The majority of your scholarly work is focused on the nature of power and political elites. Please tell us about your research.

McCargo: I have been looking at different kinds of political elites and modes of power since writing my Ph.D. about Major General Chamlong Srimuang, a former military officer who eventually became Deputy Prime Minister. He was probably best known, however, for his role in big political protest movements, such as those in May 1992, and later the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2006 and 2008. From that project, I sought to look at different kinds of power, be it military power, institutional power, or what I call “rally politics,” how people take to the streets. From there, I looked at a number of different topics, including media and the whole political reform process in Thailand, which was a huge issue in the 1990s when they produced the People’s Constitution.
Later on, I did some work on the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. I wrote a book about him with a Thai colleague and started to think in terms of different types of power networks that were developing in Thailand. On the one hand, there has been an emphasis on the Thaksin network that I talked about in our book, the Thaksinization of Thailand (NIAS 2005). At the same time, I also wrote an article in 2005 which talks about the idea of network monarchy and tries to unpack what kind of political power or influence the Thai monarchy exerts. I think people have been overly fixated with the extremely traditional notion that the king exercises certain powers, whereas actually I believe that there is a network of people who have a connection with an institutional monarchy who try to influence what is going on in a variety of different ways. In all, it is fair to say those two projects about Thaksin and the monarchical network probably caught people’s imagination more than the work that I had done prior to that.

Journal: You received your first degree in English Literature. What inspired you to make the transition to study political science? What led you to look at Asia—especially Thailand—as your region of specialty?

McCargo: It was a very curious business. I was studying English literature at the University of London, and I had this chance to spend an exchange year—what you would call a JYA junior year—abroad at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. While I was at UMass Amherst, I took a class at Smith College in Japanese literature. I was very interested in Japan and really wanted to go there, but traveling to Japan was not a cheap thing to do back then, especially as it was during the height of the rising yen.

In 1985, after working for the first half of the summer, I went to Thailand and Burma because they were in the same general direction of Japan, but cheaper. At the time, I did not know much about Southeast Asia and had no idea what I was getting myself into. I got off the plane in Bangkok and thought “this place is seriously hot and I don’t know what I’m going to do here.” It was in some ways a perverse choice for me—I am a guy from the North of England who is not crazy about hot weather, and can’t really take the sun—but for one reason or another I became very intrigued by the people. During that two month trip, I traveled around the country
by myself and met all kinds of people. There was actually a military coup attempt in September of 1985, my first exposure to a Thai coup. In all, I really got a feel that summer for how fascinating Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries could be.

After that, I still wanted to go to Japan, so after I finished my degree, I went off to teach English in a Japanese high school under what later became the JET program. Although that was a fascinating experience, I could never really get to grips with the language, and I never had the feeling that Japan was quite my place. So when I was in Japan, I made a couple of trips back to Southeast Asia. I travelled to the Philippines and then decided to go back to Thailand and thought, “I am going back to Thailand again, and I want to do what I did not do in Japan. I am going to live with a local family and immerse myself in the language.” While in Thailand, I embedded myself in Thai society by living with my amazing host family (with whom I remain in close touch) and spent all day, every day studying Thai. After that, I went back to London and did a Master’s degree in Southeast Asian Studies. One thing led to another and I did a Ph.D. about Thai politics.

If you told me in the beginning that I was going to do a Ph.D. on Thai politics and later become a professor of political science, I would have been very amused. Looking back, I have no idea what I would have done with my adult life if I had not discovered Southeast Asia during my student days.

**Journal:** Thailand has recently undergone yet another military coup. How does this coup differ from the one in 2006? What were the most important underlying issues?

**McCargo:** The biggest difference between the 2006 coup and this one is the determination of the current coup leadership to suppress dissent and get everyone on board, using whatever means that are at their disposal. If we go back to 2006, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who staged that coup, came across as a reluctant coup-maker. He arrested only about four people and very quickly handed over the day-to-day power to a government that they appointed. You did not get the sense that they were really trying to hang on to power. They just wanted to deal with what they saw as a specific set of issues, which were about the over-dominance—as they saw it—of pro-Thaksin forces in Thai society and the Thai state.
If we fast forward to 2014, we now have a coup group that has been much more hardline and dogmatic. Hundreds of people have been detained either formally or informally for long periods of time. This is a far more rigid and extended control of activities, censorship of media, and suppression of academic discussions. Just recently, some very distinguished friends of mine were dragged off from the Thammasat University campus down to the police station for “illegally” holding a seminar that was going to touch on political issues. In all, this is a very hardline way of handling things, and it differs quite considerably from the approach they had last time.

Unfortunately, the 2014 coup makers persist in believing that 2006 was a “soft” coup, which is why it failed. My interpretation, which I have written about in a couple of common pieces, is rather different. The coup in 2006 did not succeed because the goal of reorganizing Thai politics and society is beyond the capacity of the military, and just trying to act tougher than last time is not going to work. Therefore, I am afraid that the present coup group is quite misguided. They really seem to believe that they can restructure the nature of Thai politics. Anybody who has seriously and objectively studied the situation will understand that you cannot intervene militarily and get everybody to embrace “national happiness,” create reconciliation, and bring everyone to one notion of what Thailand should be about, because it is a very complex, large, diverse, dynamic, and messy country. In all, I am afraid that the coup leaders have some rethinking to do. It is just a matter of when they are going to come to terms with the reality that this coup is just not going to work out.

Journal: General Prayuth Chan-Ocha recently became the new Prime Minister of Thailand and offered a possible return to democratic rule. What are some prospects of political growth in Thailand?

McCargo: The prospect of a return to democratic rule keeps rolling further away. They started off thinking maybe to have an election in a year, and now this timeline has become rather vague: “We are not going to be held to a timetable,” “It is a question about when we are ready,” “Do not rush us,” and so on. I think that it is a bit difficult for people because Thailand has had many military coups and crises, and usually people can see a positive end in sight. That was very much the case in 2006 when the military said from the very beginning: “We will draft a new constitution.
We will have a new referendum on it, and once the referendum goes through we’ll be able to go back to politics as usual.” Therefore, we had a much clearer sense of a timetable last time and indeed in 1991.

I think this is what creates the difficulty. The coup is now over five months old, and we still do not have a really clear sense of what the plan is. It is obvious that the military does not want the pro-Thaksin forces that successfully won every conventionally staged election from 2001 to the present to win again. It is very difficult to see how the military believe that that they can reorganize the political system in such a way as to change the outcome. How could this be the case unless you are going to, in some way, dramatically reduce the level of popular participation or change the rules of the game such that you can be sure of winning that game? A lesson of 2006 was that simply taking a certain amount of limited action—freezing Thaksin’s assets, banning his political party, and changing some bits and pieces of the constitution—did not stop the pro-Thaksin party from coming back in subsequent elections.

This, I think, is the problem. The military have an objective. They do not explicitly say our objective is to stop the pro-Thaksin forces from coming to back power, but that appears to be the objective. It is not a very realistic objective unless you are going to roll back the electoral democracy quite substantially for the Thai people, who are used to having ample opportunity to express their opinions. Recent political history does not support simplistic culturalist notions about the Thai people being very sweet and passive. Thais love to get out on the streets and express their opinions – and this includes people from both sides of the political spectrum. I think it is going to be very difficult for the current government to keep everyone happy. When people are used to having a lot of political space, closing down that political space for a limited period is one thing, but closing it down for an indefinite period with no clear end game in sight is going to get much more difficult. The level of public skepticism about this process is already growing, and looks unlikely to decline.

Journal: In your latest book, Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand’s Southern Conflict (NIAS Press, 2012), you explore the relationship between the Thai state and organized religion. Do you think the regime change in Thailand will have any significant impact on the ongoing unrest plaguing the country’s southern region?
McCargo: There are a lot of problems in the three provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat (plus four districts of Songkhla) in the southernmost part of Thailand, where I had the opportunity to spend a year doing fieldwork a few years ago and about which I have written a couple of books.

The first book that I wrote about this conflict, Tearing Apart the Land (Cornell, 2008), is subtitled “Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand.” In this region, eighty percent of the people are Malay Muslims. They are not “Thai” in the sense of being Thai Buddhists who speak Thai as their first language. These people are culturally, ethnically, and religiously very different from the majority of the people in Thailand. What you normally do when you have a culturally distinct minority that has its own specific identity and is geographically concentrated in one area, is open up the political system to accommodate that area of the country by giving some kind of decentralization or autonomy. This is the whole problem. What has happened instead is that successive governments—although occasionally flirting with the idea of some sort of decentralization of power—have actually been unable to mainstream that agenda. One of the reasons why civilian governments have not been able to push for some form of autonomy is resistance from the military for whom Thailand’s southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat are functioning as a kind of army colony. The army has long controlled this region, and they do not want to see the decentralization of power. For them, this is a symbol of maintaining a notion of Thailand as a unified nation, but the way in which they are thinking about it is a very Cold War or even pre-Cold War notion of what “nationhood” is all about. Therefore, to have the military come back into power is, from the point of view of the southern border provinces, a very retrograde step. While any peace talks may not be completely successful or coherent, at least they could still talk about a process that could move towards a redefinition of the identity of that part of Thailand whilst retaining it within Thailand.

The argument was moving in favor of that discussion during the Yingluck period (2011-14). It took a number of years to get there, but people were coming to a consensus that the Deep South is a political problem that needs a political solution. Now that the military is in charge, however, it is once again a security problem, which needs a security solution. But a security solution is not going to work in this
situation. You might be able to impose your will on a minority of the population but you cannot impose your will on eighty percent of the population. Of course, the number of people who are actively fighting the Thai state is very small, but they are getting a lot of tacit support from the wider Malay Muslim community. Although the military can continue to pursue security strategies—they can talk about development, which they see in Cold War terms as a process where military units go in and promote development projects that will make people in the southern border provinces happy—this whole way of thinking is actually completely nonsensical and has very little to do with the reality on the ground.

In all, the military is in denial about what the problem is and is overconfident and confused about what the solution is. The sooner we can return to civilian rule and start discussing the conflict in the south as a political problem and not just a security problem, the better.

Journal: In the past, you boycotted studying Myanmar because you were unable to visit the country. Why is it so important for someone doing social science research to be in the field?

McCargo: When I was “boycotting” Burma, as I continue to call it, I would not go there because I was unhappy with the political situation. I did not really accept the legitimacy of the military regime after August 8, 1988 and for many years I declined to go to Burma. I made a week-long tourist trip to Burma in 1985 and went back for my second short visit in December of 2012 when a colleague asked me to speak to some political activists as part of a training project. However, I still do not feel desperately excited about going to Burma, just for a holiday or something like that, but I would go if somebody asked me to do something that I considered to be useful.

Certainly, during that period when I was not going to Burma—for what were essentially political reasons—I could not imagine doing any research about the country because the whole way that I work is based on a fieldwork approach. I was trained, as it were, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, which is a place that tends to emphasize the importance of fieldwork for Ph.D. students. Typically you would spend several months, or ideally up to a year, in the country or area that you were
working on in order to collect information and talk to people. That is how I have always worked, starting with my Ph.D. project and then with a project I did with the Thai press in the 1990s, and later on with a project I did in Pattani. Most recently, I spent a year observing the workings of the legal system in Thailand, including doing field work in police stations and in courts.

This inductive, fieldwork-based approach is the only way I know how to work. I am not someone who starts with a theory and then finds some examples to illustrate or contradict it. I am the sort of person who has to go and immerse themself in the situation under study. Therefore, I would not be able to do any serious work on a country that I was not visiting. Although I can also write general overviews and literature review pieces, if you are talking about a really substantive article or a book project, it is always going to have to be based on fieldwork and complete immersion in the country for me. This is by no means an easy option. To become a specialist on Thailand, you need to invest two to three years of your life just to get started—learning the language, travelling around the country, and getting to know people as well as you can. Although there are other ways of working, if you want to get a really rich and nuanced insight into a complicated country, like Thailand, I think that this is the best way to do it.

Journal: Given recent developments in Southeast Asia, can you comment on the future of academic research on this region?

McCargo: On the one hand, this is a great time to be doing research on Southeast Asia because so much is happening. We just had an incredibly exciting election in Indonesia. There are transitions taking place in Burma and another electoral process that is set to happen there. We have had a very troubling military coup in Thailand. We had interesting political developments in Cambodia last year. In all, there is a raft of things—the geopolitical tensions around the South China Sea, the regional dynamics, and the move toward ASEAN integration—happening throughout the region, and it is an exciting time to be studying it. Yet, the number of Southeast Asia centers in the United States or even in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world is relatively limited. The idea of fieldwork- and-area based knowledge that I am talking about is not very fashionable in terms of the way that social science
is being constructed and understood, especially in the United States, but to some extent in other countries as well.

Therefore, we are in a slightly ironic situation. There are more exciting issues to study and more opportunities than ever. The region is much more open to researchers than it has ever been. In places like Indonesia, people were constantly being kicked out fifteen or so years ago. Now it is fairly easy to go there and find out all sorts of interesting information with very little hindrance. But at the same time, the kind of work that I am talking about does not always seem to be appreciated by people who are more concerned with disciplinary developments.

I think what we need now is to think about new ways of doing Southeast Asian studies because the old model of stand-alone Southeast Asia centers is not delivering enough high quality work. We have to find ways of creating linkages and working with local scholars. I have done a lot of coauthoring of articles and even a book with colleagues in Thailand. I have supervised, to completion, more than twenty Ph.D. dissertations about Southeast Asia, most of them by people from the region. There is all this work that needs to be done in collaboration with people in Southeast Asia and other places, and we need to find new ways of working where we can make use of the power of technology and internet to communicate information. Today, technology makes things much easier than when I was doing my Ph.D. A lot of what I did as a graduate student—such as reading through piles of old Thai newspaper articles in the Thammasat University Library—I can do now from my desk in New York or Leeds. I do not need to go to Thailand at all. In the future, we need to find new ways of working that not only take advantage of those opportunities, but also allow us to get out into the region and to explore all of these things that are happening.

There is now a massive shift in the nature of the study of a region like Southeast Asia. Although I think that this is the case for other regions too, it is much clearer in the case of Southeast Asia, which is such a messy place to study. There are ten different countries, many different languages, and lots of different kinds of political systems. There is no nice, easy, one-size fits all paradigm that you can wheel in. This makes it much more difficult than Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East,
to generalize about. Southeast Asia, on the one hand, is really a region of opportunity in terms of what is happening there. It is easier to work there than before and there are so many exciting things going on, but our ability to train students to do this kind of work is not supported by the way that academia has been moving. In the future, we need to find new ways of doing Southeast Asian studies in order to engage with all of these developments. I think that is the big challenge for all of us in this field now.

*Duncan McCargo was interviewed by Andy Nguyen and Sasha Han on 24 September 2014.*