

What's happening in Southeast and East Asia

In
The
News.

26th of July 2021

Thai protest art: risk of police harassment, prison and online trolls makes artists more subtle in their works

Criticising the government or monarchy in Thailand can result in arrest and long prison sentences

A new generation of Thai artists, not afraid to speak out, are using subtlety and technology to get their message across.

As pro-democracy protests in Thailand roll on through a second year of military crackdowns and stifled dissent, Thai artists are using visual imagery to challenge censorship and question the nation's power structures.

Artists have been among the many Thais arrested under the country's draconian lèse-majesté and flag laws, which make criticising the monarchy a crime. Yet some Thai artists have carried on making art with strong political messages – even if their strategies are now less direct.

Art openly critical of the monarchy was unheard of in the past because of the taboo against any show of disrespect for the royal family and the popularity of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej. But Sippakorn is from a new generation of digitally savvy Thais who are less afraid of speaking out against King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the royal family.

A lot of Thailand's more provocative art has moved online. One of the nation's best-known street artists, known only as Headache Stencil, has said the police have been stalking him because of his graffiti lampooning General Prayuth Chan-ocha and other members of the ruling military government. In June, he launched an art collection titled "Fight Together With Myanmar" in the form of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to raise money for the pro-democracy movement.



Source: South China Morning Post

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They were once luxury venues in Cambodia. Now they are grim Covid-19 quarantine centres

In April, a law was passed that threatened 20 years' jail for anyone judged to have intentionally spread the virus. During a recent curfew period, security forces patrolled neighbourhoods with bamboo canes.

The patients sit in packed ambulances before passing through metal gates. Once they are inside, they get a number, like C07-22, a thin blanket and a bedsheet, which is meant to be a mosquito net. Lights shine bright at all hours for constant camera surveillance. Each person is given four bottles of water a day and three small meals.

The Cambodian government, racing to contain a raging coronavirus outbreak, has set up a system of quarantine centres. No one is allowed to leave until they test negative - and most people are stuck for at least 10 days.



Cambodia was a Covid-19 success story until a few months ago. From 500 cases and no deaths in late February, there were 72,104 cases and 1,254 deaths by Saturday (July 24) - with nearly 900 new cases per day and almost 70 per cent of the fatalities coming in the preceding month.

The sprawling quarantine centres are the product of an overwhelmed and underfunded healthcare system, a jolt of recent Covid-19 deaths and a strict streak that often turns to a robust security apparatus in times of trouble. The Cambodian government has gone from nonchalance to closures to crackdowns. Prime Minister Hun Sen, a strongman who has held power for 36 years, has thundered against anyone who escaped government treatment, eluded quarantine or violated home isolation.

Source: NY Times

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'The water kept rising': Floods in China's Henan kill dozens, displace hundreds of thousands

Chinese president Xi Jinping on Wednesday (July 21) called for an all-out effort to help those affected, urging the authorities to prioritise residents' safety and property.

The Meteorological bureaus for Henan and provincial capital city Zhengzhou have raised the emergency response to Level 1, the highest level.

The People's Liberation Army and Ministry of Emergency Management dispatched about 5,000 soldiers and firefighters to help out with rescue work.

Videos on social media platforms Twitter and Weibo showed commuters in Zhengzhou stuck in an underground subway car, at least waist deep in murky waters. Twelve people died and five others were injured in the incident in the subway.



On the streets, cars and motorcycles could be seen floating, while some residents were clinging on to trees to keep their heads above the gushing water. Flights and inter-city trains stopped running.

In Zhengzhou, more than 200mm of rain fell in one hour on Tuesday, meteorological data showed. The amount of rainfall between Saturday and Tuesday in the city reached 617.1mm, nearing the annual average of 640.8mm.

More than 30 reservoirs in the province have exceeded their warning levels. Henan in central China, where the famous Shaolin temple is located, is one of the most densely-populated provinces in the country with 94 million residents.

Source: The Straits Times

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Naomi Osaka in Olympic spotlight, but biracial Japanese face struggles

Emili Omuro was thrilled by Naomi Osaka's star turn at the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony, but the biracial teenager says Japan must do more to accept people of mixed heritage.

Four-time Grand Slam winner Osaka, whose mother is Japanese and father Haitian, climbed a replica Mount Fuji on Friday (July 23) to light the cauldron in the ceremony's crowning moment. And she wasn't the only athlete of dual heritage representing the host.

Japanese-Beninese NBA basketball star Rui Hachimura was one of the flag-bearers leading Japan's team into the Olympic Stadium.

Osaka and Hachimura are adored in Japan, and boast lucrative sponsorship and advertising deals.



But many young people of black and Japanese heritage still struggle in an often conservative and largely homogenous society. "There were many times when it was hard," 14-year-old Omuro, born to a Japanese mother and a black American father, told AFP of her childhood in a town north of Tokyo.

"People would whisper behind my back and make fun of me at extra-curricular clubs, or when I was walking down the street." Looking to draw attention to the bullying and discrimination faced by some biracial Japanese, Ms Omuro applied and was chosen to be a torch-bearer in the nationwide Olympic flame relay before the Games. She also hoped to highlight the country's increasing but often overlooked racial diversity.

Source: AFP

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Hong Kong teen returned from Chinese jail sent to detention for attempted arson

One of the Hong Kong democracy activists who was returned from a Chinese jail after being captured at sea last year was ordered detained in a training centre for under-20-year-olds on Monday (July 26) for attempted arson and possessing dangerous objects.

Hoang Lam Phuc, 17, was among a group of 12 people intercepted by mainland authorities in August 2020 on a boat believed to be en route to Taiwan, a case which drew international attention and concern over their treatment in China. He has been in custody either in China or in Hong Kong since then.



Training centres are an alternative to imprisonment for people aged 14 to 20, in which authorities focus on rehabilitation and offenders are trained in a trade.

The minimum period of detention is six months and the maximum is three years, but the duration is ultimately decided by the Commissioner of Correctional Services, who will consider the conduct of the offender during detention.

Hoang had pleaded guilty on the charges of attempted arson and possessing anything with intent to destroy or damage property, which were related to Hong Kong's mass pro-democracy protests in 2019. Judge Frankie Yiu in the District Court said Hoang "completely ignored the law and was irresponsible," but he took into account that he was only 16 when he committed the crimes and that he was honest in his confession.

Source: Reuters

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Duterte can't evade ICC probe on crime against drugs, says Philippine Supreme Court

The Philippines' Supreme Court has ruled that President Rodrigo Duterte cannot invoke the country's withdrawal from the Rome Statute to skirt investigation of his alleged crime related to his war on drugs.

Voting unanimously, the 15-member tribunal also held that Mr Duterte could not arbitrarily terminate international agreements without the concurrence of the Senate.

Mr Duterte has been under investigation by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges that he committed crimes against humanity in the killings of thousands in his brutal war on drugs.

In a stinging rebuke of the position of Mr Duterte and the presidential palace, the High Court ruled that as a state party, the Philippines was bound to recognise the jurisdiction of the ICC and cooperate with its processes even after its withdrawal from the treaty that created the international court.

"Withdrawing from the Rome Statute does not discharge a state party from the obligations it has incurred as a member," the court said in a 101-page decision authored by Associate Justice Marvic Leonen.

"Consequently, liability for the alleged summary killings and other atrocities committed in the course of the war on drugs is not nullified or negated here," it said in its March 16 resolution, exactly three years after the government filed its notice of withdrawal from the treaty.



Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer/ Asia News Network

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Myanmar junta replaces envoy to Britain who broke ranks

Myanmar has appointed a new temporary head of its embassy in London, Britain's foreign ministry said on Friday (July 23), replacing the previous ambassador who was ousted after breaking ranks with the military government over its Feb 1 coup.

The selection of the new "charge d'affaires ad interim" did not require the consent of the British government, a foreign ministry spokesman told Reuters, which first reported the move earlier on Friday.

More than 900 people opposing the junta have been killed by security forces since the coup, drawing international condemnation and sanctions including from Britain.

"The consent of the receiving State is not required," the spokesman said in a statement, citing the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The statement did not name the new appointee.

The Myanmar Accountability Project, a British-based rights group, said the appointee for the London job was Htun Aung Kyaw, who served as a fighter pilot during a long army career. In a statement this week, the Myanmar Accountability Project urged Britain not to recognise the representative appointed by the military saying it would be "a gross double standard and a moral outrage".

The former ambassador, Kyaw Zwar Minn, was locked out of the London embassy in April after calling for the release of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Kyaw Zwar Minn remains in Britain and has urged the British government to refuse to recognise any envoys appointed by the junta and to send them back to Myanmar.

Source: Reuters



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China rejects WHO plan for study of Covid-19 origin

China rejected on Thursday (July 22) a World Health Organisation (WHO) plan for a second phase of an investigation into the origin of the coronavirus, which includes the hypothesis it could have escaped from a Chinese laboratory, a top health official said.

The WHO this month proposed a second phase of studies into the origins of the coronavirus in China, including audits of laboratories and markets in the city of Wuhan, calling for transparency from authorities.

“We will not accept such an origins-tracing plan as it, in some aspects, disregards common sense and defies science,” Zeng Yixin, vice-minister of the National Health Commission (NHC), told reporters.

Zeng said he was taken aback when he first read the WHO plan because it lists the hypothesis that a Chinese violation of laboratory protocols had caused the virus to leak during research.

The head of the WHO said earlier in July that investigations into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic in China were being hampered by the lack of raw data on the first days of spread there. Zeng reiterated China's position that some data could not be completely shared due to privacy concerns.

“We hope the WHO would seriously review the considerations and suggestions made by Chinese experts and truly treat the origin tracing of the Covid-19 virus as a scientific matter, and get rid of political interference,” Zeng said. China opposed politicising the study, he said. The origin of the virus remains contested among experts.



Source: Reuters

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Discriminatory response to Covid-19: Korea Herald

Amid concerns over a resurgence in Covid-19 cases, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has decided to prohibit all rallies planned to take place in the capital around the Aug 15 Liberation Day.

It recently notified civic organisations of the decision, expressing worries over the possible spread of the infectious disease through large crowds expected to throng at the planned demonstrations.

So far, 21 conservative and liberal civic groups have reported to the police about their plans to hold a total of 127 rallies around the capital from Aug 14-16. About 115,000 people are expected to attend the planned gatherings.

It is worrying that almost all the organisations seem determined to push for their planned rallies in defiance of the ban issued by the city government.

What emboldens them is authorities' failure to cope sternly with a massive rally held by a major umbrella labour group in downtown Seoul early this month in direct breach of disease control rules.

Around 8,000 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) took part in the July 3 event aimed at demanding a revision to the labour law, despite authorities' repeated calls to cancel it given the protracted pandemic. Most of the demonstrators wore masks but stayed close to one another and chanted slogans throughout the street rally, which lasted nearly two hours.

Stern measures to ban the rallies planned for mid-August - a stark contrast to the lukewarm response to the demonstration held by the labour group - are likely to prompt strong repercussions from the civic groups.



Source: The Korea Herald/ Asia News Network

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No longer 'hidden victims', children are dying as Covid-19 surges in Indonesia

Hundreds of children in Indonesia have died from the coronavirus in recent weeks, many of them younger than five, a mortality rate greater than that of any other country and one that challenges the idea that children face minimal risk from Covid-19, doctors say.

The deaths, more than 100 a week this month, have come as Indonesia confronts its biggest surge yet in coronavirus cases overall.

The jump in child deaths coincides with the surge of the Delta variant, which has swept through South-east Asia, where vaccination rates are low, causing record outbreaks not only in Indonesia but also in Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous nation, this month overtook India and Brazil in the number of daily cases, becoming the new epicentre of the pandemic.



The government reported nearly 50,000 new infections and 1,566 deaths among the entire population Friday.

Based on reports from paediatricians, children now make up 12.5 per cent of the country's confirmed cases, an increase over previous months. More than 150 children died from Covid-19 during the week of July 12 alone, with half the recent deaths involving those younger than five.

Overall, Indonesia has reported more than three million cases and 83,000 deaths, but health experts say the actual figures are many times higher because testing has been very limited.

Source: NY Times