

British Club Seniors Section

Lunch Presentation: “Looking at Ancient Thai *wat* Murals”

Chairperson’s Introduction of the Speaker Dr Chris Baker:

Chris was born in the UK, has a PhD from Cambridge University, where he also taught Asian history and politics. He moved to Thailand in 1979, and worked successively as technical director of a research firm, managing director of a leading ad agency, and as marketing director for Johnnie Walker Scotch Whisky. Now he works independently as a writer and historian. He is honorary editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, and has edited four volumes of the Thailand Human Development Report for UNDP.

With his wife Prof Dr Pasuk Phongpaichit they have extensively researched and written a large, and I do mean large, number of acclaimed publications:

- In 2005, the bestselling *A History of Thailand*, with the 3rd edition published 2014;
- *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 2nd edition 2002, which won the 1997 national research prize and has been published in the Japanese language;
- In 1998, *Thailand’s Boom and Bust*;
- In 2000, *Thailand’s Crisis*;
- *Thaksin*, 2004, 2009; and
- In 2008, *Thai Capital after the Asian Crisis*.

Their more recent works include:

- In 2015, *Unequal Thailand*;
- In 2016, the first academic translations of The Ayutthaya Palace Law and the Thammasat: concerning *Law and Kingship during the Ayutthaya Period*; and
- In 2017, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World*.

They have translated works by the leader of the 1932 Thai revolution Pridi Banomyong, by Professor of Economic History Chatthip Nartsupha, some works of King Rama V, also of distinguished Historian Nidhi Eosewong, and even some from the Communist Party of Thailand.

In 2010, they completed a translation of the epic poem, The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen, which won the AAS translation prize. In 2016, they published Yuan Phai, the Defeat of Lanna: A 15th-Century Thai Epic Poem.

In recognition of their academic and writing achievements, in 2017 they jointly won the prestigious Fukuoka Grand Prize for their outstanding work on Thai society, literature and social transformation.

In 2019 their translation of “The Fifty Jataka” which tells tales of Buddha’s previous lives, still remains popular in both teaching and entertainment circles and is now acclaimed as being the lifeblood of the region’s literature.

ALL I CAN SAY IS: What a prolific publishing powerhouse couple!

So, how do all of these accomplishments lead us to today’s topic of “Looking at Old Thai Wat Murals”: Well, on the 30th November last year, one of my twin daughters from my first marriage who lives in England, sent me details of an article that she had read in the Guardian Newspaper entitled “History fades as rising sea levels slowly destroy Thailand’s temple murals”. Chris’s name is mentioned often as are a number of his insightful comments. I read that article with great interest!

In my 40 years of living in Thailand I have had the privilege of exploring so many temples across the country, most adorned with murals that captivate with their intricate details and vivid depictions, all in various states of repair and condition. I have often wondered about why they were painted and what they represent. I saw through Chris an opportunity to learn and hopefully understand about what I had seen in so many of these temples, and thought that members of our Seniors Section would also like to learn more. So, I asked my fellow Section Committee member Barbara, who, if you will recall, I have already said knows everyone in Bangkok who deserves to be known, if she knew of Chris and how to contact him. The answer was of course “Yes” and so, here he is.

Will you please welcome the eminent Historian Chris Baker!