or a river which never runs dry.\textsuperscript{50} When he realises that the Brahman-beggar is coming
to ask for his children, Vessantara is preoccupied with finding the beggar to receive
royal alms, ‘as a drunkard is to find liquor to drink’.\textsuperscript{51} When Chuchok asks him for the
gift of the children Vessantara is as happy as if a poor man was offered a great amount
of money.\textsuperscript{52} When Vessantara gives Matsi to Indra (disguised as Brahman) he utters the
words,

\begin{quote}
\textit{O than phram oei}
\textit{wa thung than kan kuson yai}
\textit{nam chai rao mai chuan choei yor thor}
\textit{sing rai than hak ork park khor kap tua rao nai khrang ni}
\textit{rao kor mi khwam yin di yorm yok hai}
\textit{mai wan wai duai khwam alai nai panraya ru wa khwam trani}
\textit{sapsin sing thi mi yu nai amnat tua rao at pen chao khorng khopor khormng wai}
\textit{ru cha borichak hai kae phu un}
\textit{rao khor wa yang yun mankhong trong tam atayasai}
\textit{rao mai dai khit pit bang som wai mi hai yachok hen lae ru}
\textit{phro samoe yu pen nit nam chit khorng rao yorm yindi mi apirom}
\textit{yu tae nai thi cha bamphem than dang rao pattian ni lae}\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

O Brahman
As for giving, the great form of merit-making
My generosity does not hesitate or waver
Anything you ask of me now
I am happy to give to you
I do not regret the gift of my wife nor am I slow to give
All the things in my power and possession
That I can give to other people -
I am firmly resolved in my habits! -
I do not think to hide them from the sight or knowledge of beggars
My kindness is always glad and willing
I know only of giving, as I here avow

Among the wishes that Indra grants Vessantara is that he never run out of things to give
to others.\textsuperscript{54} Indra keeps his pledge, and when Vessantara returns to the city as king he
sends a shower of jewels knee and waist deep, part of which Vessantara gives to the

\textsuperscript{50} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 264; Maha chat kham luang, pp. 269-70.
\textsuperscript{51} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 197; Maha chat kham luang, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{52} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 203; Maha chat kham luang, p. 191.
\textsuperscript{53} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, pp. 264-5; Maha chat kham luang, p. 271.
\textsuperscript{54} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 279; Maha chat kham luang, p. 278.
citizens and part of which he collects for future gift-giving.\textsuperscript{55}

As the major source and conduit of the theory of the Perfections (barami), the Jatakas are arranged in the Pali scriptures in such a way as to give a structural bias to the Perfection of Giving, since the story of Vessantara is the last story in the Jataka Commentary. The bodhisatta’s birth as Vessantara is his penultimate incarnation before the achievement of Buddhahood, after a journey of countless incarnations (of which only a small number are supposed to have been related in the Jatakas). It is through the bodhisatta’s attainment of than barami in this incarnation as Vessantara that all the Perfections are finally achieved, and enlightenment and Buddhahood are within reach.

Than (Pali, dana) is variously translated into English as ‘alms’, sometimes ‘charity’, or simply ‘giving’. It is the central term in a rich vocabulary in the Thai language of words corresponding in various degrees to the English word ‘give’. Besides than there is hai, thawai, horichak, fak, prakhen, prasat, prathan, chaeo, chai, morp, yok, sala, uai/oi and amnuai, among others, each denoting slight variations of context and circumstance in which this activity takes place. Within the concept of the Ten Perfections, the ethic of giving held an exalted position in Thai social relations.

Today the idea of giving, charity or donation has the notion of an act devoid of self-interest. In the modern age of commercial relations, where a multitude of kinds of exchange are regulated by financial transaction, there is something almost ‘romantic’ about giving. This modern notion of giving, however, is inappropriate in interpreting the importance of giving in premodern society. In economies where money transactions are limited, like many of those in premodern Southeast Asia - particularly outside the royal cities - giving assumes far greater significance.

Much has been written on the role of trade in state formation in Southeast Asia, yet comparatively little attention has been given to the vital role of gift exchange. Unlike trade, where the two parties were bound together only for the short duration of the transaction, the gift actually bound together parties in a closer and more enduring relationship through the creation of long-term indebtedness and the obligation to reciprocate.\textsuperscript{56} In his study of gift-giving in ‘archaic’ societies, Mauss identified three types of obligation concerned with the gift: the obligation to give, the obligation to

\textsuperscript{55} Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 343; Maha chat kham luang, pp. 357-8.

\textsuperscript{56} J.Van Baal, Reciprocity and the Position of Women: Anthropological Papers, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1975, p. 50. The way the gift could create useful indebtedness for the giver is illustrated in a general manner by a Thai folktales of unknown origin. A rich man, wishing to marry off his son to a suitable woman, invites three eligible women to his house and asks each of them in turn, how they would use one fish to enable the household to eat all year. The first woman answers that she would salt the fish. The second says that she would dry the fish. The third answers that she would make a fish curry and give it to the villagers. Having given the right answer she gained the son’s hand in marriage.
receive, and the obligation to reciprocate.\textsuperscript{57} In such societies gift-giving created a network of obligations which required reciprocation, usually in the form of personal relationships, at some time in the future.\textsuperscript{58} In his commentary on Mauss’ findings Sahlins writes about the way the gift functioned in societies in a Hobbesian state of disorder - a state which would not have been exceptional in thirteenth and fourteenth century mainland Southeast Asia. Where the alternative might be war, exchange worked to moderate competing interests by encouraging relations of interdependency. Sahlins describes the gift as ‘the primitive way of achieving the peace that in civil society is secured by the State’, and concludes that ‘the primitive analogue of the social contract is not the State but the gift’.\textsuperscript{59}

Another reason why the ethic of giving was raised above other kinds of moral conduct was that it had great prestige value.\textsuperscript{60} Unlike the other Perfections, such as moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, patience, and equanimity, for example, which were cultivated in isolation, the cultivation of \textit{than barami} was only possible by entering into a relationship: the giver needed a receiver. Moreover, unlike other virtues there was always an audience for an act of giving, even if it were only the receiver. For political purposes it was essential that the king’s practice of self-perfection be recognised by the general public. Vessantara’s ‘Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds’, shortly before his exile, was performed before the citizenry of Sivi, and his return to the royal city was also accompanied by great public displays of alms giving. \textit{Than} was the most expressive of the Perfections.

In epigraphical evidence from the Sukhothai period it is clear that among the meritorious acts performed by rulers it was \textit{than} which was given pride of place.\textsuperscript{61} The scale of the royal \textit{than} (or \textit{phraratchathan}) was often enormous. One inscription refers to a \textit{than} presentation to the monkhood by King Lithai, comprising large amounts of gold and silver, ten million cowries, ten million areca nuts, four hundred sets of monastic robes, almsbowls, cushions, pillows, mattresses and ‘countless’ other items.\textsuperscript{62} Often


\textsuperscript{60} McClung, ‘The “Vessantara Jataka”’, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{61} See, for example, Prasert and Griswold, \textit{Epigraphic and Historical Studies}, Inscriptions 1-6: pp. 271, 382-3, 458, 494-6, 512, 515-6.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, Inscription 5, pp. 512-3.
particular acts of than recounted in the Vessantara Jataka would be models for royal alms-giving. For example an inscription in Thai from the 1340s gives a eulogy of a certain Sukhothai prince who,-desiring to become a Buddha, is said to have taken ascetic vows and offered his two children and wife as than - obviously in direct imitation of Vessantara’s famous gift.63

Why did Thai rulers indulge themselves in the act of giving, and moreover, wish to broadcast the message of the king as a great giver? The answer lies partly in the process of state formation taking place during this period. Scholarship on classical and early modern Southeast Asian state formation is now showing that rather than the use of coercion (although this was a factor), rulers more often than not had to employ other means to attract people into their sphere of control.64 In many cases compulsion was simply not an option. The geography of the region, characterised by extensive tracts of forest which was often impenetrable, particularly in the wet season, worked against any ruler physically extending their power beyond a very limited radius.65 The sheer fertility of the region, abundance of land, and low population levels meant that individuals had a relative freedom to settle and cultivate new lands, rather than being tied to any one piece of land or kingdom. The history of Southeast Asia tells of the perennial problem experienced by rulers of trying to secure and maintain manpower. The most common end result of wars was for the populations of the vanquished party to be rounded up by the victor and physically relocated within his own domain. On the other hand there are countless records of peasants unable or unwilling to endure the exactions of the state in the form of corvée service or tax payments, and fleeing beyond the state’s reach.66 In order for rulers to attract people to settle within their domain inducements had to be provided. A famous example is the so-called ‘Ramkhamhaeng’ inscription of the late thirteenth century, which has been called a kind of advertisement for the Sukhothai kingdom and its ruler, on account of the rosy picture it paints of the kingdom and the attractions it offered to potential citizens.67 In Southeast Asia providing inducement was as much a part of statecraft as was coercion.


67 Wyatt, Thailand, pp. 30, 31, 54.
The ideal of the king as ‘one who gives’ was one such inducement. Certainly the characterisation of rulers as bestowers of largesse is common throughout Southeast Asia. In the wake of Khmer domination the memory of the heavy exactions of the Khmer overlords on their Thai subjects (referred to in a number of Thai chronicles), may have been one of the factors behind the promotion of a more benevolent and generous image by Thai rulers. The twentieth century Thai historian Chit Phumisak cites the increasing influence of the Vessantara Jataka from the Sukhothai period as evidence of a new ‘philosophy’ of ‘self-sacrifice and giving’, which was challenging the oppressive rule of Khmer civilisation. Inscriptions from Sukhothai emphasise the king’s benevolence and generosity (ua fua), allowing traders to travel without levying tolls, to trade without royal interference, not seizing the property of his subjects upon their deaths, and not coveting the goods of others.

By contrast, Brahmins in the Vessantara Jataka are cast as greedy and avaricious. Vessantara’s exile from the royal city was caused by the actions of Brahman who had come to ask him for the gift of the city’s white elephant. It is a mean-hearted Brahman again who asks Vessantara for the gift of his children to be servants for his wife. Indra disguises himself as a Brahman to ask for the gift of Vessantara’s wife, Mātī. In the context of Sukhothai’s struggle for independence from the Brahman dominated Khmer empire, and indeed later the kingdom of Ayuthaya, the Vessantara Jataka may have been directed by rulers at winning ‘the hearts and minds’ of the common people. Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism are commonly depicted in the scholarly literature as living in peaceful coexistence, and the inscriptions do mention Brahmins residing at the Sukhothai court. Yet the poor light in which Brahmins are cast in such a popular text is suggestive of a level of tension which would already have been present due to geopolitical realities.

In premodern Thai communities it was essential that rulers show themselves to

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69 Wyatt, Thailand, pp. 30-31, 54.

70 Chit Phumisak, Sangkhom that lum mae nam chaophraya korn samai si ayuthaya (Thai Society in the Chaophraya River Basin before the Ayuthaya), Bangkok, Mai Ngam, 1983, p. 304.

71 Inscription 1, Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p. 260.

72 Ibid., pp. 268-270, 463-4, 491, 508.
be the greatest givers, for that was the most important foundation of their authority. Anyone who could challenge the king’s reputation as the greatest giver was a potential rival, for that would enable them to create a greater network of indebtedness and therefore the support necessary to mount a challenge.

The relationship between the act of giving and authority is another example of the ambiguous boundaries in Thai social life between the spheres of religion, morality and statecraft. It is clear that while the capacity to give was considered the supreme moral virtue (barami) among the Thai, at the same time it also provided the rationale for wealth accumulation and royal authority. It is, after all, impossible to give, to practice this virtue, if one has nothing. Wealth accumulation was the sine qua non not only of the gift but also of royal authority generally. Yet at the same time the gift is manifest evidence of a ruler’s piety. So the ethic of giving is central both to statecraft, in acquiring and maintaining authority, and to ascetic self cultivation. The association between morality and authority is neatly summed up by the term barami, which connotes both the Buddhist ideal of ‘Perfection’ and this Thai Buddhist notion of power. In the Maha chat it is illustrated by the conclusion of the story: by performing his great acts of giving Vessantara not only becomes king of Sivi but also achieves the Perfection of Giving, which opens the way to Buddhahood.

The principle beneficiary of the popular propagation of the value of than was the Sangha. Indeed, than most often refers specifically to acts of giving to the Sangha. As an unproductive class (the Vinaya contained strict regulations forbidding monks to engage in productive labour) the Sangha was totally dependent for its day to day existence upon outside material support. Given the importance of the Sangha to the dissemination of royal ideology it was in the interest of rulers to see that the Sangha was well provided for. So what took the outward form of royal piety, a ruler’s cultivation of the Perfection of Giving, was at the same time a form of support for the ideological dissemination of royal authority. Royal alms-giving to the Sangha had the added advantage of being the most ostentatious, the most public of all royal acts of self-perfection. The royal kathin ceremonies at which the king presented robes to the monks was above all a performance, a demonstration of royal support of the Sangha, and of the king’s preeminent position as the greatest giver in the kingdom.73 The sheer quantity of goods offered was also an expression of the material prosperity of the kingdom.

Royal support for the Sangha, however, was never enough. It was essential for the existence of the Sangha as a broad, popularly based institution to also receive material support from the general population. Yet the Sangha could only operate effectively within a community which was willing to support it. This accounts for the

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73 For kathin ceremonies in Sukhothai see Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, Inscription 1, p. 271; and Inscription 5, pp. 512-3.
exhortations in inscriptions from this period for the common people to engage themselves in \textit{than} in order to reap the rewards in a future life. Giving to the Sangha was valued as the highest form of merit making, as Vessantara makes clear in a speech to Matsi,

\begin{multicols}{2}
\textit{chao chong hai sap khao nam photchanahan wathalangkan an udom kae than phu song sin samathi phrommachan kor cha pen maha suwannanithi an prasert sing an un cha lam loet kwa than nan mi dai}\textsuperscript{74}
\end{multicols}

You should give rice, water, foods and all provisions to the holy men of virtue and chastity
This is the greatest and most perfect treasurehouse
There is no greater thing than \textit{than}.

Conversely, not being able to give to the Sangha was one of the worst fates to befall a person. One Sukhothai inscription recording a pact between a Sukhothai king and his nephew includes, among the terrible curses that would be realised if the pact was broken by either party, the curse that monks would refuse to accept one’s offerings of \textit{than}\textsuperscript{75}. Giving to the Sangha was backed up by the concept of reward for merit making in a future life. Such reward, known in Thai (from the Pali) as \textit{anisong}, was a powerful and pervasive idea, and was disseminated both through royal inscriptions and religious tracts. As we shall see below, the Vessantara Jataka and a number of related texts were primarily responsible for propagating the concept of \textit{anisong}. \textit{Anisong} was a major impetus for the practice of \textit{than}, and was consequently an important factor in assuring popular support of the Sangha.

In Thai society \textit{than} appears a contradictory moral. On the one hand it emphasised the Buddhist ideas of selflessness, non-attachment, and disengagement from the material world, but on the other, the twin concept of \textit{anisong} meant that an act of \textit{than} was inevitably in one’s self interest. Those who had the greatest capacity to perform \textit{than} were also those who were most attached to the material world. The case of Vessantara is a classic illustration of this contradiction. Although Vessantara gave away his White Elephant, the ‘Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds’, his royal horse-drawn carriage, his two children, and his wife, all of these gifts were returned to him at the end of the story, with the additional rewards of both the kingdom and future Buddhahood. Despite this apparent contradiction - or perhaps because of its resolution in the Vessantara Jataka - the ethic of \textit{than} became deeply entrenched in Thai social life. Of all

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip san kan}, p. 33; see also \textit{Maha chat khun luang}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{75} Prasert and Griswold, \textit{Epigraphic and Historical Studies}, Inscription 15, English trans., pp.180-1.
virtuous and meritorious acts of popular Buddhism in Thai kingdoms, than became the most basic and typical act.

The Vessantara Jataka, the Family, and Thai Social Relations

More than any other Buddhist scripture known to the Thai the Vessantara Jataka is a story about the family and social relationships. This, perhaps as much as any other reason, explains why the story appealed to a mass audience. As the basic unit in society, relations within the family were of concern to everyone - to the aristocracy and nobility as much as to rural villagers. The Maha chaṭṭha was a discourse not only about kingship, moral and ascetic self-cultivation, and royal power, but also about relations within the family. The fact that these issues were played out at the level of the family made the story much more realistic and accessible to a popular audience. The Vessantara Jataka addressed issues of authority generally, and authority started in the family, in relations between husband and wife, between parents and children. The principal relationships dealt with in the story are those between father and son, mother and child, husband and wife, family and state, and the individual and society. The Maha chaṭṭha examines the hierarchies, tensions, and contradictions within these relationships. What then were the models of such social relations provided by the Vessantara Jataka?

The relationship between father and son is characterised by the absolute deference of the latter to the former. Vessantara must obey his father’s order for his exile; and Chali must obey Vessantara when he gives him and his sister Kanha to Chuchok as than. The children are Vessantara’s property to give, in order that he can achieve enlightenment and pass into nibbana. This hierarchical relationship is, however, tempered by a tie of paternal love. This provides much pathos when the two aspects of the relationship are in conflict with each other. Yet this love is strictly subordinated to the father’s self-interest, a fact the story graphically illustrates when Vessantara does nothing even when he sees his own children being beaten.

Between mother and child the relationship is characterised by the dependence of the child upon the mother, reciprocated by the mother’s maternal love for the child. Matis’s devotion to her children, and Phutsadi’s love for Vessantara, are major themes in the story, repeated again and again. As opposed to the father - son relationship, the interests of the child are placed above those of the mother. The mother - child relationship is also shown to be subordinate to the will of the husband or father, as when Sonchhai overrules Phutsadi’s plea that Vessantara not be exiled, and when Matis must acquiesce to Vessantara’s gift of the two children to Chuchok.

The husband - wife relationship is characterised by the absolute deference of the latter to the former, and, in the case where Vessantara and Matis take vows of
asceticism, the dependence of the former upon the latter for his material well-being. This hierarchical relationship is again challenged, though in the end not affected by, ties of conjugal love. This conflict between conjugal love and Vessantara’s ascetic pursuits provides more pathos in the narrative. For example, fearing that she was dead, Vessantara momentarily breaks his vows of asceticism by taking Matsu in his lap when she has fainted from the distress of her missing children. But Vessantara’s gift of his wife to Indra in the interests of achieving than barami is a clear demonstration of the subordination of relations of conjugal love to male spiritual endeavour. Matsu should also be understood as the property of Vessantara, as are the two children, for they are gifts given by Vessantara in the same way as his other material property - the White Elephant, and his wealth. For example, Matsu says to Vessantara,

Than phraong nan pen chao khong khorp khong pen an khat
mi amnat pen yai nai tua rao

You are my owner, my master
You have absolute power over me.

The relationship between Vessantara and Matsu is also shown to rest upon a principle which has become fundamental in Thai social relations. That is that power and ascetic pursuits are the preserve of the male/father, while activities in the domestic sphere, such as the care of children and providing for the livelihood of the family, are the domain of the female/mother. This gendered division between the spheres of power and spirituality (especially regarding the Buddhist monkhood) on the one hand, and domestic life on the other, which the Vessantara Jataka portrays so clearly, has persisted in Thai society with little change into recent times.

The relationship between Vessantara and Matsu is contrasted in every way to that between Chuchok, the ugly old Brahman, and his beautiful young wife, Amittada. Chuchok’s attachment to Amittada is based on lust, while Vessantara’s ties to Matsu are for the most part spiritual in nature. Vessantara is entirely dependent on Matsu to support his ascetic endeavours, to the extent that this overrides her attachment to her own children. Whereas Matsu renders absolute obedience to Vessantara, Amittada refuses to obey Chuchok and carry out her domestic duties, and threatens to leave him. Amittada’s obstinacy is the impetus for Chuchok’s journey to the forest to ask Vessantara for the gift of the two children. The story casts the two conjugal relationships in starkly contrasting moral terms.

As for the relationship between family and state, the two are seen to be

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76 From the Bangkok period version of the Maha chat. Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 268; see also Maha chat kham luang, p.273.
intrinsically related to the extent that the integrity of the family is shown to be essential to the health of the state. The structure of the story is built around the progressive break-up of the royal family of Siwi, from Vessantara’s exile from his father’s kingdom, to the gift of the children and Matsu, to its reunion at the end of the story. In the final two chapters when the family is reunited (Sonchai, Phutsadi, Vessantara, Matsu, Chali, and Kanha) auspicious occurrences take place: the earth quakes, the White Elephant is returned, a shower of jewels falls from the sky; and there is general rejoicing among the citizens. The reunion of the royal family is propitious for the kingdom at large.

The relationship of the individual to society underlies all of the above relationships. Vessantara’s duty to society, as a bodhisatta whose future enlightenment will enable others to escape the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering, overrides his obligations in all other relationships, most poignantly his duties to his own family. As Vessantara states in the narrative, enlightenment is a far dearer to him than his children or his wife,

\[
\text{phram eoi luk thang sorng khorng rao ni rao rak dang duang naiyanet} \\
\text{het wa rao rak phra phothiyan ying kwa sorng kuman dai roi thao phan thawi} \\
\text{det phon than nai khrang ni chong samret} \\
\text{tae phra soisanphet phuthaharonaworanayan} \\
\text{nai anakhothakan non thoet}^{77}
\]

O Brahman, my two children I love as my own eyes
Yet a hundred, a thousand times more than these children
do I love enlightenment!
So may the result of this act of giving in the future bring
Omniscience, the supreme jewel of enlightenment.

Similarly, Sonchai’s royal duty to carry out the will of the citizens by exiling Vessantara must override his loyalty to his family. The individual’s duty to society, whether it be defined as the citizenry or humankind, is raised above all other social obligations.

The fact that all the conflicts in the various relationships are resolved to the happiness of all parties demonstrates the moral of the story: if one heeds this hierarchy of relationships, and recognises and conforms with the mutual obligations each relationship entails, the outcome will be beneficial to all concerned.\(^{78}\)

It is not difficult to understand why such relationships should have been of concern to early Thai rulers. The thirteenth century was a time of particular instability

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\(^{77}\) Maha wetsandom chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 215. See also Maha chat kham luang, pp.272-3.

\(^{78}\) These Buddhist ideal relationships bear a close resemblance to the Five Relationships of Confucian social thinking: ruler - subject, father - son, husband - wife, elder brother - younger brother, and friend - friend.
and realignments, social as well as political, following the break-up of the classical empires of Angkor and Pagan, the Mongol invasions and the establishment of the first Tai states. The breakup of Sukhothai’s dominion and the rise of the Ayutthayan kingdom in the fourteenth century would have meant a similar environment of social instability. In such uncertain times rulers must have found it desirable to provide appropriate examples of the ideal sorts of relationships with which a strong community could be formed. In the absence of elaborate bureaucracies, inadequate revenue collection, undeveloped legal structures, and difficulties in military logistics - the commonly understood *sine qua non* of a state - such relationships when reproduced hundreds and thousands of times could be thought of as the network of attachments which as a whole constituted the state.

At the apex of this network of relationships was the ruler’s own family, whose members were often his most important political allies. At this level proper familial relations - meaning the maintenance of a recognised hierarchy - were essential to the ruler’s authority. The Ramkhamhaeng inscription stresses Ramkhamhaeng’s respect for his father, mother, and elder brother. Inscriptions from Lithai’s reign also show how the king relied upon his brothers, sons, and grandsons in administering the kingdom’s affairs. Also, in the Sukhothai kingdom a system of patrilineal descent was established to regulate the succession of rulers. Given this reliance on kin relations it is not surprising that inscriptions from the period emphasise proper relations amongst family members, especially respect for one’s mother, father, and elders.

Marriage relations similarly had consequences for royal authority. Intermarriage amongst the rulers of the various *muang* (small Tai polities) was one of the most common ways in which inter-*muang* rivalry was managed, and ethnic differences were overcome. Intermarriage resulted in small communities being amalgamated into larger socio-political units by uniting groups of people who had previously been under separate authority. The significance of marriage relations for the Sukhothai state is underlined in one chronicle which has King Ramkhamhaeng related to the king of Nakhorn Si Thammarat, the king of Angkor, and the king of Ayodhya (the ‘forerunner’

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80 Sukhothai inscriptions show that Ramkhamhaeng inherited the throne from his brother, Ban Muang, who had inherited it from his father Si Intharathit. Ramkhamhaeng was succeeded by his son Loethai, who was eventually succeeded by his son Lithai, after he had fought off a usurper, details of whom are unknown. Lithai was succeeded by his son, Maha Thammaracha II, who was followed by his son, Maha Thammaracha III, who was followed by his son, Maha Thammaracha IV; Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, East Asian Historical Monographs, Duang Kamol, Bangkok, 1976, Appendix A.

81 For example, Prasert and Griswold, *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, Inscription 3, p. 463.

Thai kingdoms were themselves conceptualised in kinship terms. For example when he became king, Ramkhamhaeng acquired the title ‘phor’, meaning ‘father’, while princes or nobles were known as luk khun, or the ‘ruler’s children’. In the Ayuthayan kingdom the term muang luk luang, meaning ‘cities of the royal sons’, was used to denote the major cities of the kingdom - even if the rulers of these cities were not actual sons of the king. Such terminology might be residual of a time when social formations were more kinship-based. The Thai were not alone in their use of kinship terminology to describe state relations. The practice was widespread throughout Southeast Asia. The use of kinship terms to describe what amounted to power relations necessarily implied a hierarchical relationship. One’s kinship status implied behaviour appropriate to that status. The same cluster of terms found in inscriptions and religious texts such as the Vessantara Jataka and the Traiphum which signify hierarchy, including chong rak phakdi - ‘loyalty’; kharop napthu and yam kreng - ‘respect’; and sawami - ‘lord’ or ‘husband’, for example, were used both for intra-familial relations as well as to describe relations between subject and ruler. The family was therefore a microcosm of the larger community and relations within the family could be seen to reflect relations on the macro scale. Matters of family were consequently of state concern.

If the maintenance of proper familial relations was seen to be fundamental to the stability of the kingdom, disregard for such proper relations might mean the weakness of the state. One Sukhothai inscription appears to attribute the breakup of Sukhothai’s dominion in the fourteenth century to dissension among relatives.

Familial and social relations such as those described in the Vessantara Jataka may appear unremarkable (albeit conservative) to us now. The apparent naturalness of familial relations hides the fact that they are as much the result of culture as of nature.

83 Ibid., p. 40.


87 See the conjectural translation in Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p.460.
They are not fixed. Although the so-called decline of ‘family values’ is seen by some social conservatives to be a recent phenomenon, the modern scholar should be aware of the perceived fragility of such relations even in the early history of the Thai. Old Buddhist prophecies propagated in such common works as the Traiphum, the Phra Malai story, the Anagatavamsa, and the Metteyasutta, describe the coming of a future time of disorder and killing (variously referred to as lokawinat, satthandarakap, mihhasanyi, or kali yuk) after the final disappearance of the Buddhist religion. This would be an apocalyptic time when all social relationships would be turned on their heads. Relatives would ‘forget’ each other and enter into sexual relations and violent conflict. Children would no longer respect their parents, turning on them and killing them. Parents would fail to care for their children. Husbands and wives would enter into extramarital relations. Citizens would rebel against their rulers. The whole age would descend into a violent maelstrom of killing and chaos.

This social chaos is followed by a ‘golden age’ foretold in the same prophecies, immediately prior to the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya. This age is characterised by monogamous relations between men and women, children’s respect for their parents, peaceful relations amongst rulers and subjects, and the absence of royal overthrows - phenomena which by virtue of their inclusion in the prophecies are obviously causally interrelated.

The Vessantara Jataka was preeminent among a number of works, including inscriptions and religious texts such as Lithai’s Traiphum, that disseminated models of ideal social relationships. Chaos and disorder were never far from the minds of the Thai. Not only did they have experience of it in their own lifetimes but the coming of a future apocalyptic age was assured in the prophecies mentioned above. By spreading the notion that the very act of listening to certain religious texts was the key to transcending the future apocalyptic age, notions of a hierarchical ordering of social relationships which these same texts contained were also disseminated, thus aiding present day purposes of social integration. As we will see below, listening to the Vessantara Jataka became valued by Thai rulers as the prime act by which the common people could be assured of reincarnation in this future fortunate age. As such it was one of the foremost ideological influences in the formation of Thai social relations.

The Kingdom of Ayuthaya

Sukhothai’s hegemony in the region was shortlived. From the latter part of the fourteenth century Sukhothai and several of the other small Tai states, were drawn into the orbit of a new kingdom based at the city of Ayuthaya in the lower Chao Phraya basin. The new kingdom embraced most of Sukhothai’s former domain, as well as
much of modern day Thailand. Unlike Sukhothai, Ayuthaya was able to retain control over its empire for a longer period. As in Sukhothai, Buddhism was invaluable to the extension of royal authority.

Buddhism, and the Ayuthayan kingdom, made great gains under the long reign (1448-1488) of King Boromatrailokanat. Boromatrailokanat’s reign is best known for the establishment of a structure of bureaucratic administration for the kingdom of Ayuthaya, including the formation of the sakdina system of social ranking, which became the political and legal foundation of the Thai feudal state until the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. In many ways Boromatrailokanat typified the model Thai king, of which Lithai was the exemplar in Sukhothai. He combined the qualities of the warrior, the scholar, and the self-perfecting ascetic. Much of his reign was spent fighting wars with the Yuan kingdom in the north, the main rival Tai state. Yuan phai, a poem commemorating Boromatrailokanat’s defeat of the Yuan, refers to Boromatrailokanat as ‘well versed in the three gems of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as well as in the Vedas’. He was the first Ayuthayan king known to have entered the monkhood (for eight months) after he had become king. He was an enthusiastic patron of Buddhism and the Sangha, constructing and restoring temples, importing Sinhalese monks and making great presentations of alms to the Sangha and the poor. Boromatrailokanat seems to have also played a significant role in the cultural union of the Brahman dominated south around the muang of Ayuthaya, with the more Buddhist-influenced north. The administrative capital where the king resided for many years was the muang of Phitsanulok, in the central-north, which for a long time had been captive of the cultural influence of Sukhothai.

It is not surprising that given Boromatrailokanat’s vigorous efforts to expand Ayuthayan authority through warfare, the strengthening of the bureaucracy, the development of a standardised corpus of law, and the extensive support of the Sangha, we should see the reappearance of the ruler’s ideological use of the Jatakas. The royal chronicles of Ayuthaya record that in 1458, King Boromatrailokanat ordered five hundred statues to be cast representing the incarnations of the bodhisatta - five hundred being the number of incarnations of the bodhisatta traditionally believed to have been

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88 Wyatt, Thailand, pp. 73-4.

89 Charnvit, The Rise of Ayudhya, p. 100. Mention of the Vedas indicates the respect at the elite level for pre-Theravada Indic learning.

represented in the Jatakas.\textsuperscript{91} Boromatrailokanat is also credited with the composition in 1482 of the \textit{Maha chat kham luang}, the oldest extant rendering into Thai of the Vessantara Jataka.\textsuperscript{92} By the end of Boromatrailokanat’s reign, with the defeat of the Yuan, and the administrative incorporation of Sukhothai into the kingdom, Ayuthaya had emerged to become, in Charnvit’s words, ‘the centre of the Thai world’.\textsuperscript{93}

The \textit{Maha chat kham luang}, as the first extant Thai translation of the Vessantara Jataka, shows beyond doubt that the story was being used by rulers for dissemination of the story beyond the élite group of Pali readers. By the latter period of the kingdom of Ayuthaya there is increasing evidence that it was widespread.\textsuperscript{94} Chronicles of Ayuthaya record that in 1627, the year of his death, King Song Tham ordered another version of the \textit{Maha chat} to be composed.\textsuperscript{95} Song Tham’s version, known to scholars today as the \textit{Kap maha chat}, is written in a relatively simple style of Thai, free of the ceremonial

\textsuperscript{91} This is the account from the "Luang Prasoet" version of the royal chronicles, which is believed to be the earliest version, originally compiled during the reign of King Narai; "Phra ratcha phongsawadan krong kao chabap luang prasoet aksoranit" in \textit{Kham hai kan chao krong kao, Kham hai kan khun luang ha wai lae Phra ratcha phongsawadan krong kao chabap luang prasoet aksoranit (Testimony of the People of the Old Capital, Testimony of Khun Luang Ha Wat, and Luang Prasoet Aksorani version of the Royal Chronicle of the Old Capital)}, Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1972, p.448. Some versions of the royal chronicles compiled in the Bangkok period differ slightly from this account, making it 550 \textit{bodhisatta} images that were cast, in 1444. The exact number of incarnations of the \textit{bodhisatta} represented in the Jatakas is a slightly problematic issue; see T.W. Rhys Davids, \textit{Buddhist Birth Stories}, London, 1925 (1st publ.1880, Truebner's Oriental Series), p. lxxiv.


\textsuperscript{93} Charnvit, \textit{The Rise of Ayudhya}, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{94} Nidhi Aeusrivongse, ‘An nuang ma chak maha chat muang phet’ (In Connection to the Phetburi Maha Chat), \textit{Pak kai lae bai rue: ruam khwam riang wa duai wannakam lae prawatisat ratanakosin (Quill and Sail, Collected Essays on Early Bangkok Literature and History)}, Bangkok, Amarin, 1984, pp. 302ff. From the eighteenth century there are increasing documentary references to the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka, such as Inscription Number 97 which mentions a performance of the \textit{thet maha chat} in Chainat (a town just north of Ayuthaya) in 1718; Inscription Number 97, ‘silacharik wat phaboromathat chainat’ (Inscription at the Temple of the Great Relic, Chainat), \textit{Prachum silachanuk (Collected Inscriptions)} Vol. 4, Prime Minister's Office, Bangkok, 1978, pp. 73-4.

\textsuperscript{95} See \textit{Phra ratchaphongsawadan krong si ayuthaya chabap phanchanthunumat (cheem) kap phra chakraphadiphong (chat) (The Phanchanthunumat and Chakraphadiphong Versions of the Royal Chronicle of Ayuthaya)}, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1964, p. 102 and p. 856. Song Tham displayed several common traits of the Thai ruler: his name means 'follower of the Dhamma'; as a high ranking monk he gained a large following as a scholar of the Buddhist scriptures and the Vedas. He became king in 1602 by overthrowing the reigning king, probably his half-brother, whom he had put to death.

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royal language and frequent Khmer and Pali phrasing which are found in King Boromatrailokanat’s earlier version, suggesting that the work was intended for a popular audience. It has also been argued that the poetic metre of this version is indicative of a text which was composed for oral presentation. The rules of composition were relatively loose (albeit given that the essential meaning of the original Pali was conveyed), allowing the poet the freedom to use the full range of his art for the audience’s enjoyment.

The widespread dissemination of the story was strongly encouraged by a number of other Buddhist works. One text with which the Vessantara Jataka became intimately related is the story of Phra Malai. The Phra Malai tells the story of a Sinhalese monk, Malai, who travels to hell and heaven, witnesses the conditions there, and brings the news back to people on earth, urging them to make merit - especially through than - in order to reap the rewards in the next life. While in heaven Malai speaks to the bodhisatta Maitreya, who is destined in his next incarnation to become the next Buddha. Maitreya gives Malai a message to take back to announce to the people: those who wish to be reborn when Maitreya is incarnated as the Buddha, in order to hear him preach the dhamma and to thereby become enlightened, should perform the Maha Chat ritual with the appropriate offerings of than, and complete it within one day. This is followed by a description of a paradise-like world into which the bodhisatta Maitreya will be incarnated.

The same exhortation to perform and listen to the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka and to perform acts of than appears in other ancient texts, including the Metteyyasutta (Treatise on Maitreya) and the Anagatavamsa (History of Future

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96 Kap maha chat (‘Maha Chat in the Kap Metre’), Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1964; see also Nidhi, ‘An nuang ma chak maha chat muang phet’, p. 305.


98 The earliest Thai version in the historical record today is that written by the poet-prince Thammathibet in 1737 (see Chao fa thammathibet: phra prawat lae phra niphon roi kromg (Prince Thammathibet: His Life and Poetry), Bangkok, Sinlapa Bannakan, 1970, pp. 239-294). but the original work is much older. The story first appears in a thirteenth century Sinhalese collection of stories called Rasayahini (McClung, “The "Vessantara Jataka””, pp. 74-5), and would probably have been known to Tai Buddhists via the influx of Sinhalese Buddhism from the thirteenth century. The Lao and Tai Yuan ceremonies of the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka (at least since the nineteenth century) were directly preceded by a recitation of the Phra Malai story.

99 Chao fa thammathibet, "Phra malai kham luang", p. 272.
The antiquity of these prophecies is indicated by the fact that the latter work is mentioned in Lithai's *Traiphum*. There is a common pattern to all these works. All are concerned with teaching the moral message of merit-making, with an emphasis upon the act of giving, than. All stress the rewards of acts of than - anisong. The Malai story describes in particular detail the rewards people receive in future incarnations for each specific act of than and other forms of merit. All show a concern for the future, a millenarian belief in the coming of a 'dark age', followed by the arrival of the future Buddha, Maitreya. All give the Vessantara Jataka - more specifically its recitation - an instrumental role in the ability of people to transcend this future age of chaos to secure rebirth in the age of the future Buddha.

**Lanna and Lan Sang**

It was not only in the kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayuthaya that the Vessantara Jataka had become a popular performative text favoured by rulers. It seems to have had a similar status in the Yuan kingdom of Lanna, centred in Chiang Mai, and the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang based in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. Founded around the same time as Sukhothai, Chiang Mai was a powerful rival of Sukhothai and later Ayuthaya, and was influential in the kingdom of Lan Sang. Buddhist monks from Sukhothai had propagated the Sinhalese style of Theravada Buddhism in Lanna from the late fourteenth century, and it may have been this form of Buddhism that brought with it the Vessantara Jataka. The earliest reference to the Vessantara Jataka's dissemination in the northern Tai kingdom appears in the *Jinakalamali*, a Pali chronicle of the kings of Lanna composed during a golden age of Buddhist scholarship and royal sponsorship of Sinhalese Buddhism under the reign of King Muang Kaew in the early sixteenth century. The *Jinakalamali* chronicle mentions that in 1519 King Muang Kaew listened to a version of the Vessantara Jataka which he had had written for the purpose of teaching.

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101 *Traiphum phra ruang*, p. 208.
the dhamma (thamma banyai).\textsuperscript{102} Once again the oral character of the dissemination of the story should be noted here. Apart from the Jinakalamali a Pali scholarly commentary on the Vessantara Jataka called Wetsandorn Thipani, written by a Lanna monk has also been dated from the reign of King Muang Kaew.\textsuperscript{103}

From the kingdom of Lanna, Buddhism was disseminated to the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang to the east. The two kingdoms were closely related, both politically and culturally. Under King Phothisalarat (1516-1548) many of the senior figures in the Lao Sangha appear to have originally come from Lanna, and a Lao chronicle states that in 1523 the king sent emmissaries to Chiang Mai to request sixty copies of the Tripitaka to take back to Lan Sang.\textsuperscript{104} These close relations continued under his son, Chalichetthathirat, who in 1548 briefly united the two thrones of Chiang Mai and Lan Sang. Scholars from Chiang Mai were brought to Lan Sang and Lao monks were sent to study Buddhism in Chiang Mai.\textsuperscript{105}

It was among the Lanna Tai peoples that the Vessantara Jataka first became connected in legend to one of the most sacred Buddha images of Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, the Emerald Buddha.\textsuperscript{106} The chronicle of the Emerald Buddha, Ratanabimbavamsa, composed in Pali by a Lanna monk in 1729, gives an account of the origins of the Emerald Buddha and its movements throughout mainland Southeast Asia, as successive rulers tried to secure the auspicious image for the purpose of ensuring the prosperity of their kingdoms.\textsuperscript{107} One of the incidents in the history of the sacred image related by the chronicle is that, when a late fifteenth century king of Chiang Mai ordered


\textsuperscript{103} Phra Sirimangkalachan, Wetsandorn thipani (Commentary on Vessantara), 2 Vols., Chiang Mai, A.D. 1517; Text transcribed from Khmer Script and Ancient Local Scripts, Project for the Transcription of Khmer and Ancient Local Scripts and Translation of Buddhist Texts into Thai, with the Support of the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council Committee and the Religious Affairs Department, Ministry of Education, (Unpublished Typed Manuscript in the National Library of Thailand) 1975. See also Damrong's preface in Chamthewiwong: phongsa wadan muang haripunchai (The History of Princess Cham; History of the City of Haripunjaya), Bangkok, Bannakit Trading, 1973.

\textsuperscript{104} Thawat Pumnothok, Wannakam thong thin (Regional Literature), Bangkok, Phira Phathan, 1982, pp. 156-7.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.


the Emerald Buddha to be brought from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai, the procession which accompanied the Emerald Buddha regularly stopped along the way to piously listen to a recital of the Vessantara Jataka.108 The chronicle recounts that when the elephant bearing the Emerald Buddha entered the territory of Chiang Mai the elephant refused to go on and uttered a terrifying roar. Taking this as an omen, the accompanying party informed the king, who replied that lots should be drawn as to which city the sacred image should be taken to. The result of the draw was that Lampang was the designated city. The elephant carrying the Emerald Buddha was turned onto the path towards Lampang and the procession set off anew, again stopping off along the way to listen to the Vessantara Jataka.109

This association of the Emerald Buddha with the Vessantara Jataka may be seen in a political light. The image had resided (according to legend) in a number of historically important Buddhist centres and Tai muang, including Pataliputra in northern India, Sri Lanka, the Khmer kingdom of Angkor, Ayuthaya, Kampaeng Phet, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Chiang Mai, and later Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, Thonburi and finally Bangkok, where it has resided since the founding of the Chakri dynasty in 1782. Possession of the image did much to confer upon a city the status of the centre of the Buddhist world.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the Vessantara Jataka has an ancient and continuous association with the Tai Buddhist peoples. It performed a vital function in state formation by disseminating through the powerful medium of textual recitation an example of an ideal social order. As expressed by the story this order consisted of three main elements. Firstly, a moral hierarchy based on one’s accumulation of the ‘Perfections’ (barami), moral virtues, among which the Perfection of Giving was preeminent. The Vessantara Jataka represents the ruler as a superior being at the apex of this hierarchy due to his greater accumulation of barami. The path of self-perfection, however, lay open to everyone. The second force for order contained in the story was the ethic of giving. The Vessantara Jataka portrayed the ruler in positive terms as the most generous giver in the kingdom; its message of supramundane rewards for the act of giving encouraged the expansion of the Sangha; and the social act of giving itself promoted increasing interaction and closer relations among the culturally and ethnically diverse peoples of the various Tai muang. Finally, recitation of the Vessantara Jataka

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108 Ratanaphimphawong (no pagination).

109 Ibid.
disseminated models of ideal social relationships, especially within the family and between ruler and subject. What the Maha chat had to say about the family in particular meant that it was more than a treatise about kingship, asceticism and power, but also a story which examined the fundamental unit of society. The family was a subject which concerned people in general. Surely this was one of the fundamental reasons behind the Vessantara Jataka’s popularity. In Tai Buddhist society Vessantara was regarded not just as a prince and a bodhisatta, but also a father, while Matsi provided the classical image of the devoted wife and mother. These were ideal roles to which everyone could aspire.

The thet maha chat’s role in state formation seems to be indicated by the fact that at moments of great political activity, such as the formation of the first significant Tai state in Sukhothai, or the vigorous extension of central power as in Boromatrailokanat’s reign, the story has received particularly close royal patronage. On the other hand the story should not be seen purely in terms of elite manipulation and social control. As a force for social order, the performance of the thet maha chat took place within an environment where social disintegration and chaos were ever-present dangers. The fragility of society was a consistent theme in Tai Buddhist teaching, as it must have been amidst the turbulence of premodern political life. Social disorder was a danger which both rulers and subjects shared a common interest in avoiding.

Unlike the more commonly understood factors in state formation such as military violence, administrative extension, expansion of royal trade, and greater efficiency in revenue collection, for example, the dissemination of the Vessantara Jataka tended towards the creation of what might be called ‘cultural communities’. Such communities recognised certain cultural codes which could themselves act as a conduit for central authority through the shared recognition between rulers and subject of specific ways of social behaviour. The reach and hold of cultural dissemination was potentially much greater than that of a ruler’s army. The widespread propagation of the Maha chat meant that it would have been recognised from Yunnan to Nakhorn Sri Thammarat, Luang Phrabang to Champassak, and beyond. This cultural community was far larger and longer lasting than any single Tai kingdom.

The following chapter will examine the relationship between the Thai people and the thet maha chat in the period in which the Thai state under the Chakri dynasty reached the apogee of its power. It is no surprise that it was then that the story was at the height of its popularity both in the rural villages and at the royal court.
CHAPTER 3

THE EXPANSION OF THE THAI STATE
AND THE HEIGHT OF THE THET Maha CHAT

After more than three centuries as the major political centre of the Tai world, as well as the capital of one of the most powerful kingdoms in Southeast Asia, in 1767 the city of Ayuthaya fell to besieging Burmese forces. If the fall of Ayuthaya had been dramatic, the resurrection and expansion of the kingdom in the decades which followed were no less so. In a remarkably short period of time the Thai1 had gained the submission of the rulers of all significant Tai principalities, including those of the Lao, Khon Muang/Yuan and Shan peoples, the kingdom of Cambodia and some of the Malay sultanates. In terms of vassal allegiance to the Thai king, the Thai state under the early kings of the Chakri dynasty was one of the largest in Southeast Asia, and considerably greater than the kingdom of Thailand today.

Scholars have marvelled at the rapid turn-around of the kingdom’s fortunes. It has been variously attributed to the military skills of its rulers, firstly King Taksin, and later the Chakri kings,2 the kingdom’s economic recovery through the expansion of overseas trade and the court’s tighter control over trade regions within its own sphere of influence,3 and the court’s energetic promotion of Buddhism to the exclusion of other religious practices, in particular Brahmanism and animism.4

Given this recognition of the critical role of Buddhism in the reformation of the Thai state in the early Bangkok period it is surprising that no study has seriously raised the question of the political role of the thet maha chat. The common categorisation of the

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1 I use the term ‘Thai’ to refer to the group of Tai inhabiting the lower Chaophraya river basin, whose language, culture, and ethnicity distinguished them from other Tai peoples.

2 This line of thinking is derived mainly from the royal chronicles which were compiled in the time of the early Chakri kings.

3 In a doctoral thesis submitted to Wollongong University in 1995 Puangthong Rungsawasdisab argues strongly that this was an important motivation for Thai involvement in the Mekong basin, Puangthong Rungsawasdisab, ‘War and Trade: Siamese Interventions in Cambodia, 1767-1851’, University of Wollongong, 1995.