

An Interview Transcript: June 12, 2024

Background

In early June 2024, we contacted New Jatuporn via Facebook introducing ourselves and our research project. New had been quite active on her Facebook account and often sold democracy-related small merchandises online. Previously, Khorapin, one of the researchers, had chatted with New and bought few of her goods. This was how we had initially known each other online. Perhaps, this previous customer-seller relationship with political solidarity, despite its superficiality, partly made New agreed unhesitantly to meet us when we asked about the interview.

We let New choose the meeting place. She picked a small stylish Café. It was nearby her newly open small restaurant in Thonburi district. This way she could come to the Café with her motorcycle within few minutes. On June 12, we arrived early and then met with New face-to-face for the first time. New's appearance was unique. She wore loose oversized T-shirt. It was like a blanket covering her small figure. Her arms and neck were full of tattoos. We noticed one written "I am children of the People." Her hair is mannishly short. She entered the Café with her girlfriend. We did not have a chance to talk to the latter who quickly disappeared at the back of the Café. Sitting together at the front of the Café, having beverages in our hands, we, a pair of researchers, started interviewing New.

After introducing ourselves, New smiled when she heard the name Puangchon Unchanam which was one of the interviewers. Puangchon, a university professor, has also been charged with lese-majeste law for writing a book "Royal Capitalism" although his case was still at an early stage comparing to New's. The line between interviewer-interviewee, academic-activist became blurred. We are on the same boat. We are the victims of this Kingdom's draconian law. With her soft small voice, New began to answer our questions.

Interview

Q: Can you briefly introduce yourself and your background? What are you doing now?

A: My hometown is Buriram Province. But after I had been charged, I have hardships travelling monthly to report myself to the court. So I moved to Bangkok. Now I am an entrepreneur. I like cooking and I just opened a new small restaurant nearby here. I am not rich having a restaurant, being an entrepreneur. No one hired me because of the ongoing case. I applied for a job and failed. This is my only option to make a living.

I do not want the case to be on trial for too long. Deep down I want to hear the verdict, get my sentence suspended, that would give me more chance of getting job. Now it is like I am caught in a limbo.

Q: Can you share with us about the reasons why you joined the movement four years ago?

A: There were two main factors. The first one is the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The company I used to work for laid off many people. My colleague was pregnant. I did a sacrifice, resigned, and let my pregnant friend kept her job. I got severance pay for 15000 TBH (445 USD) which was extremely low. This event made me rethink about economic inequality and the problem of minimum wage.

Another factor is about the economic situation in my hometown Buriram. After the 2019 election, my province remained underdeveloped. You got out of the urban area, no development at all.

Q: Were you Future Forward Party supporters? It seemed like your concerns were economic problems. Were you aware of any political problem?

A: I voted for the Future Forward Party but initially I did not see the need to reform the monarchy.

In August 2020, there were mobs in major cities. I shifted my activities from online to onsite. I took to the street and protested with other activists in Buriram.

Afterwards, I traveled to Bangkok. There I listened to political speeches at the protest. Anon the lawyer dressed up as Harry Potter. I was shocked. I was mesmerized by the leaders and activists. I was impressed by their insightful information and their knowledge.

Q: So you joined the movement as an ordinary protester? What was your role in the movement?

A: I joined the WEVO group which was responsible for protecting the protesters, making sure they were safe. I was also a cook, making food for the group. Sometimes, I was looked down on by some members of the group or excluded because of my biological gender as a woman. When there was a crash with the police force, they did not let me be at the front.

Q: How much were you involved in the group?

A: We moved in and lived together in a house. I was with these activists for two years. Then I joined the Thalu Gaz and protested at Din Deang. During that time, my parents told me to quit. But I chose to unfriend my mother on Facebook. So that she did not have to acknowledge my political activities.

Q: You mentioned that you were looked down on. Are you feeling that you are alienated from the movement? Especially you did not share similar background with them in terms of educational or Bangkokian background.

A: I did not feel alienated AT ALL with the movement. I know that most participants were university students and I am not. Rather than feeling alienated, I admired them. I wonder why they were so smart. For me, I could only explain that our society was not on the right place. But for them, they could provide so many information to support the argument. I felt that I wanted to help them somehow.

Q: Does this mean you agreed with them on the monarchy reform demand? What about other demands? Which demands did you think the most important?

A: Yes, we called for the reform. Moreover, I joined the protest that called for gender diversity and ethnic minority rights. However, I do not think omitting the monarchy issue is the right path for the protest. What we should do is to insist that the monarchy is central to our demand, to our movement.

Q: During the peak period, we now understand that you stand firmly in solidarity with the movement. What about the aftermath? When the Thai state stroked back with arrest and legal

prosecutions, do you feel left out to endure with the legal hardship by yourselves while some leaders got privileges?

A: When the movement was in decline, many of us, protesters, went separately in their own way. Personally, I do not think the leaders are privilege class and they got exempt from legal prosecution. Their case and trial might take longer comparing to mines. But all the leaders faced harsher charges. They have much more cases awaiting for trial.

Q: Have you ever thought about seeking asylum abroad? What do you think about those activists who fled and became political refugees? Or those who change their position, joining the conservative groups?

A: I admit that I thought about seeking asylum abroad many times and seriously. However, it is beyond my capacity. I have family here. I indeed asked my mom if she wanted to go live abroad with me. She said no. It would have been suffocating for me not being able to come back to Thailand to meet my parents.

Another reason is that I believe that the fight is not over yet. I want to be here and see the change. I want to see what I have planted flourish and bear fruit. I am still fighting because I am driven by ideology. You can see it like that.

For those activists who no longer live in Thailand or no longer shared political cause with us, I think it is their right to choose whatever path. Actually they might feel that they were abandoned.

Q: Are you disappointed with the current government doing nothing about political prisoners? Are you hopeful toward the amnesty bill campaign?

A: The government could not do much under this limit political structure. It is impossible for them to touch the monarchy issue. Even the Move Forward Party, if they are the government, it will be hard for them too. They will not be able to achieve what they campaigned during election.

I have no hope for the amnesty bill. It will be tough. Only thing I hope is that the judicial process should be fairer for someone like me. Based on my experience during my trial, I feel that the court did not listen to me, to my part of story. They thought I was criminal from the beginning. I will never confess. I don't think what I did was wrong. I won't admit it. I know that if I confess I might get my sentence suspended but I will never do that.

Q: Do you think your struggle is in vain?

A: Structurally, I might not be able to change anything. But in terms of people's way of thinking, I think I did some significant changes.

If you want me to talk about the tiresome, something vain. I would say that I am tired of current quarrels and division within the activists themselves. I have enough with listening to money problems they have to each other or the fight over who have fought the most. This division made me wonder what we actually have been striving for.

In the end, the struggle might not limit to street protest. Organizing mob might not be sustainable. For me, I am thinking of going to a university and study more. Perhaps, I can become a politician and fight within the system.

Q: What do you think about the groups that keep on fighting right now? Those that stubbornly criticize the monarchy and have been condemned as too radical. Do you think under this context, we should focus on other issues like gender equality for example.

A: For the Thalu Wang, although I do not agree with their modes of protest, I support them. I think economic problems are the most important thing. Gender diversity or equal marriage, these are less important for me. We can deal with wealth inequality first then reform the monarchy.

In the future, I am hopeful that a new group or movement will carry out our mission. This mission, I guess, will be led by the student movement.

Now I am exhausted. I am avoiding talking to the media since I am suffered from depression. Last year, I talked to a reporter from Voice TV. After my footage went online, there have been too many hostile comments and feedbacks. They dig out and photoshopped my parent's pictures. I am depressed. I am determined not to give an interview. But if the interviewers are the academics, I am willing to talk.

Honestly, now I am longing for being just normal people.

Q: Do you think being a Tomboy, your gender identity, matters much? Do people treat you badly because of your gender?

A: Ironically, being a Tomboy made me a privilege class in the female prison. Because I look like this, other female prisoners pampered me. They offered me more spacious sleeping room, prepared meal for me, washed my cloth. During my time in jail which lasted 3 days, I received a warm welcome and good treatment.

Q: Do you want to add anything in this interview?

A: My stance right now is that I wish my case finalizes soon. I hate being caught in a limbo, not knowing what gonna happen in my life. I might not even appeal. When they ruled that I am guilty, I just gonna accept the sentence. Anything that enables me to start a new chapter of my life.

At the Criminal Court: Verdict Day

After the interview, we kept in touch with New. Puangchon sent New his book on Thai politics. New recommended us to other lese-majeste victims. New also invited us to come listen to the Appeal court's verdict on her case on August 19, 2024.

Khorapin, one of the interviewers, was able to join New trial and to listen to her verdict. We are now living in the era of democratic backsliding. Numbers of political prisoners surged dramatically. Today might be the last day for New to have freedom. The court is unlikely to acquit her. At best, New will be found guilty and granted bail. But it can take 2-3 days to know the bail outcome.

I (Khorapin) arrive at the courtroom. There were about ten people who comes to support New. New is busy talking to friends and supporters. She wears a large T-shirt short sleeves revealing her tatoo all over her body. I call her and hold her hand. "Keep on fighting. Wish you best of luck today." New nods her head and exclaims, "I will win. I know today I will beat them." She looks very strong, no fear, no anxiety.

We all enter the courtroom. New took off her earrings, many of them. Her girlfriend stops New from doing that, telling New to put them all back. "You are not yet in jail." We wait for 30 minutes until the judge takes a seat. The judge reads the verdict. It takes less than five minutes. The verdict was "guilty with 2 years of imprisonment." Many of us have tear in our eyes, including me. We all get out of the courtroom, still do not understand what just happened. The prison's officer comes to take New. He will take her downstairs, wait for the prison's vehicle which will take New to Bangkok's Female prison.

Thing goes very fast. Everybody tries to say goodbye, gives moral support to New before she is taken away. "Be strong," I tell her. New does not shed any tear. She raises her fist while being taken away. I saw her girlfriend cry. I want to console her, cheer her up but I am paralyzed. My throat hurts and no words uttered. I hear many elders giving the instruction of what to do next. We have to buy her lunch and deliver it downstairs. We have to make sure that basic things are available for New when she arrives at the prison.

I leave the scene. New can rely on her friends.

Unexpected release

Three days later, we hear good news. New got bailed with 200000 TBH (5934 USD) cash bond. This is unexpected. In the last few months, those who were found guilty for violating lese-majeste law and get imprisonment sentence were unlikely to grant bail. But New's case is against all odd. She is free!

On the next day, I text her and say how glad I am. She calls me. Her happy exciting voice makes me smile. She says "I was surprised too! Why do they let me go?!" We spend a few minutes analyzing why she was granted bail. My theory is that New's acts of defamation is not aggressive as well as ambiguous as opposed to lese-majeste speeches or online posts. It was wearing a Thai traditional costume at a protest site that makes her a criminal. Every time we think about her "crime," we cannot help but feel disgusted toward our juridical system and our kingdom. This woman does not deserve to endure this prosecution from the first

place. Being granted bail does not represent mercy or justice from the powerful but rather a limbo, another phrase of uncertainty that she has to endure.

New Life with Freedom

After New is released, we text to one another often. New asks us many questions regarding translating all her legal documents into English. This is the process that Puangchon already went through with his case. We share as much as we can with New. We warn her about financial cost she has to spend just to acquire all necessary documents. There is no need for us to say it out loud for what purpose we have to prepare these documents.

I text New by the end of October, 2024. I inform her that I transferred 10000 TBH (296 USD) to her bank account as an honorarium for participating in our interview project. She thanks us and is happy that many who live overseas know her story.

In mid-February 2025, almost six months since we last talked. I see New posting new photos on her Facebook account. She wore an overcoat and stands on snow. I smile and feel overwhelmed. I text her, “Best wish to you. I really hope you can overcome anything and start a new happy and free life. One day we would meet again.”

She texts me back, “Someday, it will definitely be better.”