

# A.I.

## Protesters Chant on Behalf of the Dead in Ratchaprasong Intersection

By Benjamin Tausig

Ten years ago, in the aftermath of several days of shockingly public state violence against protesters in downtown Bangkok, the phrase “ที่นี่มีคนตาย!”—transliterated as *tii nii mii khon dai*—became the primary chanted mantra of dissidents. The phrase has no easy translation. That is exactly what gives it so much force.

Word for word, *tii nii mii khon dai* translates as "here are dead people." Protesters who wrote or spoke the phrase in English, however, made a variety of translation choices, from "there are dead people here" to "people died here" to "I see dead people." The different possibilities, all plausible, underscored the ambiguity of the chant. What it expressed was less important than the work of presencing, or "surrogation," that it performed. Chanting *tii nii mii khon dai* in flat repetitions, often from hundreds of synchronised human voices, invoked the dead memorially. It gave them substance.

And who were these dead? They were parents and children, laborers and retirees, young and old. Most but not all were Thai. In the main, they had come to a specific place—the commercial core of Bangkok, where wealth and power are spectacularly concentrated—to voice objections to a corrupt and brutal government. The protesters, broadly called Red Shirts, had organised an imperfect movement in many ways. They were led by a combination of sincere activists and rapacious grandstanders. The Thai government, and especially its military, predictably used these imperfections in an effort to invalidate the protests as a whole. They also used them as justifications to attack unarmed protesters with tanks and assault weapons, killing nearly one hundred people and injuring thousands in an effort to dispel them in May 2010. But these were not incoherent riots. The political problems that compelled the Red Shirt movement included decades or even centuries of corruption and structural inequality. The image (and sound and smell) of working poor people occupying some of the richest real estate in the entire country, staking their lives for recognition, made it difficult to ignore the economic and political inequality that animated their dissent. Place was important.

For these reasons, *tii nii mii khon dai* was not only an ambiguous text. It was also a meaningful material projection. The place where the phrase was chanted, Ratchaprasong intersection, mattered crucially. Listen once again to the resonance of the chant in the clip. You will hear its enormity, the cavernous space that its echoing describes. Tune your ears carefully, and you will hear that the chant is bouncing off of broad, hard surfaces. These include the concrete of the elevated rail (an elite form of transport), the asphalt surfaces of multiple intersecting roads, and the glass and steel of wealthy, towering malls. All of these signify power in Thailand—the power

of the wealthy and of the state, precisely the forms of power which have systematically excluded the rural and urban poor, with measurably increasing degrees of distance, for many years. There is very little social mobility in Thailand. Therefore, to chant in these elite places—to project sonic material into them—carries special weight.

Under ordinary circumstances, funerals and memorials use sound to make the dead symbolically and emotionally present. Mourners narrate stories, sing songs, and quote the deceased in ways that evoke them, and give the assembled a visceral sense of their being. Sound plays a similar role in protest, where its function is not only to make the dead emotionally present but also *politically* present. Such gestures are a fixture of protests against racial violence in the United States, for example, where protesters are encouraged to "say their name," in reference to murdered people of colour. This presencing rejects the claim that their deaths are banal—a narrative that the police often prefer—and reasserts injustice as the true and still unresolved story of their killing. Although this gesture is ultimately political, it relies on individual sensation at its core. People must hear sounds or words, and feel their memorial intensity, just as they would at a funeral, in order for those sounds and words to become political gestures.

*tii nii mii khon dai* arguably made no single communicative claim. It carried different significations for different protesters, as evidenced by its various credible translations. Nor was its main function to unite protesters. The various translations of the chant also suggested the different ideologies and approaches of the Red Shirts (a heterogeneity very much borne out by talking to the protesters, who often had radically contrasting politics). Chanting *tii nii mii khon dai* in unison did not erase these differences. But it was not quite an empty signifier. What the chant accomplished was a symbolic resurrection of people murdered by the state. This resurrection acted, through listening, on the bodies of people standing in Ratchaprasong, or watching footage of it. From the emotional puncture of that reception came a sense of the presence of the dead. This carried over to political realms, refuting the implicit silence and sonic banality otherwise permeating the space. Here were the dead, not yet laid to rest.