

Somsonge Burusphat. (2006). **Reading and Writing Thai**. Bangkok: Ekphimthai, 322 pp.

John Hartmann \*

jhartman@niu.edu

This is a lucidly and elegantly presented learner's book on the Thai system of writing. Published by the renowned historical-comparative Thai linguist, Dr. Somsonge Burusphat, the book is the result of teaching Thai to undergraduates at Mahidol University International College in twenty classes for the years 1995-2004. Originally distributed as handouts, the lessons have been revised based on feedback from students and faculty alike. Knowing that it has been thoroughly field-tested is assurance that it will work in Thai classes elsewhere.

The "Gedney system" for presenting Thai spoken tones using his simple chart of tone boxes is both linguistically and pedagogically sound and is based on the history of Tai languages as well. This is what Ajan Somsonge has done. My own students who have gone to Thailand to continue their studies report back to me that this chart is the single most useful handout they have

in their possession when they encounter written Thai on signs, menus, schedules and the like and need confirmation on how to produce the correct tones.

She wisely begins teaching the middle class consonants first for the obvious reason that they are fewest in number and have only two "rare consonants," which she deals with later in a special chapter (14) that focuses on all the rarely used consonants that would only be a source of frustration to beginning students if presented wholesale at the outset.

Unlike many texts designed to teach foreigners to read and write Thai, this one places emphasis on using Thai script exclusively at the outset, not IPA. The latter is used for pronunciation purposes, much like the pronunciation guide in any dictionary, but the student is never asked to write in transcription, which, to me is both a burden and a crutch that only slows down the

\* Professor of Linguistics, Northern Illinois University

task of learning to become literate in the language. The text has many work pages that asks the learner to practice writing the shapes of the letters in the early pages and whole words later. But all of the writing demanded of the student is exclusively in Thai script.

In the later chapters, the learner is presented with authentic reading selections in the form of menus, signs, songs, TV. schedule and articles. There are many other enjoyable cultural items that provide valuable insights to Thai ways as well. One section lists topics for short student compositions such as a c.v., short notes, an informal letter. There is an extra bonus at the end of the book that the student who needs a break from formal study can use to

have some fun: an Appendix (p. 313) of "One Hundred Fun and Easy Things to Do in Bangkok." That is probably worth the price of the book, which is a bargain at only \$10 U.S.

The book is skillfully designed with alternating lines of shading to aid the eye and large font size to reduce the confusion over loops and diacritics that stand out boldly in enlarged form. A judicious use of photos and cartoons adds to the aesthetic pleasure of owning and using the book. It is compact enough to tuck into the side pocket of a backpack or lunch bag. This is definitely a book that belongs in the book bag or on the bookshelf of every student and teacher of Thai.