in the Thai budgetary system, had been appointed Deputy Governor of the Bank of Thailand, and had resigned this position in protest against financial irregularities by the Prime Minister.

For a young man in his early thirties this might well have been the end of a promising career, but not for Puey. There are several reasons for this. One is, of course, Puey's great value to the Thai government. He is not merely a very able and very practical economist and administrator. He is also a transparently honest and firm man, in a country where dishonesty is very easy and firmness usually undervalued. His character inspires confidence. Yet there is one special feature which would be important anywhere, but is especially important in Thailand. He is able to believe in people, even while feeling compelled to protest against some of their actions. He is no self-righteous protester, prepared to blacken characters for the sake of condemning wrong.

In the particular case in which he felt he had to resign, the Prime Minister had, for political reasons, condoned a serious financial irregularity. I believe that Puey accepted the fact that the Prime Minister considered this necessary because of the way political power was organised in Thailand. He spoke strongly and forthrightly to the people concerned, making it clear that he could

not accept such 'necessity', but was on this occasion prepared to resign privately and without publicity. It was a moral stand, not a political protest. He was to show his capacity for political protest later, when he had a goal to achieve and protest could help.

After a spell as Financial Counsellor in Europe he returned to the Bank as its Governor. Partly through his own resignation, partly though those of other key men, the Bank had acquired a good deal of moral authority. It administered most of the overseas loans to Thailand, and lenders who had good reason for caution in lending to the Thai government were prepared to trust the Bank. In bringing Puey back to head the Bank the Prime Minister was knowingly setting limits to his own capacity, and that of his ministers, to divert public funds to private uses. He had sources beyond Puey's control, but he realised that it was for Thailand's good that a great part of the country's assets should be in safe hands. A few years later, when he established the Budget Bureau, he made Puey head of that too.

Since Puey has been Governor of the Bank he has had plenty of opportunity to make use of political protest. When he had been Governor five years the Bank published a collection of his public speeches. This makes it easy to see what he has been trying to do and to observe his mind and character at work.

There have been well-timed attacks on abuses, where a shift in public opinion could be effective. Here, a speech would mobilise business opinion against a monopoly in foreign trade. There, a criticism of inefficient public enterprise would set people asking questions. Direct abuses in government Departments were needed, but without pointing to any particular individual. These attacks have certainly stimulated press comment and had their effect on the organisation of Thai society. They are limited in scope, lacking in personal bitterness, and timed (apparently) to achieve a specific effect.

Yet there is another kind of comment, designed to achieve a more long-run result. Here the aim is to change the nature of Thai

banking by playing on a fundamental inconsistency in the character of Thai bankers. For Thai bankers at present have to be two things at once. They have to organise a professional service, with all the necessary skills and qualities of character that a banker must possess to command public confidence; yet they are also actively involved in Thai politics, furthering the rather shady interests of particular politicians and business groups.

The chief occasions for Puey's long-run efforts are his annual speeches at the dinner of the Thai Bankers' Association, and sometimes also his speeches at professional associations or faculty meetings. His aim here is to make Thai bankers more professional and strengthen them against the abuses that come from associating with politics. This aim he also pursues in his teaching; for like many Thai civil servants Puey was a part-time lecturer in a university, and unlike most of them he continued to teach even when he had risen to the highest levels of the service. In one of his books—a textbook based on his lectures—there is a fascinating attempt to derive, from Buddhist ethics, the moral duty of the practising economist. Clearly one of his motives in continuing to teach is his conviction that it is, above everything, important to train Thai professional men who will be firm in carrying out their professional obligations.

Not many years ago he made front-page news in Thailand by asking to be allowed to resign his post as Governor of the Bank to serve full-time as Dean of the Faculty of Economics at Thammasat University. The Prime Minister persuaded him to stay on and hold both posts simultaneously. Reluctantly he agreed to do this for a time, but from then on he treated his university post as the more important, and preferred to be called the Dean rather than the Governor.

The next time he was invited to the Thai Bankers' Association he was in excellent form. It was the first time, he said, that the Thai Bankers' Association had invited the Dean of Economics to address them. However, he thought it would interest the assembled

bankers to know something of the topics on which the Department hoped to undertake research projects. He then proceeded to enumerate several problems which were worthy of investigation; every one of them involved some scandal on which a bit of public reaction might lead to some cleaning-up.

Though this was in part a playful reaction, the underlying intention involved, in transferring his attention increasingly to university education, is far from playful. Puey has become convinced that the forces of decency and professional integrity are not strong enough in Thailand, mainly because not enough is done in the universities to train character in the future professional leaders. This is partly because university teachers give too little of their time to their university work. The main reason is that they are paid very little, and feel they have to spend some time supplementing their income. No doubt Puey feels that if the Governor of the Bank of Thailand gives up his position to teach full-time it will have an effect in two different directions. It will help stimulate the morale of university teachers and encourage them to give as much time as they can possibly afford to their university work. Yet it is perhaps even more important that it will stimulate new attitudes towards university teaching among those who have good reason to respect the importance of Puey's work. Senior civil servants and businessmen may manage to despise Thai university teachers; but most of them know from practical experience the influence Puey has exerted. The shadier ones may not like him, but none of them can despise him.

Since his first attempt to leave the Bank Puey's influence among Thai intellectuals has greatly increased. Many of the keen young academics, even in fields far from his own, now look to him for leadership and inspiration. This is not only because of the distinction that he has brought to the academic profession. In spite of his great responsibilities he has found time to produce important scholarly work in the Thai language: among others, a book on public finance and a half-share in the best individual text on the

economy of Thailand. Yet there is another reason for his standing among intellectuals beyond his own field. For this surprising man is also a literary artist, not only in prose but in verse.

I do not know whether he has published any serious poetry; if he has, I have not seen it, but for me it is a hard struggle to read Thai poetry and I have very little idea what is available. I know that two of his speeches to the Thai Bankers' Association were made entirely in verse—elegant, graceful verse with plenty of wit and verbal playfulness, clearly the work of a man who is at home in the medium. His recent vivid and effective account of his wartime experiences quotes some verse that he wrote when, with a group of other young Thais, he was undergoing preliminary training in the British army; so that he must have been writing verse for over twenty years.

Once I congratulated him on the fact that he had produced these speeches in verse, and wondered whether he was the only Central Bank Governor in the world who would either think of doing such a thing or have the talent to do it. He smiled his charming deprecatory smile. I thought once again how difficult it was to remember, when talking to him, the achievements of this diffident man. For not merely is he modest to a fault; he is not in any way physically distinguished. He is of average height for a Thai, a little bald, with nothing except his smile that is easy to remember. Looking more carefully one notices the uniformly quick movements, invariably smooth and unrushed, that must contribute something to the vast amount of work he gets through, and the air of kindly authority that seems natural to him in talking to any subordinate. Yet even these things convey little of the power of his personality.

He ignored the element of congratulation in my question, choosing to treat it as mere curiosity about why he should have taken the trouble to write in verse instead of in prose. It would not, he said, have been worth the time if he had not had a good many critical things to say about the government, which the new

Prime Minister might find hard to take. He was a good man—they all began this job with good intentions—and the main thing was to point out what needed to be done. It would be much easier for the Prime Minister if it was said lightly, in verse.

How many men are there, in present-day politics, who could cite—with complete candour—such civilised 'reasons of state' and implement them with such felicity? The courage to join a foreign army for his country's good, to face charges of treachery and risk torture, alone; the strength to resign, privately and on grounds of principle, an important post, on the threshold of his career; the grace, even in this crisis, and in later crises, to seek the good in his adversary and not to vilify; the ability to administer a great and powerful institution, combined with the humanity to care deeply about the moral development of an individual student; and, with all this, the capacity to clothe his thoughts in vivid and distinguished prose or in graceful, felicitous verse: these are the qualities that make Puey an inspiration to many young professional Thais. These are the qualities which make me, personally, richer for having known him.