

This professor says history has a duty to explain, rather than record, **Subhatra Bhumiprabhas** reports

**F**or over two decades, Professor Nidhi Eoseewong has shed light amongst academics and the public. His radical and independent views have provoked further debates, not only in areas of historical study, but also in social affairs.

Historians of his generation may see him as one who goes against the historical establishment. Nidhi's investigation of the study of Thai history found that the record of the official class had been recreated in the form of royal chronicles, while the common folk passed on stories of their past through legend and folk tales.

However Nidhi believes that the study of history trains its students to use their imagination with its complicate details.

Nidhi was trained as a historian at Chulalongkorn University's faculty of arts where he received bachelor's and master's degrees in history. While many historians have stuck to the meta-narrative of Thai history created by Prince Damrongrajapubharp, Nidhi challenged the old school of thought that claimed there is little difference between the work of historians and that of novelists.

Nidhi has been investigating history through fact and fiction since his university days and also extended his investigation far beyond the history of Thailand. His doctorate thesis at the University of Michigan in 1976 was "Fiction as history: a study of pre-war Indonesian novels and novelists (1920-1942)".

To Nidhi, historians have a duty to create a story as history, and if they do a good job their stories fit the remaining evidence. Their stories as history should be much more powerful symbols of the present than the stories of novelists.

From 1976 to the present day, Nidhi has had over 2,000 pieces published in books and articles for newspapers and magazines.



## Radical historian

While the historian is critical of conventional history, he has more interest in the cultural and social contexts of the old days. Nidhi has been adapting links to the past to explain many current issues.

In his book "Politics of History and Memory", published in 2002, the historian noted that the main objective of the science of history is not to record what happened in the past. It has no duty to record, but to explain. History is an explanation of changes that can be proved by facts at some level, the book asserts.

His masterpiece "Thai politics during the reign of King Taksin", launched in 1986, recounted stories of the reign that put the biography of King

Taksin in a proper socio-political context, beyond the conventional record.

Among his outstanding works are "Bourgeois Culture and Early Bangkok Literature", published in 1982, and "The History of Bangkok in the Chronicles of Ayutthaya", published in 1980. Both pieces were recently translated into English and published in the book "Pen & Sail", a collection of Nidhi's works on literature and history in early Bangkok.

"Pen & Sail" is a collection of Nidhi's articles in which he tried to use the literary works of the past to explain the changes in Thai society.

"Nowadays, the idea that there were major changes in many aspects of Thai society

in early Bangkok; that understanding the changes which arise in Thai society, or any society, requires attention to the internal factors in that society more than seeing those changes as only responses to external forces; that literature can be used as one kind of historical source material; and that, conversely, historical change has more effect on literary creativity than was once understood in Thai society – all these ideas have become commonplace and students of Thai history can accept them. Whether they agree with them or not is another matter," Nidhi wrote in the author's preface.

Nidhi's influential works have brought him wide recognition at home and abroad. In 1999, Nidhi won the academic prize at the 10th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes, established to honour the outstanding work of individuals or groups so as to preserve the unique and diverse cultures of Asia.

The award citation read "Despite the fact that most of Professor Nidhi's works are written in Thai, his outstanding achievements and activities are highly regarded not only in Thailand, but also in Japan, Europe, and the United States."

At home, in 2002, Professor Nidhi won the prestigious Sri Burapa Award for works that have influenced many fields including history, literature and media.

Apart from teaching history at Chiang Mai University for almost 30 years from 1966, Nidhi helped found the Midnight University, an alternative source of education for people from all walks of life. He also helped found Prachadham News Net (PNN), an alternative news agency to provide daily news reports on general society. PNN aimed at encouraging the mainstream media to be more concerned about issues relating to the poor.

The professor retired from teaching history at Chiang Mai University in 2000 and devoted his time after retirement to the Midnight University, which aimed to be different from the mainstream universities. Without any official status, funds, or fees, the Midnight University that Nidhi founded in 1997 has been recognised as a source of food for thought for the public as well as academia.

He continues writing and linking stories of the past to explain current society. ■