

Sam Yan Press and publishing as activism in Thailand

Monday 19 June 2023, by [PROMMONGKOL Jeerapat](#), [TEERATANABODEE Wichuta](#) (Date first published: 15 June 2023).

Student activists who energised pro-democracy protests are busily translating and disseminating anti-authoritarian books.

A room in Bangkok no larger than 15m² with three large tables, four bookshelves, and a few stacks of paper and documents is the one and only office space of Sam Yan Press. At the entrance, visitors to the press are greeted by a plain paper-printed nameplate and a large portrait of a legendary civil rights activist Martin Luther King. Like no other press in the country, Sam Yan Press is an independent publishing house, fully operated by university students and committed to “[writing and translating](#) as ways to protect and promote democracy in Thailand”.

Sam Yan Press was established in 2017 by Netiwit Chotiphathaisal, a youth activist and political science student at Chulalongkorn University, one of Thailand’s most prestigious higher education institutions. Netiwit has taken part in social and political activism at least since 2012 when he and his friends [formed](#) the Thailand Educational Revolution Alliance, a Facebook-based campaign calling for an end to the “mechanistic” education system in Thailand. At the university, he served as the President of the Chulalongkorn University Student Council in the academic year 2020–2021.

Having had a passion for reading and writing since he was young, the idea of establishing a publishing house was almost natural to Netiwit. To date, the press has published 48 titles, 38 of which are translated books and 10 are original monographs. Most books are exclusively in Thai, except the “Letter to Dr Husak”, which was also printed in Lao. The team concludes every book with an epilogue of acknowledgement and background, detailing the reasons behind title selection, some journeys of the publication process, and how it brought them to new opportunities and friendships within and across Thailand’s borders.

Sam Yan Press is managed by a team of 2 to 5 core committee members, with over 30 student contributors lending their hands for editorial, translating, and other administrative work. As university students, the founding team had the intention to keep the platform operated entirely by students and fresh graduates as a way to in turn empower young activists. Through this independent press, they see themselves as democracy activists “[writing and translating](#) as ways to protect and promote democracy in Thailand” by spreading [progressive ideas](#) related to politics, democracy, and activism in Thai society.

Books as activism

Sam Yan Press works with an extensive list of topics. Some [examples](#) from its webpage include animal rights, the [Milk Tea Alliance](#) and Chinese dissidents, engaged Buddhism, education, and feminism. As the press committee embraces the diversity of thought, the titles of the books chosen for translation are based on the contributors’ interests. While Sam Yan Press has primarily published translated books, students’ original pieces are also encouraged. Netiwit mentioned that he intended

for these monographs to ignite a [democratic spirit](#) in society.

In other words, the titles of books translated by Sam Yan Press reflect what the committee members deemed significant for the cultivation of democracy and progressive ideas in Thailand. These include several key texts from various fields of philosophy and political theory, such as Isaiah Berlin's [Two Concepts of Liberty](#), Hannah Arendt's [Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship](#), and Judith Butler's [The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind](#). Netiwit also shared that the team is currently working on the translation of James C. Scott's *Two Cheers for Anarchism*.

Apart from theoretical pieces, the press has also printed a considerable number of books capturing stories of the struggles for freedom, human rights, and democracy from around the world, including the translation of speeches and written pieces of [Liu Xiaobo](#) and [Martin Luther King](#). These books help remind the students behind Sam Yan Press, most of whom were engaged in activism in Thailand, notably the 2020-2021 pro-democracy movements, that they were not alone in their struggles.

Considering Thailand's highly contentious political atmosphere, particularly since the 2014 coup, Sam Yan Press's approach can be seen as a more strategically subtle way to promote democracy. Under military rule from 2014 to 2019, several restrictions on street gatherings were imposed, coupled with intimidation of activists through the weaponisation of laws. The waves of the youth-led pro-democracy protests in the aftermath of the 2019 general elections were also contained by the military-backed government through various means, including the [COVID-19 emergency decree](#) restricting freedom of assembly, the enforcement of the [lèse majesté law](#), and the authorities' [violent crackdown](#).

It was this political atmosphere that partially inspired the idea of Sam Yan Press—to avoid physical, direct, and violent confrontations with the authoritarians. Instead, through books, they work on the ideological and intellectual realm to strengthen ideas, restore hope, and gain more supporters in society.

Furthermore, the publisher can also help empower those who are passionate about politics and societal changes. Some contributors to the press came from a circle of student activists in Thailand, as the recruitment to the press is primarily through word of mouth. Thus, after having been suppressed and facing hurdles in rallies for years, Sam Yan Press offers them another artful, alternative way of raising awareness and expressing their thoughts.

The Sam Yan community

It was no coincidence that the publisher was named Sam Yan, as beyond academic literature and books related to democracy, people behind the publishing house have also engaged with and advocated for issues within the Sam Yan and Chulalongkorn community. The connection runs deeper than just the shared name.

Sam Yan, a district in Bangkok, is home to several historical and cultural landmarks, such as Wat Hua Lamphong (The Hua Lamphong Temple), believed to be built in the early Rama reign, a snake farm at the Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute, and hundreds of old local restaurants. It is also where Thailand's first university, Chulalongkorn University—the home institution of most Sam Yan Press team members—is located. For generations, this space has been shared between students, faculties, and other employees of the university and the locals, whose histories, memories, and livelihoods have become interconnected and interdependent.

The Sam Yan Press team expressed their fond connection to the locality through books, such as [Dear](#)

[You... at Political Science: The Life of a Commoner Behind the Curtain](#). The book features stories of Aunty Tew, a janitor who has worked at the Chulalongkorn Faculty of Political Science for nearly 70 years. She is a familiar face to everyone in the faculty, and her life is almost inextricable to the history of the university. The book, in a way, presents an alternative narrative of the institutional and community history through a recollection of a janitor's memories, one that is "[no less memorable](#) than any other dominant narratives". The team has also given eighty per cent of the revenue generated from selling this book back to Aunty Tew to support her living costs.

Another matter that the people behind the press have been heavily involved in, although yet to publish any book about, is the [gentrification of Chulalongkorn University](#). For years, the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) has pressured many building renters and vendors to cede their space through [rent increases](#) and contract terminations for newer, more expensive, and more glamorous premises such as shopping malls—a behaviour that Netiwit and Sitthikarn Theerawatanachai [deemed](#) "greedy" and "capitalistic".

When entering the Sam Yan Press office space, one's attention would quickly be caught by a big bookshelf overloaded with hundreds of books in Thai and English, which members of the press used as references or a source of inspiration. On the shelf, there was also a photo of a red shrine and a statue within it. It is a photo of the original Chao Mae Tubtim Shrine, a Chinese shrine in the Sam Yan area that was also affected by PMCU's development projects. With a history that can be traced to the reign of King Rama V, the shrine is a significant piece of evidence in the legacy of Sino-Thai relations and Chinese diasporas in Thailand. It is also the centre of faith for many Sam Yan residents.

In 2020, the university's gentrification, particularly of the shrine, sparked a series of [protests](#) led by the people of Sam Yan, including Chulalongkorn University students, some of whom are key members of the publishing house. In the end the shrine was, according to PMCU, "relocated", which referred to the destruction of the original site, along with antique sculptural patterns and original sensation of the architecture, and the construction of a [new shrine](#) at the CU (Chulalongkorn University) Centenary Park. Since the caretaker of the original shrine [insisted](#) that she would not transfer any artefacts into the newly constructed premise, the novel modern-looking shrine with [stickers pasted on the door](#) and typographical errors of some Chinese characters thus replicated nothing from the original shrine but the name.

Sam Yan Press team's attempt to tell stories of the locality through their work and battle against the PMCU illuminate that their interest is not confined to theoretical work or issues that caught mass media attention. Instead, they shed light on the lives and struggles of ordinary people who face injustice in society, particularly those around the university area—a home of their intellectual cultivation. This focus on a smaller scale has also allowed them to make visible changes and contribute to the quality of life of people within their community.

Beyond Thailand

Beyond domestic matters, Sam Yan Press has also published multiple books related to China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Examples include a translated version of Anna Marie Brady's [Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping](#), Jeffrey Wasserstrom's [Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink](#), and Hsueh Hua-yuan et al.'s [Taiwan is Not Chinese!: A History of Taiwan Nationality](#). With the team members' strong passion for democracy, justice, and human rights, it is not surprising that several selected books are critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its domestic and foreign policies. Furthermore, some leaders of the press, notably Netiwit, are comrades and admirers of key activists in Hong Kong who led a series of pro-democracy protests in 2014 and 2019.

In October 2016, following his [visit](#) to Hong Kong in the summer of that year, Netiwit, then serving as the President of the Student Council at Chulalongkorn University, invited Joshua Wong, one of the protest leaders in Hong Kong's 2014 movements, to Bangkok. Wong was to deliver a talk titled "The New Generations' Politics" as part of an event [memorialising of the 1976 Thammasat Massacre](#). However, as soon as he landed in Thailand, Wong was detained for 12 hours and subsequently deported without a chance to leave the airport.

In 2017, when Wong was imprisoned, Netiwit and his colleagues published a book titled [Time Is On Our Side: A Book for Joshua Wong's 21st Birthday](#). The book gathers a collection of speeches and essays on human rights and justice, including Liu Xiaobo's renowned June second hunger strike declaration and Joshua Wong's interview statements conducted by Netiwit. When asked about the inspiration behind the book, Netiwit explained that "I have had several arrest warrants before, and I was just thinking that if I had to be in jail on my birthday, I'd be very sad". This token of support to Wong meaningfully became Sam Yan Press' [first book](#).

Their work regarding China and its policies has caught some attention in Beijing. In May 2022, Sam Yan Press disclosed that it was approached by a Chinese businessman who was "[keen](#) to make good relations with the Chinese government". The businessman—"likely to be associated with the CCP", offered 2 million baht in cash (approximately US\$600,000) in exchange for the team to shut down the press and provide him with an official certificate of dissolution.

In a statement expressing their determination to continue "[protecting and promoting](#) freedom of expression", Sam Yan Press committee members say they rejected the offer. This message was warmly received by the Hong Kong Democracy Council, who would "[stand in solidarity](#)" with the publisher.

Intellectual activism and paths forward

Netiwit, describing himself as an introvert and bookworm, said he prefers activism through writing and translating. Together with several others who share these preferences, they use the publishing house as their platform to [protect and promote](#) democracy. Their activities might be quiet in practice, but they are loud in readers' minds. In a way, it is activism at the intellectual level.

Fighting for democracy at the intellectual level is not at all a novel repertoire of student activism around the world, including in Thailand. However, since the series of colour-coded protests in the 2000s and early 2010s, street politics characterised by mass movements, charismatic leaders, and performative acts, such as powerful speeches on the stage, have dominated the scene of contentious politics in Thailand.

Although political rallies might be crucial to catch mass attention at times, the battle of ideology between conservatives and those who seek change is also essential for the success of movements. This approach was also advocated by Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, a former Secretary-General of the dissolved Future Forward Party, citing Antonio Gramsci's view that the "war of movement" does [not suffice](#) in making changes. Instead, we have to aim for changing people's minds through "the war of position", explained Piyabutr.

Therefore, what Sam Yan Press shows us is not only the will of university students to fight for democracy but also a revival of activism through intellectual battles in Thailand. Instead of putting an entire fully grown plant into the soil and risk being destroyed right away, students behind the press are planting and watering the seeds of democratic and progressive ideologies in the hope that one day they will thrive independently and strongly. Furthermore, by publishing books related to the fight for democracy from abroad, the press is also sharing with its readers all lessons that can be

learned. Among others, it is a heartening reminder that they are not alone.

The publisher has grown rapidly since its establishment, especially during the 2020-2021 pro-democracy demonstrations. As Sam Yan Press' objectives soundly resonated with various movement's agendas, its democracy-related books attracted a larger pool of readers during that time. The team also handed out free copies of their books a few times at the protests. Netiwit shared that the team will continue strengthening their foundation in the next few years to ensure that Sam Yan Press can grow sustainably through generations of students. He also hopes that the press will be the source of inspiration and empowerment for students from other Thai universities who are fighting for their beliefs, freedom, and justice.

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