

Professor Ishii Yoneo and His Achievements

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On 12 February 2010, Professor Ishii Yoneo 石井米雄 followed in the footsteps of his wife Hiroko 弘子, who had passed away ten months earlier. As a former student who enjoyed Professor Ishii's affection for thirty-four years, I was and still am overcome with unbearable grief.

Ishii was a most outstanding leader in the realm of cultural administration and held many important administrative posts. Even if we confine ourselves just to institutions which he headed, we find that he was director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University (1985–1990), director of the Centre for East-Asian Cultural Studies for UNESCO (1991–2003), director of the Institute of Asian Cultures at Sophia University (1993–1997), president of Kanda University of International Studies (1997–2004), director general of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records, National Archives of Japan (2001–2010), and president of the Inter-University Research Institute Corporations, National Institutes for the Humanities (2004–2008). In addition, he was for many years an advisor to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the Japan Foundation and also had close connections with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Imperial Household Agency. One has the feeling that Asian area studies in Japan truly revolved around Ishii. He was also a collector of medals, being awarded the Blue Ribbon Medal (1995), the Order of the Sacred Treasure with Gold and Silver Star (2008), and Cultural Order Award (2000), but almost all of his decorations were awarded to him in his capacity as a research administrator. It is likely that in the future his name will be remembered in journalistic and government circles only as an outstanding administrator. This is truly regrettable, for Ishii was above all a scholar, and none of his other prominent and important posts represented his true person.

The path taken by Ishii's scholarship has already been described in detail in his autobiography, *A Path Will Open* (2003). His scholarship during his twenties could be said to have taken a course that went from European-style scholarship of a universal orientation in the form of linguis-

tics to a discipline of wonderful discrete knowledge in the form of Thai studies. He acquired in rapid succession various skills necessary for entering Thailand. His forte was the Thai language, especially the language spoken in the royal court, which ordinary Thais are unable to speak. He undertook a grand tour, travelling all over Thailand, and this was crowned by his experiences as the first Japanese researcher to become an ordained monk in Thailand. For Ishii, a purist of the European style of scholarship steeped to the core in the Cartesian logic of linguistics, this represented a struggle with a Thai world which, despite his best efforts, he found himself unable to enter.

Therefore, while possessing the experience of having lived for seven years in Thailand, which was exceptional for a Japanese at the time, Ishii set out on the scholarly life of a university academic as an out-and-out textual scholar. When he took up the position of associate professor at Kyoto University in the 1960s, he ignored the demands of those around him and began a series of textual analyses of Thai texts. Today any researcher involved with Southeast Asia knows of the books for the dead (*nangsu chaek*) and royal chronicles (*phongsawadan*) that provide the basis for any study of Thai history, yet these were introduced to Japanese for the first time by Ishii when he was still in his early thirties (“Literature in the Thai Language (1): *Nangsu Chaek nai kan Kusun*” [1964]; “Literature in the Thai Language (2): *Phraratcha Phongsawadan Krung Kao*” [1964]; “Literature in the Thai Language (3): *Phraratcha Phongsawadan Krung Ratanakosin*” [1965]; “Literature in the Thai Language (4): Regional *Phongsawadan*” [1965]; these have all been reprinted in *An Introduction to the Study of Early Modern Thai History* [1999]). While it seems unbelievable today, until the 1970s there existed in Southeast Asian studies in Japan a sense that it was not necessary to know any local languages. All that was needed was a knowledge of Western languages, and Asian languages were no more than extras, the languages of everyday life. It was not known that there existed histories and academic works written in local languages. Southeast Asian studies in Japan reached a world-class standard with these textual analyses and overviews by Ishii of works written in the local language. This raised Thai studies, which had been a form of Thai watching, to the level of an academic discipline.

In the course of this research, Ishii discovered the value of the Law of the Three Seals (*Kotmai tra Sam Duang*), the traditional legal code of the Ayutthaya and Ratanakosin dynasties (“Introductory Remarks on the Law of Three Seals” [1969]; “A Note on the Law of the Three Seals” [1983]).

As a result, he awoke to the importance of premodern history.

Generally, when the humanities are discussed in terms of utility or market value, the discussion turns into the utterly shallow argument that, in the case of history, all that is needed is modern and contemporary history. A considerable body of research on modern and contemporary Thai history had in fact been accumulated primarily in the United States. But the diplomat Ishii deliberately turned to the study of premodern history. He once remarked that there was something a little vulgar about the study of modern and contemporary history. “Useful area studies,” in which the majority of Southeast Asianists were engaged at the time, seem to have come across to Ishii as something quite vulgar. I adore this sense of his. He was to tirelessly continue his study of the Law of the Three Seals until his final years (“The Structure of a Thai Text of Phrathammasat in *The Law of the Three Seals* of A.D. 1805” [1987]; “Structure of the Thai Laws of Three Seals of 1805” [1987]).

Until then, about all that was known in Japan about premodern Thai history was the history of successive dynasties as delineated in English books, and it could certainly not stand up to the criticism of modern historiography. Ishii published a succession of evidentialist studies based on rigorous textual criticism of Thai sources. As a result of these studies, the preconceptions of Western travellers and researchers since the nineteenth century, according to whom premodern Thai society had been an irrational autocratic society, were undermined. Not having been brainwashed by postwar historical studies, Ishii was totally opposed to analyzing Asia through Western eyes and by means of Western historical concepts, epitomized by the historical materialism that was in its heyday at the time. He refuted the notion of Thai slaves (“The Dissolution of the System of Unfree Labour in Thailand” [1966]; “Some Remarks on Slavery in Thailand” [1967]; “An Introductory Note on the Thai Corvée System Appearing in *Kotmai tra Sam Duang*” [1968]), and demonstrated that there had existed four modes of rule in the Ayutthayan dynasty’s rule over its territory (“Three Texts in the Law of Three Seals Showing the Territories of the Ayutthayan Dynasty” [1968]).

Ishii’s research into premodern history, which had begun with the Law of the Three Seals, gradually developed into a complete revision of the concept of Southeast Asian history. Until then, accounts of premodern Southeast Asian history had consisted of only art historical descriptions based on historical sites and remains or histories of regal authority as recorded in inscriptions and chronicles. Only some scant Chinese

sources hinted at the existence of the history of an East-West trade. An overwhelming dearth of written sources prevented any analyses of socio-economic history or social history. The study of Southeast Asian history trailed far behind Chinese history and European history.

Ishii began first of all to reconstruct Southeast Asian history through the textual analysis of extant sources in local languages. Next, he shifted the focus of his interest to Southeast Asia in terms of environmental history, an approach that has yet to be tried out in any other areas. This was of course initially prompted by his experiences while travelling through Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam together with a team headed by Umesao Tadao 梅棹忠夫, who was interested in the ecology of forests, when he was still living in Thailand. Ishii's idea of situating humans within the natural environment, which he gained from this experience, developed substantially at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University through his coming into contact with front-line scholars such as the soil scientist Kyūma Kazutake 九馬一剛, the geologist Takaya Yoshikazu 高谷好一, the hydrologist Kaida Yoshihiro 海田能宏, and the agriculturalist Fukui Hayao 福井捷朗.

Ishii's first attempt to place history in the context of the natural environment was published in 1975 ("History and Rice Cultivation"), and the two types of development that he proposed for rice-growing societies—agricultural adaptation and industrial adaptation—demolished K. A. Wittfogel's thesis concerning hydraulic power and autocracy, which had until then held decisive sway in the study of Asian history. Ishii was a great demolisher of postwar historiography.

Ishii wrote very few introductory works of an educative character, and he did not write a single book for any paperback series, which are much in vogue. This was probably related to his aesthetic sense of what was "vulgar," alluded to earlier. But the introductory section of one of his few books for the lay reader (*The World of Indochinese Civilization* [1977]) is a singularly fine piece of writing that paints a vivid picture of Southeast Asia's environment and history. When I was in my twenties and continuing with my studies at a time when it was virtually impossible to see Southeast Asia with one's own eyes, this book was a bible for those interested in its natural environment. Towards the end of the 1970s, the Symposium on the Exploitation of the Jiangnan Delta was held at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, with its proceedings being later published in book form (*Chūgoku Kōnan no inasaku bunka* 中國江南の稲作文化 [The rice-growing culture of Jiangnan in China], Tokyo: Nihon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai 日本

放送出版協會, 1984). This was an ambitious undertaking which impressed upon Sinologists the need to rewrite history from the vantage point of the agricultural environment. This conference took shape under the overall leadership of Ishii and Tsubouchi Yoshihiro 坪内良博 (then associate professor).

But even so, during the 1970s Ishii was still known primarily for his work on Thailand. Even his classic *The World of Indochinese Civilization* was, apart from the introductory section, nothing more than a patchwork of histories of individual countries centred on the history of Thailand. Ishii subsequently paired up with me and continued efforts to delineate Southeast Asia as a single integrated world (*The Formation of the World of Southeast Asia* [1985]; *A New History of Countries around the World: Southeast Asian History—Continental Southeast Asia* [1999]). In these books Southeast Asia was topographically divided into coastal areas, deltas, mountainous regions, plains, and so on, with languages and peoples being assigned to each of these topographical divisions. State dominions were reduced to nothing more than one element in regional formation. Ishii created a completely new way of depicting the regional history of Southeast Asia and transformed Southeast Asian history into something that could withstand scientific scrutiny. He was the first person in the world to delineate the history of “Southeast Asia.”

As was noted earlier, Ishii deliberately separated the life that he had experienced in Thailand as a young man from his research into Thailand as a scholar at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. This was a mode of scholarly praxis typical of him, and it was for this very reason that the fruits of his research were accepted into existing disciplines without meeting any substantial resistance and received a reasonable degree of recognition. But this was not enough to satisfy Ishii, who had understood Thailand through his own contact with the real Thailand.

At an early stage he had already written an outstanding introduction to and exposition of Theravāda Buddhism (*Salvation through Precepts* [1969]; repr. *An Introduction to Thai Buddhism* [1991]), which was at the time known in Japan as Hīnayāna Buddhism, being dismissed as an unsophisticated form of Buddhism predating the Mahāyāna, and was largely unstudied. He was still only forty when he wrote this book, but while writing it, he realized that he “understood” Thai Buddhism. This book represented an attempt to give expression through the written word to the structure of Thai religion as he had understood it through his experiences of Thai society, especially his experiences as the first Japanese to have become a monk in

Thailand. He never talked directly about Buddhism as he himself had experienced it, and we were apprised in writing of his experiences as a monk only many years later in his autobiography (*A Path Will Open* [2003]). He was embarrassed to describe his raw experiences without passing them through the filter of scholarship, that is, without critiquing them. But the above book is an introduction to Theravāda Buddhism that could not have been written by anyone without actual experience of it and far surpasses any doctrinal study. In this book he makes a passing remark upon which Buddhist studies in Japan would frown: “Our aim is to apprise ourselves of what Buddhism represents in the lives of the people and not to test whether their understanding of Buddhism is correct” (repr., p. 106). There was evolving within Ishii the discipline of area studies, which uses local experience and observation as its main methods and has as its objective an understanding of a region as it is.

Six years later, in 1975, he brought out *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in History* (repr. 2003; English translation published in 1986). This was his first work in which he analyzed the relationship between Thai Buddhism and the modern Thai state not in an introductory book, but as a scholarly undertaking. It is divided into three parts. In Part 1 (“The Sangha and Society”), it is described how society in Theravāda Buddhism is underpinned by the monastic order, or Sangha, and the laity, which views the Sangha as a “field of merit” (*nā-bun*) and gives alms to it. The king is the representative of the laity, and the state is responsible for maintaining the organization of the Sangha and has the authority to control its orderliness.

Part 2 (“Sangha, State, and Society”) examines the historical process whereby this Theravāda society was established. The structure of kingship acting as the defender of the Buddhist order was established already when Theravāda Buddhism was introduced in the thirteenth century. During the reign of Rāma I of the Ratanakosin dynasty, kingship and the state increased their patronage of the Sangha by constructing large monasteries, making enormous donations, and convening a council for the preservation of the Buddhist canon, and at the same time discipline within the Sangha was enforced by Sangha Acts. Control of the Sangha by the modern secular state was determined by the Sangha Act of 1902 during the reign of Rāma V. As a result of this act, the affiliation of monks to the Sangha was clarified and its bureaucratic and regional organization was established. It was also made obligatory for monks to observe national laws, and monks had to sit an ecclesiastical examination (*nak*

tham) prescribed by the Sangha. Ishii refers to this as the “ecclesiazation” of the Sangha. Under the Sangha Act of 1941, which followed the coup d’état of 1932, the organization of the Sangha was modelled on that of a modern state and was transformed into a “democratic” system with an ecclesiastical cabinet, an ecclesiastical assembly, and ecclesiastical courts under a supreme patriarch (*sangkharāt*) appointed by the king. But this ended up intensifying the dispute between two sects within the Sangha, which resulted in the intervention of the cabinet of Sarit Thanarat, and a new Sangha Act came into effect in 1962. Under this new act, all authority over the Sangha was concentrated in the person of the supreme patriarch, who was chosen and could also be dismissed by the king. The Thai ecclesia is founded on the overwhelming ascendancy of the secular authorities. According to Ishii, there was at this time a perception that the democratic principles of control enshrined in the earlier Sangha Act of 1942 were essentially unsuitable for managing the Sangha. This difference is closely related to the fact that the earlier act was drawn up by Phibun Songkhram and the new act by Sarit. Through his association with Phibun’s family and his friendship with Sarit, Ishii had a strong image of Phibun as a republican and Sarit as a dictator, and this image is quite pronounced in his treatment of these two acts. This Sangha under the powerful control of the state is liberating for people in traditional society and is the source of “primordial sentiments” in many regional societies. In this fashion, there evolved a structure for control of the people by a state that had recognized Buddhism as the ecclesia.

In his introduction to the new edition of this book, Ishii writes that he deliberately excluded non-Buddhist religions, adding that the study of praxis-oriented Buddhism has been advanced by Tanabe Shigeharu 田邊繁治, Hayashi Yukio 林行夫, and others who have followed directly in his footsteps. In addition, Nishii Ryōko 西井涼子 and Itō Tomomi 伊藤友美 have been pursuing research into Thailand’s non-Buddhist world and monks active in new forms of Buddhism. Today, Thailand’s varied and bountiful religious world, which cannot be described solely in terms of the Sangha, is being opened up by Ishii’s successors, who have become a veritable mountain range. *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in History* brought the curtain down on the first act of Ishii’s research, which had lasted twenty-two years since he had first begun studying the Thai language in 1953.

The second act of his research can be broadly divided into research on Rāma IV and research on the Ayutthaya period. Ishii was the founder

of area studies and an irreplaceable mentor for younger colleagues in this field. But from his late forties, rather than working as a Southeast Asianist, he became an indispensable person for research administration in central government agencies. It became impossible for him to conduct research in the field of area studies, which is premised on long-term fieldwork. For the publication of his next serious academic work we were in fact kept waiting twenty-five years, until 1999, when *An Introduction to the Study of Early Modern Thai History* was published. Many of the articles included in this volume were written in the 1980s and 1990s, when the majority of his countless trips to Thailand were confined to short visits for the purpose of attending conferences or discharging his administrative duties. In spite of being the founder of area studies, he was not granted the opportunity to engage in long-term fieldwork, and he was compelled to return to his study.

In the preface to *An Introduction to the Study of Early Modern Thai History*, Ishii expresses misgivings about the fact that research on Thai history has in recent years been concentrating on modern history since the reign of Rāma V. But that is hardly surprising, for when compared with the study of modern and contemporary history, research in premodern history requires diverse skills, in particular competence in many different languages. In order to study the late Ayutthaya period, which coincided with the heyday of the Age of Commerce, one needs a grounding in Dutch, French, English, and Japanese in addition to Thai, and one also needs to be able to read Chinese sources, which provide information about Thailand throughout the course of its history. It is simple to criticize Orientalism, but the conditions that must be met by an Orientalist are quite demanding. Ishii was about the only scholar in the world to satisfy these requirements. Even in Japan, where conditions are the most favourable for getting practical training in many different languages, there is almost no one to carry on Ishii's work. Therefore, he bore a global responsibility for Ayutthayan history.

This book also aimed to present a new history of Thailand, namely, "Ishii's Thai history." First, it involved an analysis of the Law of the Three Seals, which he had been continuing to study since the 1960s, as noted earlier. Secondly, it meant re-addressing in the 1980s the content of the trade of the late Ayutthaya period in its capacity as a mercantile state. In 1988, Ishii's close friend Anthony Reid published *The Age of Commerce*, and Ishii's rediscovery of Ayutthaya as a mercantile state was a response to this new concept. He brought together all available materials from all

relevant countries regarding the quality and quantity of maritime trade, taxes, the commercial and port bureaucracies, taxation affairs, and the multiethnicity of society, centring around Ayutthaya's geopolitics and the royal family's monopolistic system of trade, and he also presented examples of the port-polity, which had existed as a concept while its realities had remained vague ("Ayutthaya as a Port-polity: On Mercantile States in Medieval Southeast Asia" [1992]; "Notes on the *Phra Khlang* or the Central Organ of the Ayutthayan Port-polity in the Fifteenth Century" [1992]; "A Note on Thai Ceramic Exports to Japan" [1995]). A comprehensive understanding of a region which is not bound to any particular fields is the most important requisite for area studies. Ishii opened up a field that might be called "historical area studies" by building up a comprehensive picture of Ayutthaya through an analysis of all manner of source materials.

Thirdly, he rectified the unilinear view of Thai history formulated by Prince Damrong and Georges Coedès. According to this unilinear view of Thai history, the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Ratanakosin dynasties arose one after another in a linear fashion and created today's kingdom of Thailand. In Ishii's view of Thai history, the continuity between the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya dynasties was negated on the basis of his full use of multilingual materials ("Sien, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya: An Interpretation of the Sukhothayan Inscription No. 11" [1995]), while Ayutthaya was divided into early and late periods, with the reign of King Naresuan marking the turning point, and it was argued that the state structure of the two periods differed ("A Note on the Name of the Capital of the Ayutthayan Dynasty in Siam" [1997]).

At the same time, Ishii carried out research on the Ratanakosin dynasty, in particular the reign of Rāma IV rather than the period since the Chakri Reform, on which research had been concentrating since David Wyatt's work. His interest in Rāma IV was based above all on an empathy with the fact that he was Thailand's first "modern" intellectual, and in his later years Ishii's research focused on Rāma IV's conversations with Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, who was a source of information for Rāma IV, his adversary in philosophical arguments about modern Europe, and above all a friend from across the sea who was probably bound to him at the very depths of his soul. Unfortunately Ishii was in the process of revising his manuscript, and we have yet to gain access to this tale of Rāma IV, entitled *The King and Another I*.

Ishii probably had in mind a rewriting of Thai history. I recall that al-

ready when Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) appeared, he murmured, "Perhaps I'll have to write it after all."

In *An Introduction to the Study of Early Modern Thai History* Ishii mentioned only that he was "aiming at the formulation of a new history of Thailand," and its content was not necessarily made explicit. Judging from various unpublished writings, it was not a history of the Siamese people and the Siamese state, or a history centred on Ayutthaya and Bangkok, as typified by the official view of Thailand's history. It would have been a history of the people and land of Thailand that encompassed not only the history of Thailand's regional cities and ethnic minorities, but also the history of Thai people living outside the borders of Thailand in places such as Sipsongpanna and the Shan Highlands, and it would have been a comprehensive study incorporating the research findings of many different disciplines and a history covering the period from the appearance of Sukhothayan Inscription No. 1 in the thirteenth century down to the upheavals of present-day Bangkok.

What is more, none of this would have been the indulgences of an amateur historian. The last essay written by Ishii was probably "Thailand's Tricolour Flag (*thong trairong*)," published in April 2009. In this essay, he analyzed the establishment of the notion of "nation, religion, and monarchy," the paradigm for the structure of Thailand's politics and culture, from Vajiravudh (Rāma VI) to Sarit, and argued that it was not something absolute, but had been created by statesmen in the course of modern history. Present-day Thailand is a historical entity. This is the conclusion to be drawn from the historical investigations to which Ishii devoted his life.

Sadly, the time for the writing of the voluminous "Ishii's Thai history" was already slipping away. If Providence had granted him a little more time on earth, and if government officials had shown him some consideration, then we would have been able to read his *History of Thailand*. It is most regrettable that we are unable to do so.

Ishii's life, spanning eighty years, was spent in research on South-east Asian area studies, administration, and teaching. What I have so far touched on the least is his work in the area of education. Since he taught on a regular basis for only a few years at Sophia University, most of his pupils formed a relationship with him through personal connections. But even so, several dozen of them always gathered at the celebrations held in honour of his sixtieth, seventieth, and eightieth birthdays. He was always

considerate towards younger people, regardless of their university, age or speciality, treating them with evenhanded and avuncular affection, and young people who had received his tutelage all described themselves as pupils of Ishii Yoneo and took pride in doing so. The majority of them are now leaders at the forefront of Southeast Asian area studies. It should not be forgotten that Ishii built up the grand massif of Southeast Asian studies.

I join my hands in gratitude for Professor Ishii's life.

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