It was in these areas and periods when the authority of the Thai king was uncertain or incomplete that the Thai kings paid special attention to the Vessantara Jataka. In the conditions of pre-modern Southeast Asia military force was never enough to ensure the enduring authority of the centre and the integration of outlying areas and peoples into a kingdom. The _thet maha chat_, because of what it says about the nature and acquisition of authority, as well as the expressive nature of the ritual, was an essential element in the cultural dimension of authority in the Thai kingdom. As Geertz has argued for ceremony and ritual in the ‘theatre state’, the representation of power or authority found in the _thet maha chat_ was not simply a masking of the real workings of power, but was itself an ‘ordering force’, in the same sense as military action, revenue collection, and the more commonly understood instruments of state power.  

If the royal capital was an ‘exemplary centre’ the royal recitation of the Vessantara Jataka provided idealized examples of authority and social order, whose actual expression contributed to their implementation in practice.

**The Vessantara Jataka, Buddhist Time and ‘Great Lineage’ History**

An essential element of the exemplary force that the Vessantara Jataka had for Thai kings was its special place in the general framework of Buddhist history. That is, the Vessantara Jataka was much more than a mere story lacking a wider historical context. Rather, it was situated within a much larger historical narrative which not only explained the origins of the Buddha, but also the origins of the Thai kings themselves. Let us now look at the conception of time and history in which the Vessantara Jataka was grounded, and how it related to the history of Thai kings.

According to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the origins of the Buddha were said to have begun four _asankheyyas_ (literally incalculable periods of time) and one hundred thousand _kappas_ (‘aeons’, or ‘world cycles’) ago. It was at this time that the brahman Sumedha made a vow at the feet of the Buddha Dipankara that he would himself one day become a Buddha. The Buddha at that time, known as Dipankara, made the prophecy that Sumedha’s vow would be fulfilled in four _asankheyyas_ and one hundred thousand _kappas_ in the future. Assuming the status of a _bodhisatta_, or a being

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73 The Pali works on which this tradition was based include the canonical _Buddhavamsa_, _Carivarti_, and the introduction to the Jataka Commentary called the _Nidanaka_.

74 The world is born, decays and ends within one _kappa_, to be reborn in a new _kappa_, and so on.
destined to become a Buddha, Sumedha began the task of accumulating the Ten Perfections. Following the Buddha Dipankara there appeared in succession over an immense period of time a further twenty-three Buddhas before the appearance of Gotama Buddha. It is as Gotama Buddha that the bodhisatta, originally the Brahman Sumedha, was finally enlightened.

In the period from when he made his vow to achieve enlightenment up to his actual enlightenment as Gotama Buddha the bodhisatta is incarnated countless times, including incarnations during the lifetimes of each of the Buddhas prior to Gotama Buddha. Five hundred and forty-seven of the bodhisatta’s incarnations are recorded in the work known as the Jataka Commentary. The Vessantara Jataka, the last Jataka in this work, is the story of the bodhisatta’s next to last incarnation, immediately preceding his incarnation when he finally achieves enlightenment as Gotama Buddha, four asankheyya and one hundred thousand kappa since his vow to attain enlightenment made in his incarnation as Sumedha. The incarnation as Vessantara, therefore, is the culminating moment in the bodhisatta’s career, and in the origin of the present Buddha.

The Genealogy of the Buddha and the Origin of Kings

As the historian Nidhi Aeusrivongse has shown in a study of the origins of the biography of the Buddha in the Thai kingdom, it was the narrative of the progress of the bodhisatta (as broadly outlined above) that was the framework for traditional accounts of

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75 The Nidana-Kathaka is quite detailed in listing these Buddhas and the times at which they appear. After Dipankara there appeared the Buddha called Kondana, and after a period of one asankheyya four Buddhas appeared within the same kappa: Mangala, Sumana, Revata and Sophiita; one asankheyya later three Buddhas appeared in the same kappa: Anomadasi, Paduma and Narada; then 100,000 kappa before the present kappa Padumuttara appeared; then 30,000 kappa later, two Buddhas appeared, Sumedha and Sujata; then 1800 kappa ago three Buddhas appeared in the same kappa: Piyadasi, Athadasi, and Dhammadasi; 94 kappa ago one Buddha appeared named Siddhattha; 92 kappa ago two Buddhas appeared, Tissa and Phussa; 91 kappa ago there appeared the Buddha Vipassi; 31 kappa ago there appeared two Buddhas, Sikhi and Vessabhu. In the present kappa called the ‘bhadrakappa’, meaning ‘fortunate aeon’, five Buddhas are destined to appear; Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, and Gotama Buddha, (who was the last Buddha to appear), and finally Metteya, who is the future Buddha. This time schema and lineage of Buddhas is quite different from the contemporary Theravada Buddhist time schema which is centred around the single figure of Gotama Buddha.

the Buddha’s origins. In fact, his study shows that before the Bangkok period Buddhist chronicles paid remarkably little attention to the actual life of the founder of the religion, the Buddha himself. These texts Nidhi terms ‘dhamma histories’ (hammaprawat), since they place less emphasis on the actual person of the Buddha than they do on the Buddha as a ‘principle of the dhamma’. Based on the Pali canonical texts the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka, and commentaries such as the Nidanakatha, these Buddhist historical narratives achieved widespread popularity and include such works as the Jinamahanidana and the Pathomsomphot. The emphasis in these ‘dhamma histories’ is on the bodhisatta’s accumulation of the Perfections. The incarnation as Vessantara and his achievement of the Perfection of Charity is always given special mention, as it is a decisive moment in the progress of the bodhisatta. Another reference to the Vessantara Jataka made by these narratives is in connection with the episode of the bodhisatta’s confrontation with the demon Mara immediately before the achievement of enlightenment. In response to Mara’s challenge the bodhisatta is said to have ‘called the earth to witness’ his achievement of the Perfection of Charity in his incarnation as Vessantara, to which the earth responded by quaking in affirmation, thus putting Mara and his army to flight. The bodhisatta’s story as told in the Jatakas, and in particular the Vessantara Jataka, would seem to have been inseparable from the life of the Buddha in Thai religious thinking of the time.

Early Western accounts of the life of the Buddha derived from Thai informants also indicate that popular perceptions of the life of the Buddha do not seem to vary greatly from the textual evidence. The late seventeenth century French missionary Gervaise who had spent four years in Siam gave an account of the Buddha’s life which


78 ‘Lakkan khom thamma’, ibid., p. 381.


80 See Phra pathomsomphothikatha (Story of the First Enlightenment), by Prince Patriarch Paramanuchit Chinorot, Department of Religion, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1962; this is a Third Reign work which was based on the Chinamahanithan and an older work called Pathomsomphot.

81 See Nidanakatha in The Story of Gotama Buddha, p. 98; Chinamahanithan, p. 96; Phra pathomsomphothikatha, pp. 180-1.

included the Buddha’s previous incarnations, the donation of all his possessions to the poor, and even the gift of one of his eyes as alms - all elements derived from the Jatakas.83

Another seventeenth century account, by de la Loubère, French envoy to the Siamese court in 1687-1688, presents a similar picture. Eager to find a book explaining the life of the Buddha de la Loubère wrote that this could not be obtained, so he was forced to rely on what he was told. His account includes the story that the Buddha gave his estate in alms, plucked out his eyes, and slaughtered his wife and children to give to an ascetic to eat, the latter a curious perversion of the Vessantara Jataka.84 Nevertheless, the centrality of the incarnation of Vessantara to the ‘life’ of the Buddha is clear.

Yet another account is that published in 1686 by a Jesuit priest who had spent some time at the court of King Narai.85 Father Tachard’s version of the Buddha’s life tells of the five hundred and fifty times that the Buddha had returned to the world, which is the nominal number of Jataka stories in the original Pali collection. The account also mentions the Buddha’s renunciation of worldly life and retirement to the wilderness with his wife and children, where, having fully extinguished his passions, he was able to allow a brahmin to take away his son and daughter and ‘torment’ them before his eyes; the donation of his wife to a poor man begging for alms, the putting out of his own eyes; and the giving of his own flesh to be distributed among the beasts - once again, a mixture of incidents derived from the Vessantara and various other Jataka stories.86 The widespread popularity of such Jataka-based ideas can be seen from Tachard’s observation that these feats ‘are the rare actions which the talapоins [monks] in their Sermons propose to the people for imitation, and the examples they make use of to incline them to virtue’.87

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83 The story of the giving away of all his possessions probably derives from the Vessantara Jataka (Nidhi, ‘Phra pathom somphothikatha kap khwan khluan wai’, p. 385) and the donation of one of his eyes comes from the Sivi Jataka. See also Nicolas Gervaise, The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam, translated and edited by John Villiers, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1989.

84 Nidhi, ‘Phra pathomsomphothikatha kap khwan khluan wai’, p. 386. See also Simon de la Loubère The Kingdom of Siam, with an introduction by David Wyatt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 136. Could La Loubère’s gruesome story have arisen from a confusion of the Thai word than, meaning both to give alms, and to eat?


86 Ibid., pp. 291-292. These incidents appear to derive from the Vessantara Jataka, the Sivi Jataka and the Sasapandit Jataka.

87 Ibid.
This narrative of the progress of the bodhisatta was not restricted to merely describing the origins of the Buddha. In turn it became part of a chronicle tradition which described the origins of kings and ruling houses throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. In other words, the bodhisatta's progress was incorporated into the genealogy of contemporary kings and rulers. The prototype of this historiographical genre was the famous fifth century Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahavamsa. 'Mahavamsa' literally means 'great lineage' and refers to the lineage from which the Buddha had descended, and of which the Sinhalese kings were the heirs. Beginning with the narrative of the bodhisatta's progress starting from his vow as the brahman Sumedha, the Mahavamsa goes on to present the bodhisatta's lineage in the present world cycle known as the bhadarakappa. The progenitor of the lineage is a figure called Maha Sammata, the first king of the present bhadarakappa and an incarnation of the bodhisatta - the future Gotama Buddha. His royal descendants are numbered in the hundreds of thousands, though only the most notable are referred to by name in the Mahavamsa. Of these, many are kings who are also recorded in the Jatakas, and some of these are actually incarnations of the bodhisatta himself: for example King Nimi of the King Nimi Jataka; Mahasudassana of the Mahasudassana Jataka; and most importantly, Prince Vessantara, his father Sonchay and son Chali of the Vessantara Jataka. It is


90 Geiger, The Mahavamsa, pp. 10-13; Wannakam samai ratanakosin, p. 52:

'The omniscient Buddha, the greatest of all Sages belongs to the lineage of King Maha Sammata. For in the beginning of this bhadarakappa our Lord Buddha was incarnated as the great king Maha Sammata. In the beginning of this kappa there were no kings; disputes arose and people stole each other's grain. There was no one to control the people. So the people all invited the great bodhisatta to be king...'


91 Among the other figures in the Maha Sammata lineage to whom I have found references in the Jatakas are Mucalinda, Roja, Sakara, Bharata, Angirasa, Suruci, Mahapata, Panada, Kalarajanaka, Okkaka, and Kusa; cf. E.B. Cowell, The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, translated from the Pali by Various Hands, under the Editorship of Professor E.B. Cowell, 6 Vols., Pali Text
from the lineage of kings descended from the *bodhisatta* king Maha Sammata that the Buddha and his own Sakya family belonged. Thus by virtue of his place in the lineage of contemporary kings as set out in 'great lineage' history, Vessantara is a crucial figure in the genealogy of the Buddha.

To construct their own histories rulers and ruling houses throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia merely appended their dynastic lineages onto the 'great lineage', (which in the original *Mahavamsa* had ended with the Sinhalese kings), thereby fusing the origins of the present king with those of the Buddha, Vessantara and back to Maha Sammata, the original 'king'. Both the *Mahavamsa* and historiography of this 'great lineage' genre enjoyed extraordinary popularity not only among Thai kings but also among those of the Burmese, the Lao, the Khmer, and other rulers in areas where Theravada Buddhist culture dominated and the *bodhisatta* kingship ideal prevailed.

The genre seems to have been particularly popular at the court of King Rama I. The first Chakri king actually had the *Mahavamsa* translated from the Pali into Thai in 1797. During the First Reign one of the best known of these 'great lineage' histories, the sixteenth century chronicle of the northern kingdoms the *Jinakalamali*, was also translated from the Pali to Thai.92 Another history of the same genre compiled in the First Reign was the *Sangitiyavamsa*, a chronicle of the Buddhist Councils and recensions of the Tripitaka compiled by a senior monk shortly after Rama I had convened his own Council to produce a new recension of the Tripitaka. Many histories of northern and northeastern kingdoms and principalities were composed in this genre, including the *Tamnan Munlasatsana*,93 composed around the same time as the *Jinakalamali*, the *Tamnan phum muang chiang mai*,94 the *Tamnan sip ha ratchawong*.95

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95 *Tamnan Sip Ha Rachawong*. *The Chronicle of the Fifteen Dynasties, Part 1* (Fascicle I-II), Lanna Thai Manuscript Project Phase 1, Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, October 1981, see pp. 9-12.
the Tamnan muang suwannakhomkham, the so-called ‘Sinhanavati Chronicle’, and the Ratchawong pakorn, the chronicle of the rulers of the principality of Nan. Versions of the latter four date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ‘Relic histories’ such as the Tamnan phra that haripunchai and the Tamnan phra that doi suthep are written within the ‘great lineage’ historiographical framework. Finally, ‘great lineage’ themes can also be found in cosmological treatises such as the Traiphumilokwinitchai, also composed at the court of Rama I, the Pali Lokathipakasan and the Pathomamulamuli, the latter a work widely known throughout the northern and northeastern regions of the kingdom.

To demonstrate their membership of this lineage and hence their royal legitimacy, Thai kings in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries claimed the title of ‘(maha) sommutiwiwong’, meaning literally ‘of the lineage of Maha Sammata’ - also an


98 ‘Ruang ratchawong pakorn, phongsawadan lanna thai’ (About the Royal Lineage, a Chronicle of Lanna Thai), Compiled by Saen Luang Ratchasomphun under the Order of Phrachao Suriyaphong Phritadet, Prince of Nan, Prachum phongsawadan (Collected Histories), Vol. 9, Part 10, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1964, see pp. 188ff.

99 Prachum tamnan phra that (Collection of Relic Histories). Parts 1 and 2, Cremation Volume, Nang Oep Umaphirohm, Bangkok, 1970; see pp. 28-9 and 139.

100 Traiphumilokwinitchai Vol. 1, Compiled by Phraya Thammapricha by Order of King Rama I in 1802, Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1977, see pp. 69-72.

101 Lokathipakasan. Compiled by Phra Sangkharat Methangkorn, Krom Sinlapakorn, Bangkok, 1986, see pp. 54-5. Eighteen copies of this text are extant, dating from 1771 to 1820.

102 Tamnan khao phi lanna pathomamulamuli/ pathomamulamuli, trans. Anatole Roger Peltier, Chiang Mai, 1991, English translation. A popular cosmology in the North and the Northeast, the Pathomamulamuli shows the structural importance of the Vessantara Jataka in premodern representations of the history of Buddhism. Before the text narrates the circumstances of the Buddha’s preaching of the Pathomamulamuli and the cosmography itself, it relates how ‘[a]fter he had achieved his earthly life as Prince Vessantara our Eminent and Precious Bodhisatva was born again in Tusita heaven where he lived four thousand celestial years. He thus came down unto the earth and was reincarnated in the womb of Queen Sri Mahamaya...’, p. 193 (Yuan version, p. 10; Thai trans., p. 11).
epithet of Prince Vessantara in the Thai version of Vessantara Jataka. Not only was the king himself perceived as having descended from the bodhisatta king Maha Sammata, but the Pali code of law inherited from the Mon and in use both at the courts of the Burmese and the Thai, the dhammasattham (Thai: thammassat), stated in its preamble that Manu, the figure credited with having been the original source of the law, was actually a minister in the service of Maha Sammata. The authority of a code of law originating from the rule of the first king Maha Sammata could be and indeed was cited, as in the case of King Rama III when he justified the crown’s taxing powers as having derived from royal custom since Maha Sammata.

One of the distinctive characteristics of ‘great lineage’ history was that the lineage whose history it related was only partly based on consanguinity or dynastic ties. It included literally hundreds of thousands of kings of many different dynasties and polities, and geographical areas which stretched from modern day northern India, to Sri Lanka, Burma, and various regions of Thailand, yet nevertheless it was seen to be the same lineage, of which present kings were the heirs. Of greater significance than blood ties was a notion of lineage based on what could be termed ‘ties of incarnation’, and which the concept of the bodhisatta king exploited. The Buddha was related to Vessantara, Nimi, Mahasudassana and other kings of the ‘great lineage’ in the sense that as a bodhisatta he had previously been incarnated as these figures. ‘Great lineage’ history, therefore, allowed contemporary kings to use to their advantage the same kind of lineal relationship to great kings of the past, to whom they were otherwise unrelated.

The obvious advantage of ‘great lineage’ history over dynastic history was that it could smooth over dynastic discontinuities which might threaten the legitimacy of a king or a ruling house. For example, during the Ayuthayan period when ‘great lineage’ historiography dominated, dynastic or blood relations were no firm guarantee of royal legitimacy. Indeed, the Ayuthaya period is characterised by relatively frequent dynastic changes (six in four hundred years), and many bloody coups. Rather it was a person’s barami which was the basis of his claim to the throne, just as it was his lack of barami

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103 See Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, passim.

104 Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer, pp. 93-4, p. 188; See also ‘Phra thammassat’ in Kotmai tra sam duang, Vol. 1, pp. 1-41.

105 Athchak Satayanurak, ‘Khwan plian prae khong sannuk thang prawatisat lae kan plian plaeng khong sangkhom thai tang tae ratchakan th 4 thung phor sor 2475’ (Shifts in Historical Consciousness and Change in Thai Society from the Fourth Reign to 1932), Masters Degree Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1988, p. 46.
which would be the rallying call of his enemies when he was to be deposed.\textsuperscript{106} The same lack of a strong dynastic principle was characteristic of the kingdoms and principalities to the north and northeast of Ayuthaya, where ‘great lineage’ history flourished. Likewise, the prominence of ‘great lineage’ history in the First Reign noted above is related to the problem of political discontinuity between the old kingdom of Ayuthaya and the new kingdom based in Bangkok. The Chakri ruled a kingdom seized by force from the King of Thonburi, and to which they had little claim based on dynastic ties to the former rulers of the kingdom of Ayuthaya.

There was, moreover, encouragement for aspiring rulers in the story of King Maha Sammata, in that Maha Sammata was, according to canonical scripture, chosen by the people to rule over them to end discord because of his status as a bodhisatta, rather than acceding to power through dynastic birthright.\textsuperscript{107} While this canonical precedent provided some flexibility in the choice of a new king, it could at the same time be a recipe for political instability, since it could be exploited by any figure who could convince others that he had the qualities of a bodhisatta and the right to rule. Such figures, known variously as phu mi bun, phu wiset, ton bun, or thammikarat (again, epithets used for Vessantara and other incarnations of the bodhisatta in the Jatakas), have appeared regularly in Thai history, particularly during periods of great crisis and social disorder, such as that immediately following the fall of Ayuthaya in 1767,\textsuperscript{108} and in the Lao speaking regions of the Thai kingdom and French Laos in 1901-2.\textsuperscript{109}

The concepts of the phu mi bun and the bodhisatta are virtually the same, differing only in one’s perspective: they both refer to leader-heroes whose authority derives from their practices of self-perfection. Phu mi bun was the term used, often pejoratively in court documents, for local ascetic figures who sometimes became leaders of revolts. Literally the term means ‘person of merit’. Such merit was acquired by the same practices of self-perfection as popular texts like the Vessantara Jataka describe for the bodhisatta. The term bodhisatta, however, was associated in court and religious documents almost always with ‘legitimate’ royalty. Both terms signify a Tai Buddhist

\textsuperscript{106} See Nidhi, \textit{Prawatisat ratnakosin nai phra ratchaphongsawadan ayuthaya}, pp. 52, 64-5; and Atthachak, ‘Khwam plian prae khorng sammuk thang prawatisat’, pp. 29, 80-4.


\textsuperscript{108} Cf. Nidhi, \textit{Kan muang thai samai phra chao kruung thonburi}, especially pp. 64ff.

kind of moral and political authority which flourished in the fluid political conditions of premodern Tai Buddhist states.

The fusion of the king’s origins as represented in ‘great lineage’ history with those of the Buddha has important implications for the way we view the relationship between ‘Buddhist history’ and the history of polities in which ‘great lineage’ history was written. In the Thai case most scholars who have studied ‘great lineage’ history of various types (often referred to as ‘tamnan’) note the ‘Buddhist’ character of the narratives, and often actually characterise them as ‘Buddhist history’.110 This terminology, however, has the effect of positing a distinction between the Buddha and the Thai king, and more importantly between ‘Buddhist history’ and, for example, ‘Thai history’. It is necessary to bear in mind that such distinctions have been imposed by later scholars for whom the Thai king bears no relation to the Buddha. The structure of ‘great lineage’ histories however, implies that no such distinction was perceived by the writers, patrons, and ‘audiences’ of such narratives themselves. Because they were perceived as belonging to the same lineage, the genealogy of the Buddha was seen as part of the genealogy of contemporary kings. It is by bearing in mind the conception of ‘great lineage’ history that it is possible to understand reports of Western visitors to the Kingdom of Ayuthaya in the late seventeenth century, which noted the popular belief that the Buddha had been a Siamese king, and even that the Buddha had actually founded the Siamese kingdom.111 This belief seems to have been little diminished by the time Bowring visited Siam in 1855, when he noted in the record of his visit that “The Siamese group their earliest ancestors around the first disciples of Buddha (Gaudama) and begin their annals about five centuries before the Christian era...”112


Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the apogee of Thai hegemony in mainland Southeast Asia coincided with the peak in the popularity of the *thet maha chat*, both at the royal court and in the kingdom’s rural villages. The two phenomena were connected. The Vessantara Jataka contained the elements of what became a Tai Buddhist conception of authority, and the *thet maha chat* was the means by which this conception was disseminated. The story portrayed rulers as the greatest givers, as beings possessed of moral perfection or the ten barami which had been accumulated through ascetic practices of self-cultivation, and as holders of supernatural powers which such moral perfection had endowed them with. The dissemination of these notions enabled the Thai kings to maintain an enduring semblance of authority in a vast kingdom with a relatively weak coercive apparatus, in terms of law, military forces, revenue collection, etc. The price to pay, however, was constant vigilance and suppression of local challenges to the authority of the Thai king, which were based on the same political conceptions.

Understanding the Vessantara Jataka as part of the genealogy of the Buddha, which in turn formed part of the genealogy of Thai kings, has great significance in the history of the Vessantara Jataka and the Thai kingdom. As we shall see in the next chapter, when the concept of political authority as exemplified in the Vessantara Jataka was rejected by the Thai court, it was precisely the Vessantara Jataka’s place in this genealogy and the very integrity of the story itself which came under attack from factions within the Thai court under the leadership of the king.

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113 It is perhaps for this reason that when one goes to the historical records of the kingdoms of the Tai peoples, the religious, literary, historical and ‘cultural’ works one finds far outweigh the more obvious records of state control such as legal codes, administrative records, taxation registers and so on.
CHAPTER 4

CHALLENGES TO THE THAI STATE
AND THE DECLINE OF THE THET MAHA CHAT

The expansion of the Thai state under the early Chakri kings had seen the apogee of the thet maha chat, both in the courts of kings and princes as well as in the village temples of most Buddhist, Tai-speaking regions in mainland Southeast Asia. However, from around the middle of the nineteenth century a gradual decline of the status and influence of the Vessantara Jataka at the Thai court can be traced, which coincided with a series of challenges which shook the foundations of the Thai state. The question needs to be asked, was the decline of the thet maha chat merely coincidental, or was it more directly connected to the profound changes taking place in the Thai kingdom?

The most significant of these challenges was the encroachment of the colonial powers in mainland Southeast Asia. By 1826 the British had taken the Burmese territories of Arakan and Tenasserim. In 1853, following the Second Anglo-Burmese War, the British seized control of the remainder of Lower Burma. Meanwhile, to the south, the influence of the East India Company in the Malayan peninsula was increasing. Following the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 the British established the Straits Settlements, made up of the port cities of Singapore, Penang and Malacca, which controlled an increasing proportion of the maritime commerce of Southeast Asia. British influence in the northern Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perak and Trengganu were challenging the Thai kings’ traditional hegemony in the region. To the east it was French power that was on the rise. The late 1850s saw the first French invasion of the Vietnamese kingdom, and by 1867 French military action had resulted in the creation of the French colony of Cochinchina in the southern part of the kingdom. Three years earlier French influence in the kingdom of Cambodia was formalised when the kingdom became a protectorate of the French. From being the dominant power in mainland Southeast Asia the Thai kingdom was now encircled on all sides by colonial powers. Just prior to his death in 1851 King Rama III is reputed to have remarked to his most senior minister that the threat from Vietnam and Burma was now gone, and that future wars would be with the West.1

Changes were also being effected in the economic foundations of the Thai state. Under the threat of British force Siam signed the Bowring Treaty of 1855, which opened the kingdom to foreign trade as never before, while at the same time attacking the fiscal basis of the Thai monarchy. Most royal monopolies were abolished, import and export duties were limited to an average of three and five percent respectively, the

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ban on the export of rice was lifted, and British citizens were granted extraterritorial rights. Within the next ten years similar commercial treaties were signed with other Western trading countries. The British envoy Bowring referred to the changes resulting from the 1855 treaty as ‘a total revolution in all the financial machinery of the government’. 

A further profound change was taking place in the sphere of cultural and intellectual life. Whether due to increasing Western contact, or the influence of a home-grown Thai ‘bourgeois’ class of merchant kings, royalty, and nobles which had been growing well before interaction with the West, the intellectual life of the Thai court - especially religious, historical, and scientific thought - began to take on some of the characteristics associated with modernity. Among these characteristics are what are commonly known to modern scholars as rationalism and secularism. Certain ‘traditional’ knowledges and cultural forms, on the other hand, came under increasing criticism by the reformist faction of the Thai court under the leadership of the Thai king.

This chapter examines the decline of the influence of the Vessantara Jataka at the Thai court amidst the great changes occurring from the middle of the nineteenth century. It will also look at the court’s rejection of the whole religious-historical framework in which the Vessantara Jataka was situated, and its adoption of a more recognisably modern form of historical writing. The key to these changes was the end of an ideology of authority based on the concept of the ‘man of merit’, the bodhisatta ruler, which underpinned the Thai Buddhist state and the monarchy at its apex, and which the Vessantara Jataka popularised. It was the threat to the existence of the Thai monarchy - and the Thai state itself - in this period that brought about renunciation of this ideology, and its replacement with a new concept of political authority, not implemented until well into the Fifth Reign, which was a response to this threat. Given that the Vessantara Jataka had been a central and enduring element in the political formations of the Thai peoples since historical records first began, its rejection by the court was an event of momentous significance for the Thai state.

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2 Ibid., p. 183.


4 See Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Pak kai lae hai rua: ruam khwam riang wa duai wannakam lae prawatisat ton ratanakosin (Quill and Sail: Essays on Early Bangkok Literature and History), Bangkok, Amarin, 1984.
The Court's Rejection of the Jatakas

It is increasingly apparent in documents and literature from the reign of King Mongkut that the importance of the Vessantara Jataka and the Jatakas stories as a whole in royal culture was on the wane. Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, a senior official and court historian during both Mongkut's reign and the early part of the reign of King Chulalongkorn, is reported to have viewed the Jatakas as mere 'fables'. It is from Mongkut's reign that the royal \textit{thet maha chat} becomes a less regular royal ceremony, scaled down in size and edged out of its usual place in the ceremonial calendar by new ceremonies such as the celebration of royal birthdays. The decreasing popularity of the Jatakas at the Thai court is reflected in the changing subject matter of sermons delivered to the king. Whereas in the reign of Rama I many of the texts which senior monks recited to the king for his spiritual edification were Jatakas or texts closely related to the Jatakas, by Mongkut's reign the Jatakas had (with the exception of the Vessantara Jataka) by and large been excluded as subjects for royal sermons. The Thammayut 'school' of the Thai Sangha which Mongkut had himself founded in the Third Reign was, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, refusing to hold \textit{thet maha chat} ceremonies ostensibly on the grounds that they did not recognise the Vessantara Jataka as a canonical text.

Mention of the declining status of the Jatakas can also be found in the writings of Western observers who had begun to take up residence in the kingdom since the Third Reign. The Catholic Bishop Palleoix enjoyed a close friendship with King Mongkut,

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\textit{Phra ratchaphithi sip song duan, phra ratchaniophon phra bat somdet phra chula chorm kiao chao yu hua (Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months by King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1973, pp. 71-5.}
\end{flushright}

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\textit{Saichon gives a list of the sermons listened to by Rama I, which includes readings from the Phra sut (Sutras), Milintakhamphi (The Questions of King Milinda), Thotsachat (the last ten Jatakas), Maha chat (the Vessantara Jataka), Athakatha chariyapitok (the Cariya Pitaka Commentary), and Pathomsomphothikatha (The Story of the First Enlightenment); in Saichon Wannarat, 'Phutthasatsana kap naew khwam khit thang kan muang nai ratchasamai phra bat somdet phra phuttha yort fa chula lok' ('Buddhism and Political Thought in the Reign of King Rama I', M.A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1982, p. 119.}
\end{flushright}

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\textit{G.E. Gerini, A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Maha Chat Ceremony, Bangkok, 1892, p. 16, fn.1. Gerini writes that the Thammayut denied that the Jatakas formed part of the Buddhist canon, (despite the fact of their inclusion in the Buddhist scriptures, being the tenth book of the Khuddakanikaya, in the Sutta pitaka), claiming that the Buddha 'did not usually discourse much of himself', and that there were no references to previous incarnations in the 'authentic sacred texts' such as the Vinaya; ibid., p. 55.}
\end{flushright}
and can be considered as having a relatively well-informed idea of the religious orthodoxy of the time. On the subject of the Jatakas, Pallegoix remarked in his Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam published in 1854 that they were ‘just ridiculous tales...only the last ten incarnations, which are called the thotsaxat, are venerated as canonical’...⁹

Sir John Bowring, who on behalf of the British government had concluded the trade treaty with the Thai court in 1855, gives us another hint of the decline of the Jatakas at the Thai court during this period. In what is almost certainly a reference to the over five hundred Jatakas contained in the Jataka Commentary, Bowring relates a story of an American missionary who had asked a senior monk during the Fourth Reign whether much religious commentary had been rejected by the ‘more enlightened party’ in Siam. The monk replied in the affirmative, mentioning ‘one set of books, consisting of more than five hundred volumes, the whole of which they rejected’.¹⁰

Towards the end of his reign Mongkut publically expressed his disapproval of the popular performances of the thet maha chat. In an article published in 1865 in one of the first Thai-language newspapers, Dr. Bradley’s ‘Bangkok Recorder’, Mongkut questioned the merit gained from the sponsorship of thet maha chat ceremonies, observing that there were other preferable ways of obtaining merit:

...There is a custom which has existed in Siam since ancient times, which takes place after the end of the Rains Retreat, late in the Tenth or in the Eleventh month [of the lunar calendar], in preaching halls both within and outside the capital, in both royal and non-royal temples in every region of the country, and in royal palaces or houses of the nobility. That custom is the thet maha chat. Princes and nobles as well as men and women in the villages get together and sponsor the performance, inviting monks and novices to come and sing the thirteen chapters of the Vessantara Jataka in its melodic recitation style (thamnorn thetsana). The sponsors of the recitations of each chapter are very happy to donate money and offerings amounting to great sums. In every region of the country it is believed that this is meritorious for the Buddhist religion.

But there are some people who do not believe that this is merit making. These people criticise such buffoonish (talok khanorn) performances of the thet maha chat, questioning the nature of the merit one will receive in return for such great donations. If one wishes to pay worship by practising the dhamma and the vinaya, and by so doing really sustaining the Buddhist religion, or by paying respect to one’s father and mother, relatives and elders in one’s family, or by helping the poor, the elderly and infirm, and the needy, or by building roads, bridges, rest-houses or


residences, or anything else, one will gain more reward and merit than by
pouring money into the *thet maha chat*...\(^{11}\)

Mongkut goes on to decry the monastic charlatans who urge the people to donate
large amounts of money to stage *thet maha chat* performances, and who then disrobe
from the monkhood, find themselves wives, and proceed to drink and gamble away
their ill-gotten earnings from the *thet maha chat*. While the emphasis here is on the
wastage of capital which might otherwise have been invested for the kingdom’s
economic and social development, Mongkut’s words do not reject merit-making itself -
even for other religious activities. The target is clearly the *thet maha chat*. Published in
Thai, the article was obviously directed at the Bangkok élite and can be seen as the first
official attempt to discourage performances of the *thet maha chat*.

Despite the clearly negative light in which the Jatakas were held by Mongkut and
his supporters, the process by which they were edged out of royal culture was a gradual
one. Mongkut himself had recited a chapter from the *Maha chat* as a youth in the Second
Reign. The Fourth Reign chronicle mentions a large royal *thet maha chat* ceremony
performed in the year of Mongkut’s accession to the throne in 1851 in honour of his
three royal predecessors, as well as the young crown prince Chulalongkorn’s recitation
of a chapter of the Vessantara Jataka in 1866, specially written for him by King
Mongkut himself. Mongkut is known to have personally composed at least four other
chapters of the Vessantara Jataka for recitation, and even a version in Latin!\(^{12}\) A
possible explanation for this inconsistency may lie in court politics. Mongkut’s political
position as king was relatively weak, owing to his twenty-seven years in the monkhood
during the reign of his older half-brother Rama III. It was only through the support of
the powerful Bunng family that he came to the throne, and significantly it was an
influential member of that family, Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, who shared his
opinion of the Jatakas. It may have been that Mongkut’s political enemies, the
conservative faction at the court (the so-called ‘old Siam’ party), were still influential
enough to insist that such royal ceremonial as the *thet maha chat*, which popularised an
ideology of kingship promoted by Mongkut’s royal predecessor and long time rival,
Rama III, be retained. Nevertheless, for the first time the close association between the
institution of kingship and the Vessantara Jataka was being challenged.

\(^{11}\) *Nangsu chotmaiheht - The Bangkok Recorder*, Vol. 1, November 18th 1965, No.18, ‘Ruang

\(^{12}\) See *Maha chat phra ratchaniphon nai ratchanakan thi 4 (The Fourth Reign King’s Version of
the Maha Chat)*, Cremation Volume, Morm Chao Chongkonni Wathanawong, Bangkok, 1965, ‘kham
athibai’, p. kor; and Gerini, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Gerini notes that the latter version was written while
Mongkut was still in the monkhood. Mongkut had learned his Latin from the French Bishop Pallegoix.
By the mid-Fifth Reign there is mounting evidence that the performance of the Vessantara Jataka had been even further marginalised by the Bangkok court. In 1892 Colonel Gerini, an Italian in the employ of the court who had resided in the kingdom for eleven years, published a study (in English) of the *thet maha chat*. The study was personally checked by King Chulalongkorn himself, and the text contains his corrigenda. The overall impression given by Gerini’s study is that the *thet maha chat* as a royal custom was in chronic decline. Of the chanting of Boromatratalokanat’s version of the Vessantara Jataka, the *Maha chat kham luang*, Gerini claimed that it had ‘long become obsolete for recitation in select circles’ 13. Of the custom whereby new novices recited chapters of the *Maha chat*, he wrote that it had been popular up to forty or fifty years ago (ie. the late Third and early Fourth Reigns) among all families whether rich or poor, but had since declined, and was now ‘limited to a few of the noblest and wealthiest families of the realm....’ 14 Another custom associated with the royal *thet maha chat*, where the Second King 15 would travel by boat to nearby Pathum Thani province to collect the thousands of lotus flowers required for the performance of the *thet maha chat*, had, in Gerini’s words, ‘long become a mere reminiscence, as also has the post and office of the *uparaja* itself’. 16 In general the annual *thet maha chat* and ceremony at the Thai court was, in Gerini’s judgment, not ‘so general and popular as in the days of yore’. 17

King Chulalongkorn himself had begun to comment publicly on the Jatakas’ status. In 1888 the king’s work *Phraratchaphithi sip song duan*, or ‘Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months’, was published in instalments to a readership of the Thai aristocracy and nobility. A complex and intricately descriptive work, at one level it was an attempt to present a detailed and accurate picture of royal custom and ceremony and its origins at a time of great cultural change. A particularly remarkable aspect of the work is the sense of historical awareness it displays, most apparent in its observations of changes in the ritual details of certain ceremonies and customs over time, as well as in

13 Gerini, *op. cit.*, p. 16.


15 As the position was known by the foreign community. In Thai the post of *uparat* (alternatively *uparaja*, *wang na*, *phraratchawang boworn sathan mongkhon*, or ‘Front Palace Prince’) was one of the power centres of the premodern Thai state, second only to, and frequently at rivalry with, the King himself. A number of kings had previously held the post of *uparat* prior to assuming the throne. King Chulalongkorn abolished the post of *uparat* in 1885, following the death of its last incumbent, Wichai chan.

16 Gerini, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

the realization that some elements of royal culture were now ‘out of date’, or unacceptable for the present times. This was certainly the light in which the Jatakas were portrayed. One instance was the king’s condemnation of the Buddhist belief known as the ‘pancha antarathani’, or the prophesy of the five-stage ‘disappearance’ of Buddhist knowledge.

In regard to the pancha antarathani the Commentator [i.e. the fifth century Pali scholar Buddhaghosa] predicted that the Disappearance will proceed in stages starting from the good parts of the dhamma. From the highest dhamma (paramat) the disappearance will continue until the Jatakas. Of the Jatakas the Vessantara Jataka will disappear first because it is the best Jataka... 18

Dismissing this belief as nonsense the king wrote that in his opinion

...the ‘Disappearance’ which will in fact happen will be of that kind of knowledge which has no real ‘substance’ (kaensan). My prediction is that it will be the Jatakas that will disappear before anything else, because they are full of rubbish... 19

On the chanting of the Maha chat kham luang at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha the king remarked that ‘nowadays nobody enjoys listening to it, because they can not really understand it’. 20 Of the king who had composed the Maha chat kham luang centuries earlier, while praising his mastery of poetic composition Chulalongkorn regretted that he had not been serious in studying the dhamma. His written work, Chulalongkorn wrote, attained ‘only to the level of the Vessantara Jataka, which is merely an entertaining and readable story. His aim in composing this work was merely to play with the Pali and Thai language...’ 21 As for the royal thet maha chat, once the

18 Phra ratchaphithi sip sorn duan, p. 430.

19 In Thai: ‘pen khorng roq riaw tang tang mi mak”; Phra ratchaphithi sip sorn duan, pp. 430-3. In the original pancha antarathani prophecy the first disappearance is that of the scriptures, starting from the Abhidhamma and finishing with the Vessantara Jataka followed by the rest of the Jatakas; the second is that of religious practice; the third, enlightenment; the fourth the monkhood; and finally the holy relics.

20 Ibid., p. 527.

21 Ibid., p. 521. The full quote: ‘If one carefully considers the knowledge of King Songtham one will realise that although he had a great knowledge of the Tripitaka, and was unequalled in his skill in Thai composition, he did not concern himself with the careful investigation of the finer and more profound parts of the dhamma. He was content merely with literary study, rather than applying himself to the search for the truth in the dhamma. The reason I say this is that in everything the king did - his teaching of the monks for example - involved only the explanation of Pali grammar. His written work attained only to the level of the Vessantara Jataka, which is just an entertaining and readable story. His aim in composing this work was merely to play with the Pali and Thai language. As for his concern for
Illustrations of kan kuman and kan matsi episodes from a Traiphum manuscript; from Maha chat samman nan isan (Northeastern Version of the Vessantara Jataka). Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1988.
grandest ceremony of the royal calender, Chulalongkorn wrote that nowadays it was held only irregularly.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73.}

**Excision of the Jatakas from the Story of the Buddha**

Another sign of the declining status at the Thai court of the Vessantara and other Jatakas, the stories of the Buddha’s former lives, was their exclusion from narratives about the life of the Buddha. A study by Nidhi Aeusrivongse has shown the appearance during the nineteenth century of a new genre of Buddhist narrative of a more biographical nature, which took as its main subject the ‘human’ life of the Buddha, starting from his birth and ending with his death and entry into \textit{nibbana}.\footnote{Nidhi, ‘\textit{Phra pathomsomphothikatha kap khwam khluan wai thang satsana nai ton ratanakosin}’ (\textit{The Phrapathomsomphothikatha} and Religious Movements in the Early Bangkok Period) in \textit{Pak kai lae hai rua}, pp. 400-402.} This new biographical genre, exemplified in Nidhi’s study by three works - \textit{Phrapathomsomphothikatha} written by Prince Patriarch Paramanuchit during the Third Reign; a work by the Supreme Patriarch Sa similarly titled \textit{Pathomsomphot} and composed in the early part of the Fifth Reign; and Prince Wachirayan’s \textit{Phutthaprawat} written in the early twentieth century - excluded virtually all references to the Buddha’s previous lives. It replaced an older Buddhist narrative tradition whose subject was not so much the Buddha as the \textit{bodhisatta} - the ‘Buddha-to-be’ - and his accumulation of the Perfections (\textit{barami}) in countless successive incarnations, culminating in the achievement of Buddha-hood in his incarnation as Gautama. Nidhi calls this older form of Buddhist narrative \textit{thammaprawat}, literally ‘\textit{dhamma} history’, on the grounds that it is characterised by the representation of the Buddha not as a human being but as a principle of the \textit{dhamma}.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 381.}

The decline of the genre of ‘\textit{dhamma} history’, had enormous implications for the status of the Jatakas. The importance of the Jatakas depended to a large extent on their structural position in relation to the old ‘\textit{dhamma} history’ narrative. The Jatakas were part of the narrative about the origins of the Buddha. However, as records of the incarnations of the \textit{bodhisatta} the Jatakas lost their significance once the focus of Buddhist history shifted to the (human) lifetime of the person of the Buddha. In the older \textit{dhamma} history schema the Vessantara Jataka had been crucial because it was in

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 381.}
the incarnation as Vessantara that the bodhisatta finally achieved all the Perfections which would enable him to be enlightened in his subsequent incarnation as the Buddha. In the new biographical representation of the Buddha the Vessantara Jataka had no place, since the origins of the Buddha went back only to his birth.

This new form of Buddhist narrative resulted in the undermining not only of the Jatakas but with them the theory of the Perfections (barami). The Jatakas had provided vivid examples of the accumulation and practice of the Perfections (kan bamphen barami), such as Giving (than barami), Equanimity (ubekka barami) and Morality (sin barami). In the new genre of Buddhist narrative the bodhisatta’s accumulation of Perfections in previous incarnations counts for nothing. It was of no significance in the new representation of the Buddha’s life, which concentrates on the quest for enlightenment only within the Buddha’s lifetime. Together with the theory of the Perfections, the ideal of the bodhisatta which the Jatakas had exemplified was also eclipsed in the new genre, and this development had correlations in the political sphere, as will be shown below.

The Decline of ‘Great Lineage’ History

A further factor related to the decline of the Jatakas was the development of a new conception of history. It was argued in the previous chapter that ‘dhamma history’ style narratives of the Buddha’s origins had been integrated into the genealogies of ruling houses to produce a chronicle tradition that was popular with Theravada Buddhist rulers everywhere, including the Sinhalese and Burmese rulers, as well as the Thai kings of Ayuthaya, the early Bangkok monarchy, and rulers of other Tai principalities. I have termed this type of chronic tradition ‘great lineage’ history, after its prototype, the Sinhalese Mahayamsa. By means of ‘great lineage’ history contemporary rulers could claim to be descended from the house of the Buddha, (which in turn was descended from the first king, the bodhisatta Maha Sammata, or ‘the Great Elect’).25

The ‘great lineage’ historographical tradition which flourished at the courts of Thai rulers through to the reign of the first Chakri king Rama I, appears to have coexisted alongside another genre of chronic, the ‘Phraratchaphongsawadan’, or dynastic chronicle.26 In striking contrast to ‘great lineage’ history the


26 An etymological interpretation of the term ‘phraratchaphongsawadan’ suggests that the word originally signified ‘royal lineage of avatars’ - ‘avata’ being a Brahmanical concept meaning in this case an earthly incarnation of the god Narayana; cf. Chit Phumisak, Sangkhom tham lam mae nam chao phraya korn samai ayuthaya, Bangkok, Mai Ngam, 1983, pp. 72-3. Perhaps originating from a period when Brahmanical culture was influential in the kingdom, by the time of the early kings of the Chakri
Phraratchaphongsawadan made no reference (in terms of the structure of the genre) to the lineage of the Buddha. The Phraratchaphongsawadan’s subject was the reigns and successions of the kings of the former ‘capital’ Ayuthaya, dating from the putative ‘founding’ of the royal city in the mid-fourteenth century until the city’s fall - and that of the incumbent dynasty - to the Burmese in 1676. The genre is known to have existed since the seventeenth century in the kingdom of Ayuthaya, and was resurrected after the city’s fall, first by King Taksin of the short-lived kingdom of Thonburi, and later by Rama I and his successors of the Chakri dynasty. The political uses of the Phraratchaphongsawadan genre are clear. For the new regimes of Taksin and then the Chakri it was necessary to show their connections to the former kingdom of Ayuthaya, whose political authority they had laid claim to through military conquest following its collapse after the Burmese sack of the city of Ayuthaya in 1676.

While the Phraratchaphongsawadan provided meaning and legitimacy to the early Bangkok kings in terms of their relationship to previous kings of Ayuthaya, compared to the ‘great lineage’ chronicle it was relatively limited in terms of its historical scope. ‘Great lineage’ history linked contemporary rulers to races of kings dating from (in the chronicles’ terms) the beginning of the world, to the race of the Buddha himself, as well as to kingdoms, and dynasties subsequent to the Buddha and prior to the founding of Ayuthaya. ‘Great lineage’ history, therefore, had its political uses as well. For Thai kings it served the purpose of portraying them as inheritors and protectors of the Buddhist religion. Moreover, in the newly expanded Thai kingdom under the early Bangkok kings which incorporated the previously autonomous Buddhist heartlands of the north and northeast (where ‘great lineage’ history had had a long tradition), it showed them to be leaders of the Buddhist world.

The two historiographical forms appear to have coexisted in the early Bangkok period. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this situation had changed. The Phraratchaphongsawadan became the dominant historical form and ‘great lineage’ history ceased to be written at the Thai court. Well-known versions of Phraratchaphongsawadan were compiled during the Third Reign by the Prince-Patriarch

dynasty the word would appear to have lost much of its original meaning, when, as Atchara has convincingly argued, Buddhism was vigorously promoted as the state religion and ‘Hindu’ or ‘Brahman’ elements of court culture marginalised; cf. Atchara Kanchanothai, ‘Kan fun phra phutthasatsana nai samai ratanakosin torn ton (phor sor 2325-2395)’ (The Restoration of Buddhism in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1852), Master’s Thesis, Dept. of History, Chulalongkorn University, 1980.

27 The origin of this genre is the subject of a Masters degree thesis being written by Ian Hodges in the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University.

28 Cf. Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Prawitats ratanakosin nai phraratchaphongsawadan (Early Bangkok History in the Phraratchaphongsawadan), Thai Studies Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Bannakit, 1980, pp. 5-20.
Paramanuchitchinorot, a son of Rama I and a high-ranking monk,\textsuperscript{29} and in the Fourth Reign by King Mongkut himself and Prince Wongsathiratsani, a half-brother of Mongkut.\textsuperscript{30} In the early Fifth Reign Chaophraya Thipakhorawong made use of the genre to write separate dynastic chronicles of the first four Chakri reigns, the Phraratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin.

The abandonment of the 'great lineage' genre in favour of the exclusive use of the Phraratchaphongsawadan marks an important break in the historical consciousness of the Thai elite. It suggests that the representation and legitimation of kings in historical discourse was moving away from association with the Buddha and his royal line, and towards firstly, depicting the Chakri dynasty as rightful successors to the kingdom of Ayuthaya, and secondly, emphasising the importance of the Chakri blood-line.\textsuperscript{31} A change in the idea of royal lineage was occurring.

The consequences of the decline of 'great lineage' history for the Jatakas were drastic. While the Buddha remained an important element in this ‘great lineage’ chronicle tradition the Jatakas maintained their status at the Thai court. But once the Buddha was omitted from the genealogy of Thai kings the Jatakas inevitably lost their authority - indeed were rendered irrelevant - in relation to the dominant conception of history.

An example of the changing concept of the lineal descent of kings, which is evident in the Thai court's development of the Phraratchaphongsawadan genre, can be found in a letter by King Mongkut to the Burmese. In 1856 Mongkut had received a letter carried by emissaries sent by the Burmese king to the head of the Thai Sangha, inquiring as to the state of the Buddhist religion in Siam, with an offer of assistance. The letter began by extolling the virtues of the Burmese king, including his claim of descent from the bodhisatta king Maha Sammata, and his pious conduct modelled on the Jataka kings Silava, Dasanajakra, Nemi and Vessantara. In a mocking reply to the Burmese king's letter Mongkut wrote,

...Because of this dhamma gift we have received which discourses upon the greatness of the King of Ava,\textsuperscript{32} and praises his qualities and pious

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 19.


\textsuperscript{31} See Athachat Satayanurak, 'Khwan plian prae khong samnuk thang prawatisat lae kan plian plaeing khong sangkhom thai tang tae ratchakan thi 4 thung phor.sor.2475' (Shifts in Historical Consciousness and Change in Thai Society from the Fourth Reign to 1932), Master's Degree thesis, Department of History, Chulalongkorn University, 1988, pp. 39, 64, 80ff.

\textsuperscript{32} At that time the capital city of the Burmese kingdom. The following year the Burmese king Mindon moved the capital to Mandalay.
reknowned at such great length, I ought to explain the situation here in Siam in return. As a rule the Thai of Siam are moderate in their rhetoric. Even if some claim is true, if it concerns someone or some thing which is difficult to verify and believe for oneself, then one ought not talk about it at any length. It serves no purpose. As for the boast about [the Burmese king] being descended from the lineage of king Maha Sammata in a pure, unbroken line, this idea comes from the Canon and Commentaries. But people of all countries know now that this is an ancient mode of praise originally used only for māthayom prathet, which is today known as India, since the Canon was compiled in māthayom prathet, and the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries refer to the Canon. The situation in māthayom prathet has nothing to do with other countries...It is difficult to believe that any king has such a pure descent from such a remote origin...So we will leave aside such outrageous claims rather than imitate you...³³

The irony of Mongkut’s reply to the Burmese king was that this was the same lineage - the lineage of the mythical first king Maha Sammata - from which Thai kings had themselves claimed descent as late as the previous reign.³⁴

The Thai kings had, therefore, discarded the so-called ‘great lineage’ in favour of a lineage which paid more attention to the importance of blood or dynastic ties, and especially those of the Chakri dynasty. To understand why this change occurred we now need to look at the new concept of kingship that was emerging in Mongkut’s reign.

The End of the bodhisatta-King

The previous two chapters showed how royal support for the Vessantara Jataka and their dissemination into popular culture was bound up with ideas of political authority based on the concept of ‘bodhisatta kingship’. That is, like the bodhisatta in the Jatakas, the king was also conceived of as being intent on achieving enlightenment through the accumulation of the Perfections (barami). Indeed, the mere fact of being king was itself held to be evidence of the accumulation of the Perfections in previous incarnations. In the first three reigns of the Chakri dynasty this ideal was so pervasive that the king, on occasions, appeared consciously to imitate the deeds of the bodhisatta as recorded in the Jatakas.

The rejection of the Jatakas, which is evident in the decline of the thet maha chat at the court of the Thai king, in the new biographical narrative of the Buddha’s life, and

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³⁴ Attachak, ‘Khwam plian praek horng samnuk thang prawatisat’, p. 46, refers to King Rama III claiming taxation powers as a royal right inherited from the time of King Maha Sammata.