

ICWA LETTERS

MZW-10
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Democracy Day vs. APEC

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

JANUARY, 2004

BANGKOK, Thailand—On October 20, 2003, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's guests were all seated for a state dinner during the 25th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit: U.S. President George W. Bush; China's President Hu Jintao; Russia's President Valdimir Putin; Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi; and 16 other world leaders. Forks slipped into meals that had been tested on mice to ensure against poison, and a children's chorus (slightly off-key) broke into "Getting to Know You."

"Getting to Know You"?

The song was most likely intended as a lighthearted Thai elaboration on the summit's theme of unity in diversity, but Rogers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, a fictionalized story about the relationship between Siam's King Mongkut and an English governess, is banned in Thailand as an affront to the monarchy. Plainly, the conflict was between royal sensitivity and promotion — and promotion won. The summit had been stage-managed to the last detail as a public-relations event designed to exploit Thailand's moment in the global-media spotlight. Thaksin went so far as to prohibit protests during APEC, and even reminded the Thai people that visiting dignitaries were guests of His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej. Yet, somehow, a song from the forbidden musical had been chosen to entertain APEC leaders.

As it happened, preparations for the APEC extravaganza coincided with the commemoration of Thailand's 14 October 1973 pro-democracy uprising, highlighting a conspicuous contrast between Thailand's political past and present. On one hand there was the somber commemoration of Thailand's struggle for popular



Photographs of the victims of the 14 October uprising on display at the "14 October" Monument on the 30th anniversary of the event.



The Nation, October 10, 2003

democracy. On the other hand was the glitzy APEC meeting, the success of which was portrayed by the Thai government as an emblem of national pride, a symbol of Thailand's new economic vitality, and a kind of ceremonial endorsement by the international community of Prime Minister Thaksin as Southeast Asia's new leader.

The government's preparations for APEC were felt at some level by most Bangkok residents. At the very least, it was impossible not to notice the new flower boxes in the highway medians, the fresh paint on the government buildings and the proliferation of signs welcoming APEC delegates to Bangkok. There was also an ominous aspect to the preparations, as the government pursued sometimes heavy-handed efforts to present a fairytale image of the Kingdom to visiting leaders. A campaign to cleanse Bangkok of the homeless, for example, and Thaksin's demand that there be no public demonstrations during APEC generated a certain dissonance with the commemoration of 14 October, the first great clash between a pro-democracy movement and the autocratic military rule that once dominated Thai politics.

Democracy Day

Before the mass protests of Indonesia's reform movement brought an end to Suharto's 32-year authoritarian rule in 1998, before China's ill-starred democracy movement was crushed in Tiananmen Square in 1989, before the Burmese army killed thousands of protestors demanding democracy in Burma in 1988, before "People Power" forced Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos into exile in 1986, a student-led protest movement succeeded in toppling a military dictatorship in Thailand. Although the 14 October uprising is not well known outside Thailand, it was an important event, not only for Thailand, but for the region. It was the first time that a popular pro-democracy movement

in Southeast Asia had overcome military despotism.

In 1973, frustration with Thailand's military regime, headed by Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn, his son, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, and Field Marshal Praphat Charusathien, came to a head. A Thai student movement that had been energized by the global anti-Vietnam War movement and that had cut its teeth protesting Japanese economic domination in Thailand turned its attention to domestic political change. When the regime arrested 13 student leaders for demanding a constitution and parliamentary elections, thousands of students gathered on the campus of Thammasat University to call for their release and support their demands.

On October 14, the protestors took their demands to the street, growing to more than 400,000 in number. The Thanom-Praphat-Narong regime backed down, agreeing to release the student leaders and to draft a new constitution. Before this news filtered down to the protestors, violence broke out between students and riot police in the vicinity of the Chitlada Palace, the residence of the King. The Army moved in to support the police and the violence spread. The King intervened on behalf of the student protestors and prevailed on the dictators to go into exile. Sev-



(Above) The body of Jira Boonmark, the first student killed by soldiers on 14 October 1973, surrounded by fellow protestors. (Left) Student protestors march under a banner reading "We need a Constitution," 14 October 1973.



Democracy Monument on Ratchadamnern Avenue commemorates the “1932 Revolution” that brought an end to absolute monarchy in Siam. It was built in one year and completed in 1939.

enty-seven people were killed and 857 were wounded in violence of October 14-15. It was not the last time that Thais would kill Thais on the streets of Bangkok.

In August 2003, the Thai parliament resolved to name the anniversary of the 1973 uprising *Wan 14 Tula Prachathipatai*, or “14 October Democracy Day.” The Cabinet had rejected a proposal to call the anniversary simply “Democracy Day,” fearing that it might lead people to believe that democracy in Thailand dated only from 1973. In the received, official history of Thailand, democracy was born on June 24, 1932, when young military officers and civil servants replaced the absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy in a bloodless coup. It is this event that is commemorated by the massive, nationalistic “Democracy Monument,” which sits in the middle of Ratchadamnern Avenue, Bangkok’s equivalent of the Champs-Élysées. However, the “1932 revolution” did not establish participatory democracy so much as shift power from the monarchy to the new bureaucratic and military elite. Indeed, in the 60 years between 1932 and 1992, Thailand had 17 coups and 15 constitutions and was ruled by the military more often than not. Seen in this perspective, the 14 October uprising, in which a mass movement toppled a dictatorial regime, was an important milestone in Thailand’s political development.

However, as the controversy about what to call the

anniversary suggests, the uprising has had an ambivalent place in Thai history. In a country never colonized and thus bereft of a heroic struggle for national liberation, the triumph of the 1973 student-led protests symbolizes for many Thais the popular struggle against corrupt authoritarianism and for democracy. But the memory of 14 October 1973 is complicated by its association with a later and more controversial confrontation between pro-democracy protestors and state security forces.¹ On 6 October 1976, police, paramilitary forces and right-wing vigilantes massacred students who had gathered at Thammasat University to protest Field Marshal Thanom’s return from exile. Students were shot, stabbed and lynched, and the corpses of many victims were mutilated by the attackers. At least 40 and as many as 100 people were killed; the precise number is not known. This violence offered a pretext for a military coup and brought an end to the three-year experiment with democratic rule inaugurated on 14 October 1973. The 6 October atrocities were so savage—and the perpetrators so closely linked to the Thai establishment—that there remains no place for the event in official narratives of Thai history.²

The ambivalence surrounding 14 October by virtue of its association with 6 October is reflected in the way the event is remembered. The foundation stone for a 14 October memorial was laid in 1974, but construction did not begin until 1998. The long delay reflected official un-

¹ Thongchai Winichakul, “Thai Democracy in Public Memory: Monuments and their Narratives,” 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4-8 July 1999.

² For more on the October 6 massacre, see Benedict O.G. Andersen, “Withdrawal Symptoms,” in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, London: Verso 1998, pp. 130-73, and Thongchai Winichakul, “We Do Not Forget the 6 October: The 1996 Commemoration of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok,” presented at the workshop on *Imagining the Past, Remembering the Future*, Cebu, the Philippines, March 8-10, 2001.

ease about the monument, which translated into inaction and obstruction of the project, especially after 1976 when some activists favored creating a single monument to the “October martyrs” of both the 14 and 6 October events. The 14 October monument that opened in 2001 exudes diffidence, as if the designers weren’t sure they wanted to attract attention. The centerpiece of the monument is a dark, inverted cone, shielded from Ratchadamnern Avenue by dark granite walls, trees and greenery that seem designed to deflect attention, contrasting sharply with the imposing Democracy Monument that sits a block away. The discomfort of Thai officialdom in coming to grips with 14 October is also evident in the fate of an Education Ministry project to publish a book about 14 October for use in Thai schools, which has foundered for years on differences between committee members about appropriate content.

Democracy activists welcomed Parliament’s decision to name 14 October “Democracy Day” as official recognition of the importance of the event that was long overdue. However, organizers of the 30th-anniversary commemoration of the 14 October uprising soon discovered that their preparations conflicted with plans for sprucing-up Bangkok before the APEC summit.

Two days before the thirtieth anniversary of the pro-democracy uprising, the crystal “torch” that sits atop the “14 October” Monument shattered as it was being gilded with gold leaf. The mishap was considered by some Thais



Club versus bayonet on Ratchadmanern Avenue, October 1973.

to be a bad omen and a symbol of the precarious state of democracy and civil liberties in Thailand today. If there were mischievous spirits at work, they might have been signifying that the anniversary of the 1973 uprising was doomed to be eclipsed by the APEC summit.

Bangkok governor Samak Sundaravej sparked controversy by prohibiting use of Sanam Luang, a large, tree-ringed park near the Grand Palace, for the commemoration. The controversy over Sanam Luang was emotionally charged for several reasons. Sanam Luang is a public space in a city that has few such places. It was a site of some of the bloodshed on 14 October, 6 October and “Black May” 1992, when the Thai Army killed more than 50 pro-democracy protestors. This latter violence sparked a political reform movement that led in turn to the promulgation of the so-called “People’s Constitution” in 1997. Sanam Luang is also the site of royal ceremonies and civic celebrations; when, in 1974, the King and Queen presided over cremation rites for the victims of 14 October, the ceremony was held at Sanam Luang.

Outrage at the prohibition may have been intensified by the fact that Governor Samak is an exemplar of the “dinosaur” politician, a holdover from an earlier and more authoritarian era of Thai politics. Samak has been consistently on the wrong side of Thailand’s democracy struggles. In 1973, for example, Samak was cabinet minister in the Thanom-Praphat government. In 1976, after allegedly urging violence against students gathered at





Bangkok Post, October 3, 2003

Thammasat University, Samak became Interior Minister in the new military-dominated government.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) argued that use of Sanam Luang for the 14 October commemoration interfered with preparations for APEC. Samak maintained that the grass damaged by the 14 October commemoration would not recover before the APEC delegates began to arrive in the capital. Bangkok city clerk Nathanon Thaweessin said, "Sanam Luang is having its trees trimmed, its lawn replanted and its ground resurfaced for APEC. ... Peace and order and the image of the country are very important."³

The 14 October anniversary event organizers cried foul. One critic, artist Wasan Sitthikhet, complained, "How can you compare the death of grass to the death of so many people fighting for democracy 30 years ago?"⁴ Nevertheless, the event organizers put forward proposals for a compromise, offering to decrease the length of the celebration by several days and to use only a small portion of Sanam Luang. Samak stood firm, saying the organizers could commemorate 14 October in Sanam Luang after the APEC summit.

Although Prime Minister Thaksin took a hands-on approach to APEC planning, personally supervising the waiters during a banquet rehearsal, for example, he insisted that he could not order Samak to allow the 14 October event organizers use of Sanam Luang. Thaksin urged both parties to compromise and reach agreement. When that failed, Thaksin suggested to Samak that he allow use of Sanam Luang and even offered to pay to re-sod the park. "Believe me," said Thaksin, "[Samak and the event organizers] can reach an agreement because they are all Thais."⁵

In the event, a celebration was held on the soccer field at Thammasat University, across the street from Sanam

Luang, with speeches by former student activists, musical performances and fireworks. Booths with books and various presentations about Thailand's democracy struggle were also set up on the sidewalks on one section of Sanam Luang and artwork WAS displayed on a paved area of the park. Although Samak never rescinded his prohibition, the police did not intervene.

Potemkin Bangkok

The BMA's effort to keep the public off the grass of Sanam Luang was just one small part of a comprehensive campaign to make over the capital in advance of

APEC. This campaign was impossible to avoid or ignore. It had the tenor of a crusade. The actions that the government asked its citizens to perform for APEC, or to refrain from performing, were cast as patriotic duty. The government gave Bangkok residents the impression that a successful APEC would bring honor and wealth to Thailand, whereas any blemish would disgrace the nation. The energy and breadth of the government's campaign to present a prettified image of Bangkok to the world during APEC, even though carried out with Thaksin's trademark confidence, seemed to betray a sense of desperation. Making a good impression was the government's paramount concern. As Thaksin explained, "The APEC summit is a window of opportunity for Thailand to project itself before the global community."⁶

Much of the work of the beautification and public-order campaign fell to Samak and the BMA, which imple-



This sign warns people to "Keep off the Grass," Sanam Luang.

³ *The Nation*, September 28, 2003.

⁴ *Bangkok Post*, October 10, 2003.

⁵ *The Nation*, October 4, 2003.

⁶ *Bangkok Post*, October 3, 2003.

mented programs to rid Bangkok of stray dogs, the homeless, street-walkers, beggars and young sellers of jasmine garlands who haunt busy Bangkok intersections. The campaign to remove stray dogs began in mid-September and seemed to be welcomed by most people whom I asked about it. The campaign to remove the homeless from Bangkok followed soon thereafter. "There are no excuses for being a vagabond," Samak said.⁷ This effort proved more controversial, not least because Samak compared the homeless to the dogs he had just had shipped off to pounds in Sakeo Province. "Give [the homeless] a chance to go back home first, then, put [the remainder] together in one place in another province and feed them from the state budget like my previous operation against street dogs. ... If we treat them well, more people will become homeless," Samak said.⁸ According to newspaper reports, homeless people were sent to holding centers where they were to receive medical assistance and job training. Thaksin offered rhetorical support to Samak's vagrant roundup, describing the homeless as "wimps" with "weak characters."⁹

Illegal immigrants and beggars were included among the undesirable elements targeted for removal. More than 600 Cambodians, many of them beggars, were rounded up and flown in a Royal Thai Air Force cargo plane to Cambodia. The US State Department's director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, John Miller, criticized the mass deportation for failing to identify the illegal immigrants and to understand the circumstances that brought them to Thailand. Miller said it was likely that many would end up again in the hands of traffickers and be re-trafficked to Thailand.¹⁰

I first noticed the preparations for APEC when I saw municipal workers hacking limbs from the trees along Arun Amarin Road near my apartment. The trees lined the route that would be used by APEC dignitaries on their way to the Royal Thai Navy Headquarters to view the first-ever nighttime procession of Royal barges. The trees weren't being pruned

so much as being reduced to limbless trunks. A great shade-giving tree in front of the gym I use was cut down altogether. I stood with Uncle Jek, the gym's proprietor, and we shook our heads at the arboreal butchery. The workers said the foliage was a security hazard.

Then I noticed large billboards advertising APEC popping up on pedestrian bridges. A few days later I saw workers removing one of these signs. The about-face was instituted after a rash of violent muggings, conducted in the lee of the billboards, began occurring on pedestrian bridges around the city. At least one of these attacks was fatal.

The great lengths to which the Thaksin government was willing to go to hide Bangkok's less-attractive realities was best illustrated by the unfurling of the world's longest banner on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. The banner was designed to hide a riverside slum from the view of APEC leaders as they watched the Royal Barge procession on the evening of October 20 from the Royal Thai Navy Conference Hall. Instead of sagging tin roofs and the grimy concrete of the Tha Tien neighborhood, the dignitaries saw a banner 20 meters high and about half a kilometer long welcoming them to Bangkok and



A painting by Wasan Sitthikhet displayed at Sanam Luang, showing Bangkok Governor Samak Sundaravej (with a dinosaur's tail) over a cage of dogs and homeless people. The bubble reads, "Catching all the poor people in Thailand and putting them in a cage is shameful. APEC [delegates] will praise our city [and our] dinosaur government as truly prosperous."

⁷ *Bangkok Post*, September 17, 2003.

⁸ *The Nation*, September 17, 2003.

⁹ *The Nation*, September 19, 2003.

¹⁰ *Bangkok Post*, October 7, 2003.



(Above) This banner rising from the Chao Phraya River was certified by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's longest. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority raised the banner to hide the unsightly Tha Tien neighborhood from APEC leaders during the Royal Barge procession on October 20, 2003. (Right) Behind the banner: the reality.



decorated with images of the Grand Palace. White lattice-work walls hid other slums around Bangkok.

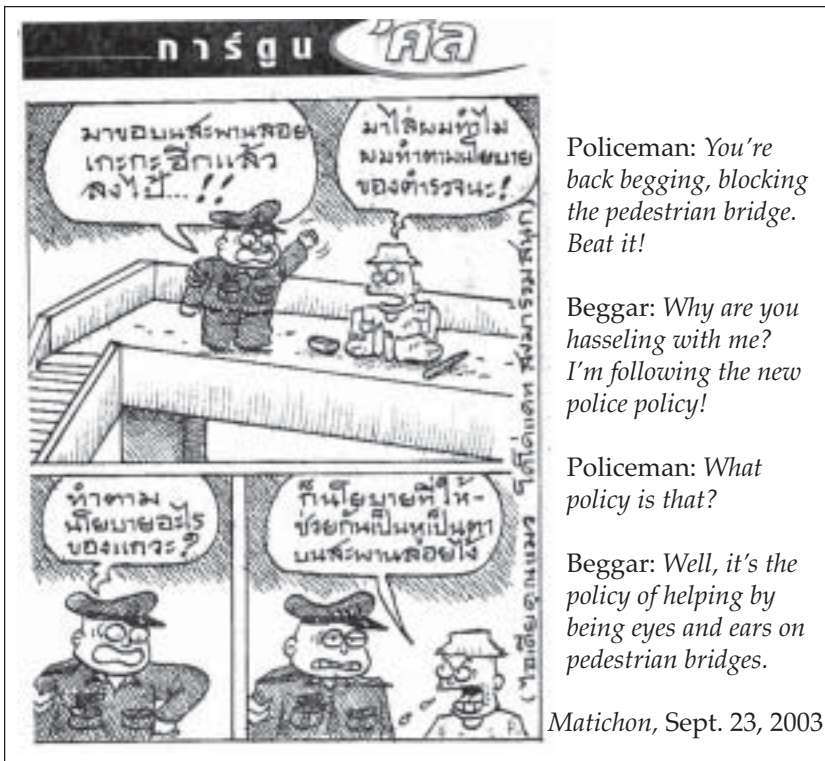
Given the concentration of world leaders in Bangkok, security was a major concern for the Thai government. The threat of terrorism was highlighted with the August arrest of Hambali, a Jemaah Islamiyah leader and associate of Osama bin Laden in Thailand. Announcing the arrest, Thaksin claimed that Hambali had been planning attacks on the APEC meeting. Security for APEC was accordingly tight.

The Ministry of Defence organized a ceremony in Bangkok to inaugurate a special center to receive tips from the public; some 500 taxi drivers and hotel staff swore to act as the "eyes and ears" of the government during APEC. Police organized a seminar to train hundreds of Bangkok taxi drivers to recognize "man-portable air-defense systems" (MANPADS, or shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles), several of which were rumored to have been smuggled into Thailand from Cambodia. Taxi drivers were also offered training in how to spot terrorists who happened into their cabs. Overly quiet people, I was

dismayed to learn, were to be considered suspicious.

The government had also to contend with the daunting task of taming Bangkok's infamous traffic so that the dozens of motorcades scheduled during the two-day summit would not be delayed. Thaksin's solution stopped just short of a declaration of martial law. The government was shut down for six days, so that civil servants wouldn't clog the roads by commuting. All events on land owned by the Palace's Crown Property Bureau, such as the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, were also canceled. There was discussion of closing banks, hospitals and the Stock Exchange. These plans were scaled back; hospitals closed their outpatient services and banks were requested not to send out messengers. Thaksin even had the Ministry of Commerce pressure Bangkok's department stores not to offer sales during APEC.

The government suggested that the APEC holiday would be a good time for Bangkok residents to take a holiday up-country. As on any long weekend, Bangkokians left town in droves. According to the *Bangkok Post*, casinos in Poipet, Cambodia, did excellent



Policeman: *You're back begging, blocking the pedestrian bridge. Beat it!*

Beggar: *Why are you hasseling with me? I'm following the new police policy!*

Policeman: *What policy is that?*

Beggar: *Well, it's the policy of helping by being eyes and ears on pedestrian bridges.*

Matichon, Sept. 23, 2003

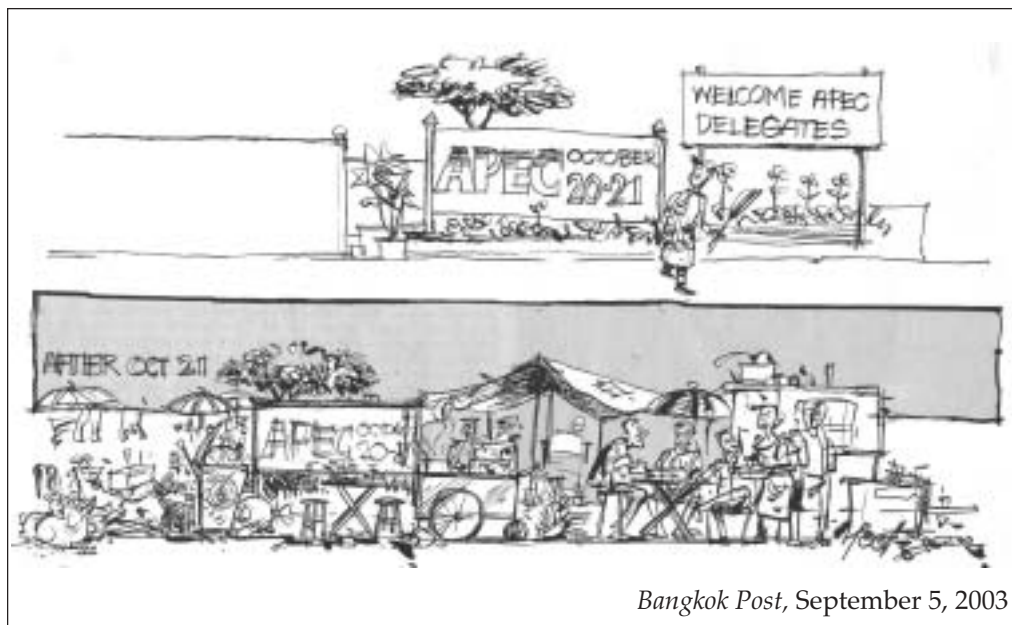
with ornate figureheads, manned by more than 2,000 sailors in traditional costume.

The government sponsored a week-long, 24-hour-a-day APEC Channel to educate the public about the importance of the event. The TV channel included practical news such as information on road closures along with stories on the history of the Royal Barge procession and the variety of foot massages available to journalists at the Queen Sirikit Convention Center. Stories also described silk shirts, tailored to the measurements of each of the 21 APEC leaders, which were to be worn for the traditional APEC group portrait. The shirts, which many criticized for looking too Chinese and not very Thai, cost more than \$2,200 each. The leaders were also presented with the specially-designed, monogrammed *benjaraong* ceramic ware used for the state dinner. Each set cost \$2,500, more than the average annual salary in Thailand.

business during the APEC holiday, with hotels fully booked and some gamblers forced to sleep in the hotel lobbies.¹¹ The government asked those Bangkok residents who remained in town during the summit to smile more often, especially in downtown areas where they might be seen by APEC delegates.

All of these efforts were aimed at making Bangkok appear to be something it isn't, namely, a clean, attractive city free of traffic, pollution, crime and poor people. Only such a city could offer the appropriate backdrop for the public-relations spectacle the government had planned. The centerpiece of the extravaganza was the nighttime procession of Royal Barges down the Chao Phraya River. Although the procession is normally performed only as part of various royal ceremonies, the Palace granted Thaksin's request to stage a procession on the last night of the summit as entertainment for the visiting leaders. From a newly-renovated building at the Navy Headquarters across the River from the Grand Palace, the leaders would watch the flotilla of 52 narrow vessels, many

The money the government spent on impressing foreign VIPs did not impress most Thais. A poll conducted by ABAC/Assumption University during the summit found that only slightly more than 5 percent of those polled thought the money spent was "worthwhile for Thailand," while almost 22 percent said it definitely was not.¹² Some questioned why the government waited until foreign guests were about to arrive before addressing the problems of stray dogs, litter and street crime. Thailand's Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai explained, "When we are here on our own, we can afford



Bangkok Post, September 5, 2003

¹¹ Bangkok Post, October 19, 2003.

¹² "Thailand Benefits from APEC," Thailand News Agency, October 23, 2003.



On October 19, in defiance of Prime Minister Thaksin's prohibition on protests during the APEC summit, about 1,000 people turned out for a protest in Bangkok organized by the Worker's Group for Democracy. The organizers of the protest bowed to government pressure to change the venue for the demonstration. The protest covered a number of themes, including opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the adverse effects on poor people of global-trade liberalization. Special Branch Police, in plainclothes and with giveaway ear pieces, were out in force, videotaping the proceedings.

to be unorganized. But when we receive guests, it's natural to try our best to be orderly."¹³

Some Thais, like Thepchai Yong, group editor of *The Nation*, wondered "whether the Thaksin government has gone overboard in trying to force APEC down people's throats."¹⁴ While a majority of Thais supported the government's efforts and were satisfied with the APEC preparations, almost a quarter of those polled by ABAC /

Assumption said they were completely unimpressed by the preparations for APEC. If anyone had reason to complain (excepting those who had already been hustled out of town), I figured it was the residents of Tha Tien, whose homes the government had hidden behind the record-breaking banner. When I went there one sunny afternoon, however, I found no trace of resentment. "I like the banner," said one Tha Tien resident. With a wave of her arm indicating her neighborhood, she added, "It looks better than all this."

"A World of Differences"?

Thaksin coined the theme for the 2003 APEC meeting: "A World of Differences: Partnership for the Future." The differences between the Prime Minister and his domestic critics, however, were meant to be as invisible as a Bangkok slum. While efforts to beautify Bangkok were costly and, according to some critics, excessive, they could at least be justified as the responsibility of a good host. But the Thai government did not stop at replacing stray dogs and indigents with flower pots and welcome banners. Thaksin also sought to ensure that APEC dignitaries would not be disturbed by any manifestation of democracy in action.

The first hint that APEC was going to be exploited as an excuse to crack down on "undesirable elements" came in mid-September. On the anniversary of the September 1988 coup in Burma, 15 Burmese activists were arrested for rallying outside the Burmese Embassy to demand the release from detention of democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi. The police asked the media not to report the protest and arrests, "for fear of possible repercussions on next month's APEC summit meeting in Bangkok."¹⁵ At the time I didn't understand what those repercussions could be (Burma is not an APEC member) or why they were particularly to be avoided on account of the APEC

meeting. I chalked it up to Thaksin's ongoing campaign to placate the military junta in Rangoon. It soon became clear that it was not only hapless, undocumented Burmese that were going to be silenced in the cause of a trouble-free APEC.

On October 1, in comments made after a meeting to discuss the government's new initiative to eradicate poverty, Thaksin warned Thais not to stage protests or dem-

¹³ *Bangkok Post*, October 15, 2003.

¹⁴ *The Nation*, October 7, 2003.

¹⁵ *Bangkok Post*, September 19, 2003.



This photograph, published in the October 16 Thai Post, shows Thai Military Police shooting at a target wearing a headband labeled "NGO," for non-government organization. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra views many NGOs as hostile to his administration.

onstrations during the summit. The Prime Minister justified his prohibition in terms of national security and appealed to those considering protests or street rallies to think of Thailand's international reputation. "It won't hurt if you will think about your motherland and the image of your country for just a week," said Thaksin.¹⁶

The prohibition came with a threat; Thaksin said that any group that staged a protest would face "long and painful consequences." Thaksin also warned that any villagers found to have participated in street rallies during APEC, would "be the last to receive government funds" as part of the government's poverty-eradication program. NGOs that fell foul of the prohibition would be blacklisted. In effect, Thaksin offered Thai people a choice: forego their constitutionally-guaranteed rights to free speech and assembly in exchange for government money, or exercise those rights at risk of unspecified but "painful consequences."

Section 39 of the Thai Constitution reads, "A person shall enjoy the liberty to express his or her opinion, make speeches, write, print, publicize, and make expression by other means. [...]" Section 44 reads, "A person shall enjoy the liberty to assemble peacefully and without arms. [...]" In each case there is a stipulation that, "The restriction on liberty under paragraph one shall not be

imposed except by virtue of the provisions of the law" If Thaksin desired such laws it is quite possible that he could have had them passed, given his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) Party's absolute majority in Parliament, but he didn't take the legal route. Rather, he relied on intimidation.

Thaksin's threat of "painful consequences" in retaliation for exercising one's rights is chilling; the Prime Minister has a record of intimidating and punishing critics and others who stand in his way. After Thaksin's family-owned Shinawatra Corporation bought controlling shares in ITV, Thailand's independent television station, 21 of the channel's reporters lost their jobs for refusing to toe the pro-Thaksin editorial line. More than 60 journalists and activists were targeted for investigation by the Anti-Money Laundering Office, which is chaired by Thaksin. In May 2003 it was revealed that the government had asked the Foreign Ministry to help cut foreign sources of funding for NGOs deemed too critical of the government. Some critics of the government have received death threats. The spate of apparent extra-judicial killings in the government's drug crackdown earlier this year has contributed to a climate of fear (see MZW 6).

Interior Minister Wan Muhammad Nor Matha warned that he had not ruled out the use of force on those choos-

¹⁶ *The Nation*, October 2, 2003.

ing to stage protests during APEC. As if to underscore the threat, a photograph was published in the October 16 edition of the *Thai Post* showing a riot-control squad of the 11th Military Police Battalion taking target practice on a dummy with the letters “NGO” on it. The drill was observed by the Royal Thai Army chief General Chaisit Shinawatra, who is Prime Minister Thaksin’s cousin,¹⁷ who had ordered the Army to prepare a 400-man force to assist police if any protests during APEC got out of control. As noted in a *Bangkok Post* editorial, the Army is proscribed from domestic law enforcement, except in cases of a national emergency or martial law.¹⁸ Earlier, about a week before the anniversary of 14 October, General Chaisit had ordered, “A protest is the act of senseless people. It would drag the country downward and obstruct the government from reaping profit from the [APEC] meeting.”¹⁹

The message presented to would-be demonstrators by the image of Thai soldiers shooting at a mock civilian activist couldn’t have clearer, nor could the unpleasant memories of 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 have been more plainly evoked. Thaksin’s comments about NGO activists and protestors further echoed these events. An important element in the 6 October atrocity, for example, was the propaganda campaign broadcast on military radio stations that portrayed the students as “scum of the earth,” Vietnamese agents and traitors to the monarchy.²⁰ Thaksin flirted with this kind of dehumanizing language in his effort to demonize NGOs: “These [APEC delegates] will bring investment money to Thailand. Unfortunately, some *pret* (ghouls) are going to hold street rallies [during the APEC summit] and this is very bad for the country’s image.”²¹

The government also blacklisted about 700 foreign NGOs and activists from entering Thailand for fear that they might stage protests. Human-rights, anti-globalization and environmental activists were lumped with terrorists and Falun Gong practitioners who might embarrass China’s president. When he first called on people not to protest, Thaksin impugned the motives of Thai NGO activists. “These people merely need to show they are working to please their overseas sources of funding,” he said. “Everybody knows that NGOs are funded by foreigners.”²² Protests were just a means for activists “to collect a receipt” from foreign sponsors. The PM suggested that government funds would be made available to NGOs if they played along so that they wouldn’t be

dependent on foreign donors.

In later attempts to justify his prohibition on protests, Thaksin reiterated the theme of Thai NGOs as flunkies of foreign paymasters. Thaksin asked reporters, “Do you know who backs some of these NGOs? It’s the George Soros foundation. Remember who destroyed our baht currency six years ago? Don’t forget so easily or so quickly.”²³ This is a damning association in Thailand, where the billionaire philanthropist is still widely believed to have been behind the collapse of the Thai baht that sparked the Asian financial crisis.

Thaksin’s effort to smear NGOs by linking them to Soros ignores the fact that many NGO activists, especially those that oppose trade liberalization and globalization, dislike and distrust Soros. The implication behind Thaksin’s smear, however, is that there are no legitimate grievances in Thailand that the government is not already well on its way to solving, and that there would be no discontent at all if not for meddling foreigners and local opportunists. Thaksin said of foreign activists, “They will be welcome here after the summit. They should know what I mean.”²⁴

Not only were foreign activists barred from entering the Kingdom, but local activists were invited to leave. One Thai activist told me that he spent the APEC-summit period in the U.S. after he was encouraged to leave the country in the course of a friendly chat with military intelligence. He had explained to the authorities that he considered APEC an ineffectual talk shop and that his group had no plans to stage any protests during the summit. All the same, the Thai government preferred that he be on the other side of the planet during the summit.

Form over Substance

For all the money and effort expended on the summit, the Thai government had only modest success in advancing its stated agenda. The sub-themes prepared for the summit were the promotion of knowledge-based economies, promotion of human security (especially economic security but including freedom from terrorism), financial reform, development of small and medium enterprises and support for the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Doha Development Agenda.²⁵ Support for the WTO became a more important goal after the collapse of

¹⁷ General Chaisit’s recent 18-month rise from major general in an inactive post to four-star general was the fastest in the history of the Royal Thai Army.

¹⁸ *Bangkok Post*, October 15, 2003.

¹⁹ *Bangkok Post*, October 7, 2003.

²⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, “We Do Not Forget the 6 October,” p. 2.

²¹ *The Nation*, October 16, 2003.

²² *The Nation*, October 2, 2003.

²³ *Bangkok Post*, October 12, 2003.

²⁴ *The Nation* October 13, 2003.

²⁵ Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Foreign Minister of Thailand, Remarks at the First Senior Officials Meeting for the 15th APEC Meeting, Chiang Rai, Thailand, February 20, 2003.

talks during the fifth ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico, the month before. In explaining the importance of APEC to Thailand, and the need for Thailand to make a good impression, Thai officials cited the opportunity for increased tourism as a result of the summit, increased trade, and an expanded market for Thai products.

Although Thai officials paid lip service to the importance of a multilateral trade system, their major effort in that direction was an ill-conceived and poorly received plan to bring forward the deadline for removing trade barriers set out at the 1994 APEC summit in Bogor, Indonesia.²⁶ Thaksin showed poor form by breaking with APEC tradition and shutting out World Trade Organization chief Supachai Panichpakdi from the ministerial-level APEC meeting. It is no coincidence that Supachai, who is Thai, is also a member of the opposition Democrat Party and has the intellect and standing to rival Thaksin. Thailand was, however, active on the sidelines of the summit, pursuing bilateral free-trade agreement talks with Canada, New Zealand, Taiwan and the United States.

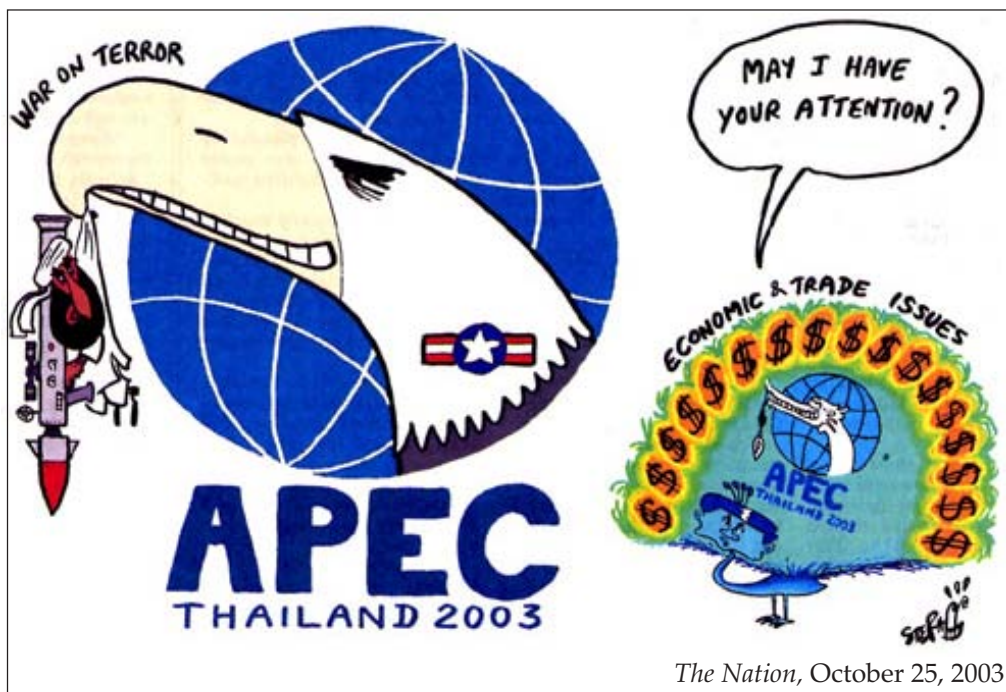
Thailand's effort to bring APEC back to its core focus of multilateral trade liberalization was overshadowed by the U.S. anti-terrorism agenda. One of the key achievements at this year's APEC was an agreement to monitor and control MANPADS, the same weapons that Thai authorities had trained the taxi drivers to recognize and report. The United States also officially accorded Thailand status as a Major Non-NATO Ally during Thaksin's meeting with President Bush.

According to political scientist Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, "beyond its successful light and sound and marketing ploys, Apec's substantive outcome was a poor reflection of Thailand's national interest."²⁷ Indeed, the marketing aspect of Thailand's APEC performance appears to have been a priority for the Thai government, and it was the prospective benefits of this marketing that Thaksin used to justify the expense of the summit. Figures on the cost to Thailand of the two-day meeting range from \$25 million to \$43 million, not counting the hidden costs of shutting down the capital for almost

a week.²⁸ "In three years' time, you will see drastic changes resulting from this meeting," Thaksin said. "Investments will increase and many people will move their production bases to Thailand."²⁹

The unspoken agenda of APEC 2003 seems to have been to mark Thailand's recovery from the economic crisis and Thaksin's ascent to regional leadership. The APEC extravaganza marketed not only Thailand, but also the ruling Thai Rak Thai Party and the Prime Minister himself. Although some economists may have doubts about the sustainability of Thaksin's economic policies, there is no denying that the Thai economy has come alive under Thaksin's leadership. The Thai economy grew at greater than 6 percent in the first half of 2003. The stock market is roaring. In August, with much fanfare, Thailand paid back the last of the money it owed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for its post-crisis bailout package, two years ahead of schedule. There is a sense of optimism in Thailand again after the painful experience of the Asian economic crisis. The pomp and ceremony surrounding APEC and the pride that Thais were instructed to take in the summit gave the appearance of a national celebration of Thai Rak Thai's economic successes.

It was no accident, for example, that a 43-page book on Thai Rak Thai policies, aptly titled "The Performance of the Thai Government," was included in the press kits issued to foreign journalists covering APEC. The booklet included chapters on "Thaksinomics" ("Recognised worldwide as a new model of development") and media freedom, illustrated with a photograph of Thaksin in headphones giving his weekly radio ad-



²⁶ *The Nation*, October 23, 2003.

²⁷ Thitinan Pongshudirak, "Hidden Costs, Lost Opportunities," *Bangkok Post*, October 20, 2003.

²⁸ Thitinan Pongshudirak, "Hidden Costs, Lost Opportunities," *Bangkok Post*, October 20, 2003.

²⁹ *Bangkok Post*, October 23, 2003.



The Suphannahongse barge. An image of the prow of this barge was featured in the logo of APEC 2003. Photo by Kittinun Rodsupan.

dress.³⁰ The press kit did not include literature from other political parties.

It is no surprise that the Thai public was most impressed by and interested in the spectacle of the APEC summit, rather than the outcome of the ministerial meeting. According to the ABAC / Assumption University poll, Bangkokians cited the Royal Barge procession as the single most impressive aspect of APEC, followed by the welcome ceremony and the beautification of Bangkok.³¹ The Royal Barge procession was indeed spectacular. Having seen each of the four rehearsals from our river-side apartment and already weary of the government's relentless APEC ballyhooing, I was not particularly excited by the event. However, even I was moved by the finale, when thousands of floating candles turned the surface of the Chao Phraya river into a shimmering ribbon of flame, and hundreds of paper lanterns rose into the sky, forming an arc across the river. For the moment, at least, I didn't mind being manipulated.

Beyond celebrating national pride and economic optimism, APEC's pageantry seemed designed to draw attention to Thaksin's new, elevated standing on the world stage. The *Christian Science Monitor* described the APEC summit as Thaksin's "coming out" party. Particularly in light of the imminent retirement of Malaysia's outspoken Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohammed, Thaksin was recognized by the international community as the Southeast Asian region's new leader.

Endorsements of Thaksin's new status came from many quarters. Ernest Bower, president of the US-ASEAN Business Council, declared that "The leadership [in the region] now, I would say ... has moved to Bangkok, to Thaksin."³² South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong each acknowledged Thaksin's regional leadership. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo declared herself a disciple of Thaksinomics. Even the managing director of the IMF, which had long been Thaksin's favorite foreign devil and whipping boy, praised the Prime Minister's regional vision.³³

Not long ago Thailand's regional leadership would have represented a politically-progressive step for the region. Although Thailand's political development has been uneven and subject to setbacks, the sacrifices made by Thai people in the cause of democracy, most dramatically with the events of 14 October, 6 October and May 1992, ensured that Thailand was at the forefront of democratic development in Southeast Asia. The fact that Thaksin has emerged as the region's *de facto* leader does not mean that the region is catching up with Thailand in terms participatory politics, press freedom and accountability. Rather, as Thailand becomes familiar again with the comforts of

³⁰ *Bangkok Post*, October 15, 2003.

³¹ "Thailand Benefits from APEC," Thailand News Agency, October 23, 2003.

³² *Bangkok Post*, October 16, 2003.

³³ *The Nation*, September 5, 2003.

a booming economy, it is also shrinking from the promise of the democratic aspirations embodied in the 1997 Constitution.

Thaksin is leading country toward the kind of “soft authoritarianism” that is more typical of the region and Thailand’s own political past. According to Chulalongkorn University’s Dr. Thitinan, “There is a clear attempt to silence critics and close down the dissenting space. . . . We now have an aura of authoritarian rule.”³⁴ Power is growing ever more concentrated in the hands of one political party and, indeed, one man. Senator Somkiat Onwimol, a former charter writer, said “The problem is not that we’re heading for single-party rule. The problem is that we’re going to have a one-man government—Thaksin’s rule.”³⁵

On October 1, the same day that Thaksin threatened Thais who exercised their right to protest during APEC, the Prime Minister gave a speech to the Foreign Correspondent’s Club of Thailand. During the question-and-answer session, Thaksin offered this candid assessment of democracy’s worth: “Well, I always said that democracy is not the end by itself, but is the means to an end. The end should be improving the livelihood of your people.”³⁶ Thaksin’s conception of democracy as a vehicle or tool suggests that he does not appreciate the value of political participation in a democratic system. In his book *Development as Freedom*, Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen argues that political liberty and civil rights are absolutely

necessary if people are to be able to define for themselves the meaning of their own welfare:

“Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the processes of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion”³⁷

Democracy, then, is not merely the means to an end, as Thaksin asserts, but the means by which the end is defined.

There is no denying that Thaksin has grasped and responded to the needs and wishes of many Thais, but much depends on how those needs and wishes are formed and articulated. When power is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, when people are too complacent or too scared to speak out, and when even elected leaders hold democracy in dis-esteem, the functioning of democracy is bound to be impaired. The presence of democratic institutions is not sufficient. Sen notes that, “Democracy does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria. The opportunity it opens has to be positively grabbed in order to achieve the desired effect.”³⁸ The protestors who took to the streets on 14 October sought to ensure that Thais would have that opportunity. □

³⁴ *Christian Science Monitor*, October 21, 2003.

³⁵ *Bangkok Post*, October 12, 2003.

³⁶ Peter Lloyd, “Shinawatra Grooming Himself for South-East Asia Leadership: Observers,” Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio, October 5, 2003; transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/correspondents/content/2003/s959934.htm>

³⁷ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New York: Anchor Books, 1999, p. 153.

³⁸ Sen, p. 155

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Author: Wheeler, Matthew Z.

Title: ICWA Letters - South Asia

ISSN: 1083-4257

Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; The Americas;
Europe/Russia; Mideast/North
Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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