Another scholar whose influence can be seen in Chulalongkorn’s essay is E.B. Cowell, who had supervised the English translation of Fausbøll’s romanized edition of the Pali text.\(^{37}\) While not referring to any Aryan connection, he concurred with Rhys Davids that the primary value of the Jatakas was as folk literature with historical use:

['The Jatakas'] foremost interest to us consists in their relation to folk-lore and the light which they often throw on those popular stories which illustrate so vividly the ideas and superstitions of the early times of civilisation. In this respect they possess a special value, as, although much of their matter is peculiar to Buddhism, they contain embedded with it an unrivalled collection of Folk-lore. They are also full of interest as giving a vivid picture of the social life and customs of Ancient India.\(^{38}\)

Fausbøll himself, who had initially become interested in the Jataka Book because of its great popularity among the Sinhalese Buddhists and the great reverence they paid to it, later related that ‘the further I got into the book, the clearer I saw its importance, not only in a linguistic sense but also from a culture-historical point of view...’\(^{39}\)

Western scholarship, then, was concerned foremost with the historical significance of the stories found in the Jataka Book. With this objective it became all the more necessary to date accurately the origins of Jataka literature. This turned out to be a complex operation.\(^{40}\) The Jataka Book, or the Jatakathavannana as it was known in Pali and as it appeared in Fausbøll’s romanized edition, was in fact a prose commentary on an earlier canonical work in verse.\(^{41}\) This canonical work (without the commentary) was rare and as yet unpublished. The entire work the Jatakathavannana, consisted of a long general introduction (called in Pali Nidana katha), followed by the five hundred and fifty Jatakas. Each of the five hundred and fifty Jatakas was made up of a number of distinct parts. That is, each Jataka was ‘framed’ by an introduction, where it was described how the Buddha came to tell the following story, and a short conclusion, in which the

\(^{37}\) For Chulalongkorn’s knowledge and use of Cowell’s work see “Ruang plaec nibat chadok”, Pramuan phra niphone somdet phra mahsa samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot; phra ratcha hathalekha - lai phra hat, pp. 99 - 103.


\(^{40}\) The following summary is based on Buddhist Birth Stories, pp. i-lxxx; Buddhist India, pp. 189-209; Fausbøll, op. cit., Vol. VII, pp. I-XII; and Cowell, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. vii-xii.

\(^{41}\) The Pali text itself actually states this in the beginning of the general introduction to the work; Buddhist Birth Stories, p. 81.
Buddha told his audience whom the characters in the story were reborn as in their present births, and identified himself as the bodhisatta ('buddha-to-be') in the story. This 'frame' surrounded the story itself, which was written mainly in prose but contained also the verses of the earlier canonical work. Finally there was also a 'verbal interpretation' of the verses contained in the stories.42

The Jataka Book therefore was a composite text. The whole was written down in Pali by an unknown author in Ceylon probably in the fifth century A.D. However it appears that this work was a translation of an earlier work, also a commentary, in Sinhalese, which had accompanied the Pali canonical verses.43 This earlier Sinhalese work had apparently been lost, but clues to the age of the original commentary were found elsewhere. Faubsoell and others reasoned that because the canonical verses alone were not enough to constitute the story, they must have been accompanied from the earliest times by a prose commentary, which narrated most of the story and made the verses intelligible. This implied that at least by the time of the finalisation of the Buddhist canon (the latest time the canonical verses could have been composed) the story existed in something like the form in which it appeared in the fifth century A.D. commentary. Unfortunately, since the dates of the various parts of the canon and its eventual finalisation were not yet clear to Western scholars, more evidence was needed.44

---


43 This older Sinhalese version is actually referred to in the text; Rhys Davids, Buddhist Birth Stories, p. 173.

44 See for example Müller’s discussion of this point in The Dhammapada: A Collection of Verses being One of the Canonical Books of the Buddhists, translated from Pali by F. Max Müller, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. X, New Delhi, 1965 (1st publ. 1881), pp. ix - lv. The dating of the Buddhist scriptures was just part of the overall project undertaken by scholars in the broader field of Indian studies to, as Müller described it, '[and] the storm tossed ship of Indian chronology...in the harbour of real historical chronology', ibid., p. xxxv.

The whole question of canonicity was one which preoccupied the Western Pali scholars. The issue was very complex. Different texts - 'canonical' works, commentaries, and religious histories - written at different times, give accounts of different bodies of works, all of which could be described as 'canonical'. Even more confusing was the fact that the word 'canon' as Western scholars were using it did not correspond exactly with words used in Buddhist texts to describe some authoritative corpus of Buddhist works. In a recent article (Steven Collins, "On The Very Idea of the Pali Canon", Journal of the Pali Text Society, Vol. XV, edited by K.R.Norman, Oxford, 1990, pp. 89-126), it is shown that there are a number of words appearing in Pali texts which could be translated by the word 'canon', except that none of them convey the same sense of a 'closed list'. The word pali, which later came to mean the language of the scriptures, was also used in contrast to the word suttakatha (commentary). Pitaka, usually translated as 'basket', from which comes the word tripitaka, or 'three baskets' [of tradition], only later acquired the meaning of canon in the 'closed' sense. Buddha-vacana meaning 'Word of the Buddha', which comes closer to the exclusivist sense of 'canon', could, however, also be interpreted figuratively [Collins, pp. 91-94]. But the way in which Western Pali scholars used the term also implied to a certain extent a value judgment. These scholars were creating a new field of knowledge,
Part of that evidence came from a discipline closely allied to history: archaeology. Recent archaeological excavations at the Bharut and Sanchi stupas had revealed bas-reliefs dating from the third century B.C., which illustrated scenes from the Jataka stories. Many of these bas-reliefs portrayed scenes which were found in the commentary but not in the canonical verses, which thereby proved the existence of the commentary by that time. Another reliable date was found in the Dipavamsa, which scholars had judged to be the earliest Ceylonese chronicle, composed not earlier than the fourth century A.D. The chronicle gave an account of the Great Council, known to have been held in about the middle of the fourth century B.C., in which a book called the Jataka was mentioned. Whether this book included the prose commentary however was not known.

More evidence suggested that the some of the stories may have been older still. The archaic language of the Pali verses indicated that they may have come from the time of the early Buddhists. Research had even shown that language similar to that found in the verses was present in the earliest Indian literature, the Vedas, which was known to predate Buddhist writings by many hundreds of years. Authorities on Indian history claimed that social conditions revealed in Jataka stories certainly dated at least from the Buddha’s time, if not earlier.\(^{45}\) In particular, a great many of the cities and kingdoms referred to in the Jataka stories were known by Indian historical scholarship to have flourished before the time of the Buddha, on the basis of their appearance in the earlier Vedic literature. Other references in the Jataka stories supported the conclusion that most of the stories must have been drawn from a body of folk literature pre-dating the Buddha.\(^{46}\)

Thus even though the stories were narrated largely by the commentary (which was, of course, post-canonical), Western Buddhist scholarship was showing that the origin of many of the stories was pre-Buddhist. On the other hand however, that part of the commentary which described the Buddha as narrator of the story of one of his own former lives was declared to have originated well after the time of the Buddha. Supporting evidence included the fact that place names referred to in this part of the Jataka dated mostly from the Buddha’s time and later.

\(^{45}\) Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, pp. 201-4.

\(^{46}\) Here, though, there was another problem in that the date of the Buddha’s birth and death in terms of Western chronology was still a subject of debate; cf. Müller, *The Dhammapada: A Collection of Verses being One of the Canonical Books of the Buddhists*, pp. xxxiv - xlv.
What were the consequences of this historical classification of the various parts of the Jatakas?

Firstly it split the Jatakas into different parts according to their respective chronological status. The verses together with the story which presumably accompanied the verses in some form from the start, were old in terms of the evolution of the Buddhist scriptures, and those of a large number of Jatakas could be proven with considerable certainty to have been in existence before the time of the Buddha, in the form of folk-tales. What this deduction inevitably suggested was that many Jatakas must have been adopted from this previously existing body of tales, and given a Buddhist ‘flavour’. As Rhys Davids wrote of the oldest Jatakas, ‘None of them are specially Buddhist. They are modified, perhaps, more or less to suit Buddhist ethics...there is nothing peculiarly Buddhist about them. Even the ethics they inculcate are Indian’. 47 That the Jataka stories had not been created purely as vehicles for Buddhist ethics but rather had been adapted from other, older tales meant that they had an historical value independent of their religious content. And the fact that their content could be cross-checked with other texts enhanced that value.

This supposedly pre-Buddhist ‘kernel’ of the Jataka, the story, contrasted with the ‘framework’ part of the Jataka commentary, which was considered to be of later origin. In particular, the introduction to each Jataka - which described the circumstances of the Buddha telling the story - was given little status as historical fact. Cowell wrote ‘it is an interesting question for future investigation how far they contain any historical data...I confess that I have no confidence in their historical credibility, - they appear to me rather the laboured invention of a later age...’ 48 For Rhys Davids, too, the style of the introductions seemed to be more modern than the stories, rendering them ‘entirely devoid of credit’. 49 He also pointed to cases where similar introductions had been used for different stories, which again served to attack their basis in historical fact. Rhys Davids compared that part of the commentary containing the introductions with the medieval Legends of the Saints. 50 The pejorative sense implied here was in the contrast between ‘legend’ and ‘history’. That is, the stories could be considered ‘historical’ whereas the rest of the commentary which related the story to the person of the Buddha was ‘legend’.

47 Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. 197.


49 Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. lxxviii.

History was the main criterion by which the Jatakas were judged. Its assault on the Jataka text divided the Jataka into separate parts: those that could be accepted as fact on historical grounds; and those that failed this criterion. The parts which tied the Jataka story to the Buddha, the introduction and conclusion, were judged to be of later genesis and hence of dubious historical status. But the 'kernel' of the Jataka, the story, was held to be drawn from pre-Buddhist folklore, and thus not essentially Buddhist at all. Without the crucial connection between the Jataka and the Buddha the story could now be interpreted as parable, which perhaps had been used by the Buddha to illustrate some point in his teaching.\textsuperscript{51} Since history showed that this 'parable' had its origin in existing 'folklore' rather than in religious inspiration, the Jataka became valuable to modern day scholars as an historical source for pre-Buddhist India studies.

The critical influence of the new discipline of history in Western textual studies on the Jatakas can be seen in perspective by looking at how the same text was interpreted by the Sinhalese. Fausboll's transcription of the Jataka Book had relied for the most part on the Sinhalese text, and the Sinhalese tradition was the one most Western scholars were familiar with. Hardy, in his very popular book on Sinhalese Buddhism, quotes a comment made in 1838 by a missionary friend and early Pali scholar on this point: "The work known by this title [the Book of the Five Hundred and Fifty Births]...is a Pali commentary on one of the fifteen books belonging to the fifth section of the Sutra Pitaka, or Discourses of Budha [sic], and forms no part therefore of the sacred code; but according to a decision that the comments are of equal authority with the text, it is regarded as of indisputable authority".\textsuperscript{52} The Sinhalese therefore, like the Western scholars, also distinguished the commentary from the text,\textsuperscript{53} but unlike the

\textsuperscript{51} In fact Rhys Davids appears uncertain as to whether the Buddha actually told these stories as pure parables which were turned into Birth Stories by later commentators, or whether he told them from the start as Birth Stories. In \textit{Buddhist Birth Stories} Rhys Davids writes 'From the facts as they stand it seems at present to be the most probable explanation of the rise of our Jataka Book to suppose that it was due to the religious faith of the Indian Buddhists of the third or fourth century B.C., who not only repeated a number of fables, parables and stories ascribed to the Buddha, but gave them a peculiar sacredness and a special religious significance by identifying the best character in each with the Buddha himself in some previous birth. From the time when this step was taken, what had been merely parables or fables became "Jatakas", a word invented to distinguish, and used only of those stories which have been thus sanctified...' p. lxxv. From this passage, and indeed the tone of the rest of the essay, the sense is that the stories only became Birth Stories - Jatakas - subsequent to the Buddha telling them. But in \textit{Buddhist India} this stance seems to be softened a little, not denying that the Buddha told the stories as Birth Stories, but emphasising that the stories were still basically parables, and mostly drawn from existing folklore; \textit{Buddhist India}, pp. 206-208.


\textsuperscript{53} "The Ceylonese tradition goes so far as to say that the original Jataka Book consisted of verses alone; that the Birth Stories are Commentary upon them; and the Introductory Stories, the Conclusions and the Pada-gata-samaya or word-for-word explanation of the verses are Commentary on this Commentary", Rhys Davids, \textit{Buddhist India}, pp. lxx-lxxi.

152
Western scholars the commentary was not seen to be inferior to the text. However on the subject of the Sinhalese tradition, Rhys Davids commented, 'Unfortunately this orthodox belief as to the history of the Book of the Birth Stories rests on a foundation of quicksand'.

Yet quite apart from the historical arguments there seems to have been a reluctance on the part of Western scholars to attribute the telling of the Jatakas to the Buddha, based on other grounds. Whereas similarities between the Jataka stories and Western folklore could be found and highlighted, no such similarities with Western traditions existed in regard to the central doctrines expressed in the Jataka Book. It is interesting that these doctrines - rebirth, and the bodhisatta's accumulation of parami over successive lifetimes - receive surprisingly little attention in the Western scholarship, and when they do it is with some scepticism bordering on condescension as to their intellectual merit. Max Müller wrote: 'We must not suppose that [the Buddha's] hearers were expected to believe, in our sense of the word, all the circumstances of his former existences as told by Buddha Sakya-muni. Even for an Indian imagination it would have been hard to accept them as matters of fact. A Gataka [Jataka] was not much more than what a parable is with us...'.

In Rhys Davids' work it is as if they have no part in the 'original' Buddhism, but were a later addition. In support of this proposition, he showed that those canonical works which treated the same doctrines found in the Jataka Book, the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka, were the latest of the Buddhist canonical works. On the Jatakas included in the Cariyapitaka Rhys Davids wrote

This particular set of Jatakas is also arranged on the basis of the Paramitas, a doctrine that plays no part in the older books. The Ten Perfections (Paramita) are qualities a Buddha is supposed to have acquired in the countless series of his previous rebirths as a

---

54 Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories*, p. ii. Rhys Davids gives this account of the Sinhalese tradition: 'The Buddha, as occasion arose, was accustomed throughout his long career to explain and comment on the events happening around him by telling of similar events that had occurred in his own previous births. The experience, not of one lifetime only, but of many lives, was always present to his mind; and it was this experience he so often used to point a moral, or adorn a tale. The stories so told are said to have reverently learned and repeated by his disciples; and after his death 550 of them were gathered together in one collection, called the Book of the 550 Jatakas or Birthlets. The commentary to these gives for each Jataka, or Birth Story, an account of the event in Gotama's life which led to his first telling that particular story. Both text and commentary were then handed down, in the Pali language in which they were composed, to the time of the Council of Patna (held in or about the year 250 B.C.); and they were carried in the following year to Ceylon by the great missionary Mahinda, the son of Asoka. There the commentary was written down in Sinhalese, the Aryan dialect spoken in Ceylon; and was retranslated into its present form in the Pali language in the fifth century of our era. But the text of the Jataka stories themselves has been throughout preserved in its original Pali form'; *ibid.*, pp. i-ii.

Bodhisatva. It gradually grew up as the Bodhisatva idea began to appeal more to the Indian mind.\textsuperscript{56}

Rhys Davids suggested, moreover, that it was these doctrines, which he attributed to the heterodox Mahayana Buddhist sect, which had actually led to the decline of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{57}

Western Pali scholarship marginalised and devalued the Jatakas. The Jatakas were, in effect, omitted from the 'orthodox' Buddhism this scholarship was constructing. Textual and historical arguments were put forward which undermined the authority on which the Jatakas was based: the belief that they were narrated by the Buddha himself. The content of the Jatakas stories was seen at best as pre-Buddhist folklore with some use in socio-historical research into the conditions of ancient Indian civilization, and at worst as a corruption of the original purity of Buddhism. Let us now turn to see how influential Western Pali scholarship was on the Thai court's own researches into Buddhism in the Thai kingdom.

Relations between the Thai Court and Western Pali Scholars

That Chulalongkorn's essay on the Jatakas made use of Western Pali scholarship, in particular the work of Rhys Davids, appears obvious. At times the text of Chulalongkorn's essay follows this scholarship almost verbatim. The fact that Chulalongkorn was able to make such use of Western scholarship is an indication of the closeness of the relations between the Thai court of King Chulalongkorn and the Western Pali text scholars. This relationship had existed for many years before Chulalongkorn wrote his essay on the Jatakas. But it also illustrates what appears to be a distinctive characteristic of Thai culture generally, which is a willingness to adopt, copy, and indigenize foreign ideas and culture, seemingly without misgivings and yet at the same time maintaining a sense of cultural continuity. Besides Chulalongkorn, Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan, Sommut Amoraphan, Damrong, Narit, and other leading scholars of the Thai court made frequent use of the research and edited texts of the Pali Text Society and European scholars.

\textsuperscript{56} Rhys Davids, \textit{Buddhist India}, p. 177. 'Bodhisatva' is the Sanskrit equivalent of the Pali 'bodhisatta'.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 177. Most scholarship on Buddhism up till this time had been based on the Pali texts. However there was a growing recognition that another distinct 'school' of Buddhism existed, based on the later, Sanskrit texts. The kind of Buddhism based on these Sanskrit texts came to be called 'Mahayana Buddhism'. Rhys Davids' writings often convey a sense that, because the Mahayana doctrine was based on texts composed subsequent to the Pali texts, it was somehow inferior to the early Buddhism.
It was a strange relationship. For the Western scholars the Thai aristocratic Buddhist scholars were at the same time native informants as well as fellow scholars. One of the most pressing reasons for the frequent contact with the Siamese court was the desire to obtain Pali manuscripts. Fausbøll, when beginning his transcription of the Jataka Book, requested from the King of Siam a Siamese manuscript of the Jatakas, but his letter remained unanswered. In 1885 Fausbøll did receive from Prince Devawongse, the Siamese Minister for Foreign Affairs, a manuscript containing a portion of the Jataka Book, but the Jatakas it contained had already been transcribed by Fausbøll in an earlier volume. A copy of Fausbøll’s initial request appears in the Thai National Archives in the files of the Ministry of Education, along with a letter dated 1901 to Prince Sommut Amoraphan from R. Chalmers, the translator (under Cowell’s editorship) of the first volume of Fausbøll’s edition of the Jataka Book. In this letter Chalmers politely declined a belated offer from the Siamese to send a Siamese manuscript of the Jataka Book, on the grounds that Fausbøll’s transcription had already been completed. Two years earlier, in recognition of the scholarly talents of Prince Patriarch Wachirayan, the de facto head of the Thai Buddhist Sangha, Chalmers had dedicated the last volume of his edition of the Majjhima-Nikaya for the Pali Text Society to the ‘Prince-Priest’; the dedication read, "To Vajirñana: A Western Tribute to Eastern Scholarship". Chalmers had also been impressed with the ‘scholarship and courtesy’ of the king’s Private Secretary, Prince Sommut, on his trip to England in 1897 accompanying the king.

In the inaugural issue of the Journal of the Pali Text Society in 1882 Rhys Davids had appealed for help from Burma, Siam, and Ceylon for good manuscripts. Whereas early Pali textual scholarship in the West had relied for the most part on texts from Ceylon, as contacts with the Siamese court became closer, Pali manuscripts from

---


59 Fausbøll, op. cit., Vol. IV. Another Siamese manuscript was received in 1891; op. cit., Vol. V.

60 Hor chotmai het haeng chat (National Archives), “mor ror 5 sor/34” Thammakhadi, 25/178, “ruang mister chalmers thawal nangsu bali text kae krom sommut” (Mr. Chalmers Presents Pali Text MS to Prince Sommut), 4-5 January 1901 (r.s.120).


Siam began to make their way into Western manuscript collections. On occasions it even seems as if the Thai court felt some pressure from Western scholars to have texts published or manuscripts found for them. In a letter to King Chulalongkorn in 1903 Wachirayan wrote that Rhys Davids had expressed to him the desire to have the Commentaries to the Tripitaka published. Chulalongkorn replied that he felt embarrassed (laai chai khao) as he had already personally promised Rhys Davids that he would have the Commentaries printed. Western scholars were constantly pressing the Thai court for texts, some of which could not always be found, as in the case of Fausbøll’s request for a manuscript of the Jataka Book.

Of greater significance than the offer of manuscripts, however, was the financial assistance that the King of Siam and members of the court were rendering to Pali scholarship. It seems that the king was very conscious of the positive role that Buddhism could play in shaping Western attitudes towards Asia, and certainly did his utmost to promote Western studies of Buddhism. The King had played a most important role in the birth of the Pali Text Society. In 1882, when the Society was in danger of failing, in response to a request from Rhys Davids the King donated a sum of two hundred pounds to ensure the Society’s survival. The King’s donation was out of an initial donation total of only three hundred and sixty eight pounds, and the third largest donation, twenty pounds, was from another member of the Siamese court, Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Devawongse. By 1884 Prince Prisdang, Siamese Minister to

---

64 The initial orientation of Pali scholars was towards the Sinhalese Buddhist tradition. Several scholars had been former civil servants in British Ceylon; the majority of available Pali manuscripts were obtained from Ceylon, (cf. the lists of Pali manuscripts in collections around the world, in Journal of the Pali Text Society, Vol. I, 1882, pp. 30-58; almost half of the subscribers to the first volume of the Journal of the Pali Text Society were Sinhalese Buddhist monks, ibid., p. 3; and a letter from one of these monks published in this first volume “sets out the historical dependence of Burmese and Siamese MSS. on those of Ceylon, and strongly insists on the general superiority of the latter”, ibid. Unknown to Western scholars of this period, in the eighteenth century Buddhism in Ceylon had undergone a decline, and the then king had to send a mission to Siam, where Buddhism appeared to be flourishing, with a request for assistance in religious matters. King Boromakot of Siam replied by sending two missions to Ceylon, one in 1752 and another in 1756, along with a total of 97 Pali manuscripts, ostensibly on the grounds that these texts were no longer extant in Ceylon; Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Ruang praditsathan phra song sayam wong tai langka thawip (On the Establishment of the Siamese Sangha in Sri Lanka), written in 1914 and presented to Prince Narisaranuwatwong, Cremation Volume, Somdet Phra Sangkharat Chao Krom Luang Wachirayanwong, Wat Thepsirinharawat, Bangkok, 1960; see also articles by O.von Hiniiber and Suphaphan Na Bangchang in Journal of the Pali Text Society, Vol. XII, ed. K.R.Norman, Oxford, 1988, pp. 173-212.

65 “Ruang cha phim attahakatha phra traipitok” (On the Publishing of the Tripitaka Commentaries), Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phra va wachirayan warorot: phra ratcha battalekha - hai phra hat, pp. 77-79.

66 Wickremaratne, op. cit., p. 154.

Germany had also donated money to the Society,\(^{68}\) and by 1901 the King had donated a further twenty pounds.\(^{69}\) Some years later Chulalongkorn presented a huge gift of five hundred pounds to the Pali Text Society for a Pali Dictionary Fund.\(^{70}\)

The Thai king had also been a contributor to Max Müller, the doyen of Indian literary studies, whom Chulalongkorn had met during his trip to Europe in 1897. Müller was editor of the ‘Sacred Books of the East’ series, on which the publications of the Pali Text Society had been modelled.\(^{71}\) This series, which had published translations of the sacred texts of the Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Muslims and Zoroastrians, had just been completed when there were offers to translate some additional Buddhist texts. Müller, who was eager to have these texts published, later wrote: "I was highly gratified when I was informed that H.M. the King of Siam, being desirous that the true teaching of the Buddha should become more widely known in Europe, had been graciously pleased to promise that material support without which the publication of these translations would have been impossible."\(^{72}\) The new series was called the ‘Sacred Books of the Buddhists’.\(^{73}\)

The Thai court attempted to promote Buddhism in the West in other ways. In 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Prince Chandradat Chudhadharn presented a paper entitled ‘Buddhism as it Exists in Siam’ in which he described the moral system to a Western audience.\(^{74}\) As a reward for his services to Buddhism the Thai court awarded Edwin Arnold the title ‘Officer of the Order of the White Elephant of Siam’, under the new system of royal honours conceived by King

---

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 1884, p. 162.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 1897-1901, p. 91.

\(^{70}\) Cf. Journal of the Pali Text Society, 1913, Preface.

\(^{71}\) Wickremaratne, op. cit., pp. 149, 154.


Chulalongkorn. It seems that the Thai court was eager to show that Buddhism was a religion which was in spiritual, moral, scriptural, and indeed intellectual terms at least the equal of Christianity. In Buddhism the Thai court had found an attribute of their society - indeed, in some respects the foundation of Thai society - which received considerable respect from important sections of the Western scholarly community. This helped to combat Western perceptions of ‘barbarism’ and the lack of ‘civilisation’ in the peoples and religious and philosophical systems of Asia, which inevitably accompanied the spread of imperialism.

In all these projects it could also be said that Chulalongkorn was fulfilling the traditional role expected of Thai Buddhist kings to nourish and support the Buddhist religion, which included the ‘maintenance’ of the Buddhist scriptures. However, given the extent of the King’s assistance to the publication of Buddhist texts it is possible that, as the last remaining independent Buddhist monarch (at least in the Theravada tradition) Chulalongkorn was aware of a broader responsibility as the supreme patron of the Buddhist religion world-wide. Ceylon, the birthplace of the Theravada Buddhist textual tradition, had been under British control since the early nineteenth century, and the monarchy at Kandy was abolished in 1815; Lao independence from the Thai kingdom was finally brought to an end with the Thai sacking of Vientiane in the late 1820s and the capture and execution of the Lao king Chao Anu; the Cambodian kingdom had been made a French protectorate in 1867; In 1886 the British brought the Konbaung dynasty in Burma to an end with the annexation of Upper Burma; and in 1893 the French seized Siam’s Lao territories east of the Mekong.

The unique status of the Siamese king was also recognised by Buddhists in the colonised Buddhist former kingdoms, who were worried about the state of the religion under the colonial powers. In 1896 the King was approached by a Burmese publishing house for financial assistance in the printing of the famous Burmese recension of the Tripitaka which had been inscribed in stone tablets at Mandalay by a former king of Burma, Mindon Min. The assistance had been asked of the Siamese king, the publisher pointed out, because Burmese Buddhism was now without a spiritual or temporal head. Fears for the future of Buddhism in Ceylon and requests for patronage were

75 Arnold, op. cit., see title page.

76 Snodgrass has shown a similar concern on the part of Japanese Buddhists; see Snodgrass, “The Representation of Japanese Buddhism”.

77 Hor chotmai het haeng chat (National Archives), mor ror 5 sor/41, phra traipitok (Tripitaka), 3/276, "ruang rong phim rangkung khor phraratchathan rachupatham nai kan phim phra traipitok aksorn phama" (Rangoon Publisher Requests Royal Assistance in Printing Tripitaka in Burmese Script), 9 karakadakkhom 115 - 20 mesayon 124 (9 July 1896 - 20 April 1905). The King’s approval for this assistance was given.

As in the Thai kingdom, for the Burmese the king and the Buddhist religion were inextricably
also expressed to Chulalongkorn by Ceylonese monks and pious laity. When Chulalongkorn visited British Ceylon on his way to Europe in 1897 he was welcomed with banners on which were written the greetings ‘Hail Buddhist King of Siam’ and ‘Welcome to the Defender of Buddhism’.  

Western control of the former Buddhist kingdoms, and the perceived dangers this had for the future of the Buddhist religion was one of the reasons behind the first ever printed version of the Siamese redaction of the Tripitaka, completed in 1893. As the preface to each volume of the publication explained,

In early times Buddhist kingdoms were still independent; the king of each was a Buddhist, and both endowed and supported Buddhism. This was the case in many countries, to wit, Siam, Ceylon, Burma, Laos and Cambodia....But in the present time Ceylon and Burma have come under English dominion; the governors of these countries are not Buddhists; they take measures to foster the secular rather than the spiritual welfare of the people; and they do not maintain Buddhism as did the old Buddhist kings...Cambodia came under French dominion, so that the people there could not maintain the faith in its full vigour. As regards the country of Laos, which is in the kingdom of Siam, the princes and people there profess a distorted form of the faith...Hence it is only in Siam that Buddhism stands inviolate...Such, then, were the considerations which led His Majesty the King of Siam to conceive the plan of examining and purifying the text of the Tipitaka....

The publication was intended both for distribution throughout the Thai kingdom, and overseas to Western centres of Buddhist studies. Over two hundred and thirty copies of this massive work were sent to scholarly institutions around the world, including those linked. A British official in late nineteenth century Burma commented that ‘The Burman cannot conceive of a religion without a Defender of the Faith - a king who appoints and rules the Buddhist hierarchy. The extinction of the monarchy left the nation, according to the people’s notions, without a religion.’; quoted in Yoneo Ishii, Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History, trans. Peter Hawkes, Kyoto University, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1986, p. 67.

78 Phraya Si Sathathep (Seng), Chotmaihet sadet phraphat yuroq ror sor 116 (Notes on the Royal Visit to Europe in 1897), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1972, pp. 86-7. On Chulalongkorn’s visit to British Ceylon see also Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot: phra niphon tang ruang (Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan’s Collected Writings: Various Works), Bangkok, Mahamakut, 1971, pp. 154, 159, 197.

79 See Chulalongkorn’s address to the Sangha in 1888: ‘Phra ratcjadamrat kae phra song nai kan thi cha truat sorp phra traipitok’ (The King’s Directive to the Sangha in Editing the Tripitaka), in Prayut Sitthiphon, ed., Nangsu maharatckawi piyamaharat chor por ror. chotmaihet phra ratcjaniphon phratchodatthalekha phratchodgawrap phrahoromrachowat (Chulalongkorn the Great, Beloved King, the Great Royal Poet: Records, Writings, Correspondence, Announcements, Commands). Part 1, 1984, p. 154.

of England and her colonies, France, Germany, Portugal and its colonies, Holland and her colonies, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, America, Spain, Japan and Russia.\textsuperscript{81} On the front cover was written in English, French, German, Thai and Pali,

This edition of the sacred writings of the Southern Buddhists the Tripitaka has been published by order of His Majesty Somdet Phra Paramindr Maha Chulalongkorn Phra Chula Chom Klao of Siam on the 25th anniversary of his ascension to the Throne and is presented by Him in commemoration of this event to ...\textsuperscript{82}

A certain number of copies had also been set aside for subsequent overseas requests. The court would only respond to such requests provided they came from ‘recognised’ scholarly institutions.\textsuperscript{83}

In this new recension of the Tripitaka in 1893 we find further evidence of the marginalisation of the Jatakas by the Thai court in the Fifth Reign. Excluded from the monumental publication was the Jataka book along with seven other books which had also previously been considered canonical, namely the Vimanavatthu, the Petavatthu, the Therakatha, the Therikatha, the Apadana, the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka.\textsuperscript{84} The reason why these books were not included is not clear. In Childers’ Pali dictionary of 1875 it had been pointed out that three of the aforementioned books, the Apadana, the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka, were of dubious canonical status on the grounds that the commentator Buddhaghosa had not mentioned these books as being recited at the First Council immediately following the Buddha’s death.\textsuperscript{85} However, other

\textsuperscript{81} Hor chotmai het haeng chat (National Archives), mor ror 5 sor/41, phra traipitok (Tripitaka), 8/175, "Banchi chamnua phra traipitok thi phra ratchathan suksasathan tang prathet" (List of Tripitakas Given by the King to Foreign Scholarly Institutions).

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} One request from a Ceylonese library was rejected with an explanation that the library was "unknown to the principle Buddhists in the island and can therefore be of little importance. Under these circumstances I cannot recommend His Majesty the King to present a gift of such a valuable book as the Royal Edition of the Tripitaka to such an unimportant district." ibid., 13/175, "ruang chao tang chat khör phra ratchathan phra traipitok" (Foreigners Request the Tripitaka), 22 minakhom 114 - 17 mokarakhom 119 (22 March 1895 - 17 January 1900).


\textsuperscript{85} R.C. Childers, A Dictionary of the Pali Language, Kyoto, 1976 (reprinted from 1st ed., London, 1875), p. 282, "nikaya". Also referred to in Müller, The Dhammapada, p. xxvi. It is known that Childers’ dictionary was in use among scholars at the Thai court including Chulalongkorn, and indeed became a model for similar dictionaries later produced in Siam; see Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot; lai phra hat kho kap kan suksa (Prince
traditions suggest that these books were added to the canon at a later date, and Childers’ list of canonical works does include all the books left out of the Siamese edition. The books are held as canonical - ie. being part of the Tripitaka - by most Western scholars. The omission of the Jataka and other books was also unprecedented in previous recensions of the Tripitaka by the Thai court. The Sangitayavamsa, written in 1788, presents a list of the works contained in Rama I’s famous recension of the Tripitaka completed in the same year, which includes all those works missing from the 1893 edition. And Rama VII’s edition of a second printed Siamese Tripitaka in 1928 (‘Phra Traipitok Sayam Rat’) saw the reinstatement of the missing books in the official Siamese canon. The omission seems therefore to have been an aberration peculiar to the 1893 edition.

The Jataka book was closely related in theme and content to a number of the other books which had been omitted from the 1893 Tripitaka, in particular the Cariya Pitaka and the Buddhavamsa. They dealt with similar concepts: the bodhisatta; the accumulation of harami; reincarnation; and the lineage of Buddhas who existed before the better known Gautama Buddha. Besides being incompatible with the rationalism of Western scholars, they were also no longer acceptable to the prevailing religious orthodoxy of the Siamese elite. Yet the omission of these books, and the marginalisation of the Jatakas by the Thai court in general, was more than simply an issue of canonicity or textual authenticity - although these were the grounds on which the Jatakas were attacked, both by Western Buddhist scholars and the Thai court. To understand the real concern of the Thai court in relation to the Jatakas it is now time to look at their place in popular culture during the Fifth Reign.


86 See for example, Müller, op. cit., pp. xxvii-xxix; also the first volume of the Journal of the Pali Text Society, 1882, p. 9. Chalmers assumed that the eight books had been left out because of ‘the inability of the small body of editors to cope with their task in its entirety before the King’s Jubilee’, Chalmers, ‘The King of Siam’s Edition of the Pali Tripitaka’, p. 7.

87 Somdet Phra Wanarat, Sangkhitayawong, pp. 456-7, 461.


89 In regard to the omission of the Petavyatthu, one Western scholar remarked that it was "relatively late in composition...a law type of Buddhism...", and "The base type of Buddhism found in this work evidently directed the Siamese theologians in not admitting the book into the printed edition of the Canon"; Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol. XXX, "The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon" Part IV, Petavyatthu: Stories of the Departed, translated by H.S. Gehman, Pali Text Society, London, 1974 (1st publ. 1942), p. xii.
The Persistence of the Jatakas in Popular Culture

It is always difficult to get a picture of rural life in the Thai kingdom because of the lack of local sources for the period and the need to fall back on elite documents. Because of the great influence of literature originating from the Thai court, it is tempting to imagine the social and cultural character of the Thai kingdom outside the royal capital as some vague reflection of court life. This would be a mistake. Despite the undoubted modernist outlook of the Thai court in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would be wrong to view the Thai kingdom as a whole as ‘modern’. In many respects the culture of the provincial regions bore a closer resemblance to the culture of the Thai capital a century earlier. The religious and cultural affairs of the rural hinterland had not seemed to worry the Thai court up to now. It had been prepared to allow a considerable degree of autonomy to regional centres - the various administrative towns or muang, as well as the tributary states or prathetsarat - as long as political and economic obligations (such as the oath of allegiance rendered by local lords, nobility and tributary princes, corvee duties, revenue collection, etc.) were met.

The court’s relatively tenuous control over its hinterlands increasingly became a cause for concern with the coming of the colonial powers. Continuing Western encroachment meant that that the Thai court was forced to rethink its system of administration in the interests of its own survival. The result was a new system of provincial administration, known in Thai as the thetsaphiban system. This was modelled on the colonial administration of the Dutch and British, and was implemented progressively throughout the kingdom from 1893. The previous system consisted of the old dynasties of regional lords or princes of tributary states who were bound to the Thai king by oaths of allegiance and who enjoyed their positions through hereditary birthright. This decentralized, rather loose system of governance no longer guaranteed the Thai court sufficient control. The thetsaphiban system involved the replacement of the old regional ruling houses with ‘Commissioners’ (kha luang) appointed by the court. The court’s appointees were usually from the Bangkok aristocracy or nobility, and they assumed responsibility for all administrative matters of importance, in particular financial and judicial affairs. New administrative regions known as monthon were created in place of the older territorial units. The effect of the thetsaphiban system was to destroy the power of the local lords and centralize control of the provincial regions and tributary states into the hands of the Thai court.

---

A further result of the new geopolitical situation was the heightening of Bangkok’s interest in the cultural affairs of the kingdom’s outlying regions. While Rhys Davids and the other Western Pali scholars were writing about the Jatakas as a kind of textual exercise, for the Buddhist scholars of the Thai court the Jatakas were more than just texts, they were a thriving part of the kingdom’s popular culture. Indeed, it was during the reign of Chulalongkorn that the enormous influence of Jataka literature in popular religion was coming to the attention of the Thai court. In 1893 an article was published in Thai under the pen name ‘N.P.’ (probably Prince Narathip Praphanphong) which gave a account of the custom of the Thet maha chat among the peoples of the Thai kingdom.\footnote{‘N.P.’, ‘Prapheni thet maha chat’ (The Thet maha chat custom), 1893, reprinted in Maha wetsandorn chadok sammuang thetsana 13 kan (The Thirteen Chapter Version of the Great Vessantara Jataka). Published in Honour of the 90th birthday of Phratchaphatharachan (Pleng Kumara), Bangkok, 1992. The original article was published along with a version of the Vessantara Jataka printed in Thai characters - manuscript versions of the Maha Chat had traditionally been written using the khorn or khmer script because of the sacredness of the subject. Only monks were adept at reading khorn script, so the publishing of the story in Thai characters was an attempt to make the Vessantara Jataka accessible to a wider reading audience.} Describing the popular ceremony in great detail the article noted that it was the greatest alms giving occasion of the year, and that it was celebrated every year, in virtually every temple or preaching hall throughout the country, even more so in the outer provinces.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 6-7.} Although the article notes that the Thet maha chat had been known to former Thai kings, it is interesting that the author appears to attempt to distance the Thet maha chat from Thai culture, by suggesting that the Maha chat probably originated among the Lao people.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 13-14.} This seems to be another attempt by the Thai court to downplay the formerly high status the Jatakas had once enjoyed at the Thai court.

The king himself had had a greater opportunity than perhaps any other king before him to see the situation in the countryside for himself. Chulalongkorn is well known for his visits upcountry, both in an official capacity as well as incognito. On one trip to Chanthaburi in 1886 the king had the opportunity to listen to a sermon (Thetsana) given in a local temple. In a letter to to Prince Wachirayan the king expressed his shock that the sermon was mostly made up of nithan (‘tales’ or ‘fables’).\footnote{‘Ruang bangrueng satsana nai hua muang’ (Strengthening Religion in the Provinces), Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot: phra ratcha hathalekhha lai phra hat, pp. 54-5.} We can assume that among these nithan must have been the Jataka tales, since nithan was the generic name the court now gave to the Jatakas. The king commented to Wachirayan that religion in the provinces was in a poor state, because the books were either full of
‘nonsense’ (leuw lew lai lai) or were too difficult for the villagers to understand. The king expressed his intention that appropriate religious teaching material be prepared by Sangha authorities in Bangkok and sent out to the provinces in place of the material that was currently being used.95

The king’s concern for religious affairs in the rural up-country regions was perhaps the seed for the most wide-ranging survey into local religious practice ever attempted by the Thai court. In the last years of the nineteenth century the king ordered the Sangha to report on the state of religious affairs throughout the Thai kingdom. The results of the survey, conducted over several years, startled the Sangha authorities. Not only did religious practice generally appear lax (in the eyes of the Sangha officials), but it was found that the Jatakas and other nithap formed the basis of religious instruction for most of the kingdom. In Nakhon Sri Thammarat montholin in the South, one of the most ancient religious centres of the region, the report sent back to Sangha head Wachirayan stated that ‘religious instruction (kan thetsana sang sorn) consists mostly of the Jatakas, as in other montholin’.96 Indeed this seems to have been the pattern for the Thai kingdom as a whole, for on the question of religious preaching Wachirayan’s final report to the king concluded, ‘as for religious instruction, generally speaking it consists of merely explaining about Giving, Moral Conduct, and the Vessantara Jataka’.97

While the survey has no specific mention of the Jatakas for the northern part of the kingdom, a chronicle compiled in 1893 by a northern monk in honour of the ruler of the principality of Nan, Suriyaphritadet, mentions the merit making acts of his predecessor Anantaworaritthidet, who between 1855 and 1886 financed the copying of a great number of Buddhist manuscripts, including a great many Jatakas, the Vessantara Jataka being the most popular among them.98 As for religious affairs in the Chiang Mai region, a recently compiled catalogue of regional manuscript literature reveals a flourishing tradition of Jataka manuscript composition during this period, with the

95 Ibid.

96 Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phra ya wachirayan warorot: lei phra hat kiao kap kan sukxa (Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan’s Collected Writings: Letters on Education), Bangkok, Mahamakut, 1971, p. 70.

97 “Katha thi tetsana pen phiang sadaeang than sin lae ruang chadok maha chat doi mak”, ‘Sarup raikan truat chat kan khana kan phra satsana lae kan sukxa hua muang, sok 120’ (Conclusion to the Report on the Investigation and Organisation of the Sangha, Religious Affairs and Provincial Education, 1901), in ibid., p. 95.

Vessantara Jataka again the most popular work in terms of the numbers of extant manuscripts.  

Another feature of religious life in the up-country areas which was alarming to the Thai court was the continuing popular interest in the idea of the ‘man of merit’ (phu mi bun). This term described a being who was believed to have acquired great moral stature and supernatural power as a result of ascetic self-cultivation. One of the reports of the Sangha’s survey from the Chumphon area in the south stated that meditation was one of the most popular forms of religious activity, but that some people would ‘lose their senses’ believing they were phu wiset (another name for a person of merit) and attract large followings. In the Lao region the situation was worse. The report from Nakhorn Ratchasima stated that there no worthy religious teaching materials, only ‘books about men of merit’. The Sangha reports noted that these stories were very popular among the villagers. In some cases villagers would become ‘deranged’ (charit fan fuan) and attempt to set themselves up as men of merit like in the books, or else flock to see others who were reputed to be men of merit. The report recommended that such books be seized and replaced by more appropriate material.  

The report from Nakhorn Ratchasima coincided with the most serious diplomatic incident to occur since the Thai kingdom was forced to give up its suzerainty over the Lao territories east of the Mekong river to the French in 1893. Between 1901-2 a number of religious figures from the northeastern region of the Thai kingdom and French Laos led large scale uprisings against the Thai and French administrative authorities, in what became known as the ‘Rebellion of the Men of Merit’ (kabot phu mi bun). The uprising has been attributed to a combination of factors, including the acute poverty of the region, exacerbated by heavy taxation by both the French and Thai authorities, bad harvests, and perhaps most importantly the nullification of the powers

---


100 Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phra ya wachirayan warorot; lai phra hat kia k'ap kan sukxa (Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan’s Collected Writings: Letters on Education), p.114.  

101 Ibid., pp. 115-6.  

of the Lao nobility and political class by the implementation of Thai and French centralised administration. But the most interesting aspect of the uprising is the terms in which it was conceived of by those involved. The leaders of the uprising were known locally as phu mi bun, and were adept at meditation and other forms of self-cultivation, from which they were said to have developed supernatural powers, including invulnerability, and healing powers. The coming of the phu mi bun had been prophesied by palm leaf manuscripts circulating throughout the region - which the Thai court had been aware of from its survey into religious affairs in the Lao region - and recited to the people by monks and lettered men. The manuscripts contained a millenarian prophecy of an imminent catastrophe, the coming of a righteous ruler, and the beginning of a new, more just social order. The uprising presented a serious problem for the Thai court. It gave the French an ideal pretext for further expansion into the Thai kingdom in the interests of ensuring their regional security. However, after several confrontations with both the Thai and French authorities, in which the phu mi bun and several thousand of their followers experienced some initial successes, the uprising was eventually suppressed by heavily armed troops despatched by the Thai authorities with the cooperation of the French.

Who were the phu mi bun? The evidence suggests that a number of them were disaffected members of the former Lao nobility who saw both Thai and French rule as a foreign imposition. Yet they were also regarded by their followers as ascetics with supernatural powers. What must be recognised is the religious nature of the authority of these leaders which enabled them to lead the uprising. The attraction of the phu mi bun figures for the Lao villagers was the belief in their superior moral and supernatural qualities acquired through regimes of asceticism, or in Jataka terms, ‘accumulation of the Perfections’. This corresponds precisely with the ideal of authority disseminated by the Jatakas among the Tai Buddhist peoples for over six hundred years. Even the terms used to refer to these figures, phu mi bun, phu wiset, thao thammikarat, and chao ton bun, are the same terms used as epithets for the bodhisatta in Lao versions of the Vessantara Jataka.

Keyes has noted how Thai military suppression of the revolt and the execution of its leaders were insufficient to guarantee the long term integration of the northeastern region with the Thai state. To achieve this the Thai government was forced to change the ‘cultural outlook’ of the Lao people. This was achieved over subsequent decades

---

103 Keyes, op. cit., pp. 297-8; Murdoch, op. cit., p. 57; Bunnag, op. cit., p. 151.


105 Keyes, op. cit., p. 300.
through the centralisation of the Sangha in the northeast, the implementation of compulsory primary school education with a curriculum designed by authorities in Bangkok, and rituals which closely associated the Buddha and the Thai king. The idea was emphasised that the only man of merit was the Thai king. In the new conception of government popularised by the Thai authorities,

All legitimate authority is conceived of as flowing from the monarchy... In short, the centralization of power became not only a fact in the experience of northeasterners; it also became a fact in the way in which they conceived of the nature of political power...106

The phu mi bun uprisings at the beginning of the twentieth century were by no means the first nor the last such occurrences to take place among the Thai peoples. Ironically, the phu mi bun rebels in the kingdom’s northeast had more in common with previous Thai rulers such as the kings of Sukhothai, Chiang Mai and the Lao kingdom of Lan Chang, as well as Taksin and the Chakri kings of the early Bangkok period, than they did with the more modern kind of political authority embodied by King Chulalongkorn. Chulalongkorn saw the rebellions essentially as an attempt to return to an older form of government.107 Yet such a view illustrates the extent to which the king had embraced a linear theory of modernization and political development, which provided the justification for eliminating different forms of political behaviour on the grounds that they needed to be superceded by a more ‘modern’ and hence superior form. Although the phu mi bun revolts were its last major violent expression, the decline of the older conceptualisation of authority was gradual. Sporadic outbreaks of social unrest similar to the phu mi bun uprisings continued to occur in various parts of the Thai kingdom as late as the 1960s, which illustrates the enduring power of this ideology in the popular consciousness.108

**Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout this thesis, it was at times of intense political activity among Tai Buddhist peoples - such as at the formation of the first states in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the resurrection of the Thai state after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, and now the threat to the existence of an independent Thai state in the age of imperialism - that the Jatakas received the support of kings and princes.

---

106 Ibid.


For the Jatakas to have preoccupied the attention of a kingdom’s rulers would be considered absurd were they simply folktales or religious parables, as most Thai and Western scholarship has declared since the time of King Chulalongkorn until the present day. Jatakas were never just folktales; that is a recent definition. The arguments surrounding issues of canonicity, textual authenticity, and rationality, as well as the engagement with Western scholars on matters relating to Buddhist orthodoxy, were more the outward expression of a deeper concern in the minds of the Thai rulers. As I have argued in previous chapters, the Jatakas, and the Vessantara Jataka in particular, were the principal conduit of a conception of authority and social hierarchy which was recognised throughout the Tai Buddhist world. For this reason they had enjoyed such a privileged position with Thai rulers. The court’s rejection of the Jatakas in the Fifth Reign was directly related to the repudiation of a Tai Buddhist form of political organisation in favour of a more centralized, bureaucratic model, not unlike that of the neighbouring colonial regimes. It was this model which enabled the Thai court to survive the dangers of the colonial era.

In the Thai kingdom until modern times there is no body of literature which examines the nature of political life (as we understand it) - of the sort that may be found in the European tradition of political thought from the sixteenth century onwards. Instead it is the Jatakas and related religious literature which seem to provide the source of much of the conceptualization of authority and political organization among the Tai Buddhist peoples. The language of statecraft in the Thai kingdom up until the mid-nineteenth century seems to echo the moral-religious discourse found in stories like the Vessantara Jataka. It is no surprise, therefore, that with the marginalisation of the Jatakas in the late nineteenth century we see the first stirrings of Thai political thought that could legitimately be called modern. In 1885 a group of princes presented a lengthy document to King Chulalongkorn unsuccessfully petitioning him to introduce steps to transform Thai government into one along the lines of a European parliamentary democracy. Three years later King Chulalongkorn gave a long speech analysing in great detail the old forms of government in the Thai kingdom and declaring the need to change the ‘traditional system of government (thamniam kan pokkhrong) to make it appropriate to the present time and to enable the country to progress’.109 The political ideals popularised by the Jatakas were making way for a new conception of power and government.

The issue of the Jatakas was only one element of a much broader questioning of cultural matters taking place in the Thai kingdom. The documentary sources of the Fifth

109 ‘Phra ratchadamrat phra bat somdet phra chula chorm klao chao yu hua song thalaeng phra borom ratchathibai kae khai kan pokkhrong phaen din’ (King Chulalongkorn’s Speech Announcing Changes in the Administration of the Kingdom), in Prayut Sithiphan, op. cit., Part Two, p. 342.
Reign are replete with material concerning Thai culture. The question of culture was much more than just scholarly debate. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the major figures in the scholarly debate over the Jatakas and other cultural issues - Chulalongkorn, Wachirayan, and several of the leading Thai princes - were also the principal agents of executive power in the Thai kingdom. In the Thai kingdom of the Fifth Reign, what we today call 'culture' cannot be separated from other spheres of human activity. Culture was inextricably linked to those other areas of human experience we know today as politics and government, history, and even economic life. The following two chapters will examine the reconfiguration of cultural matters which was occurring in the Fifth Reign.
CHAPTER 6
THE WACHIRAYAN LIBRARY AND THE FORMATION OF A THAI LITERARY KNOWLEDGE

In the Fifth Reign the Jatakas as a literary genre were categorized by the Thai court as folktale - nihan. It had been a move deliberately designed to deny them the legitimacy they had enjoyed since the formation of the first known Tai polities over six centuries earlier. The court’s attack on the Jatakas, however, was but one aspect of a much broader change taking place in the Thai kingdom. A new hierarchy of knowledge was being erected by the Thai elite, designed to serve a new but as yet inchoate conception of authority in the Thai kingdom, that of the nation-state. This new hierarchy differed from the old in important aspects. The custodians of the new knowledge were secular - princes or state functionaries, rather than Buddhist monks or Brahmins; the mode of dissemination was literary, rather than oral; the character of the new knowledge was consciously “Thai”, rather than Buddhist; and rather than in temples scattered throughout the kingdom, the centre of the preservation of this knowledge was the national library in the royal capital.

The significance of the library, as its name suggests both in Thai (hor samut - ‘book house’) and English, lay in it being a centre for knowledge contained in literary form. Although Buddhist and other premodern knowledges of the Thai kingdom certainly relied on manuscripts, yet much of the transmission of these kinds of knowledge was done by oral means. This was especially so with Buddhist knowledge, where the thetsana (‘sermon’) was the main form of communicating knowledge to a popular audience. As we have seen with the Vessantara Jataka, the medium which was responsible for the story’s widespread popularity among the Tai peoples was the thet maha chat, the sermon on the ‘Great Birth’.

As a medium for the preservation and communication of knowledge, however, the written word was acquiring a new importance with the introduction of printing in the mid-nineteenth century. Literacy was becoming more and more important as an instrument of government. In particular, the expansion of the bureaucracy in the 1880s and 1890s relied on literate clerks, and reforms in the education system of the same period, intended primarily to serve the expanding bureaucracy, were placing more and more emphasis on literacy in the Thai language - not for reading the Buddhist scriptures, but for administrative competency. Moreover, the power of printing, the ability to produce thousands of exact copies of the same document, gave it a political advantage which the palm leaf manuscript could never hope to match.

In previous chapters it was shown that even during this period, the power of palm leaf manuscript was considerable. Indeed, the ‘Holy Men’ revolts of the turn of the
century were partly sparked off by the circulation and recitation of palm leaf manuscripts with millenarian predictions. The court’s response that such manuscripts ought to be seized and replaced by religious instruction produced by the court is an indication of the political potential of the palm leaf manuscript. The shift to print can be seen as partly due to this desire of the Thai court to replace the existing religious tradition in the rural areas with a standardised one devised in the Thai capital. Indeed, one of Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan’s main activities during these decades was to produce a corpus of Buddhist instructional material and distribute it in printed editions to the kingdom’s temples.

The origins of the national library in the Thai kingdom can be seen in the context of these shifts in the preservation and dissemination of knowledge: firstly from orality to literacy; and secondly from manuscripts to printed literature.

A second development with which the national library was inextricably bound was the laying of the first foundations of the Thai nation-state in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Of the institutions which were central to the development of the nation-state scholars have singled out for particular attention the creation of a national bureaucracy, the setting up of a standing army, the development of a national education system, and the formation of a nationalised religious administration. On a different level, the elaboration of the actual concept of the Thai nation has been attributed to various individuals, such as Chulalongkorn himself and Prince Damrong; to the flourishing of historical studies in the kingdom; to the establishment of a national museum; and to the development of a sense of the territorial identity of the Thai nation. However, one institution which has received less attention but which was essential to the enrichment of the concept of the Thai nation - as much as it was indispensable to the proper appearance of a modern state - was the national library. Founded in the early 1880s as a kind of ‘club’ for the Thai aristocracy, and institutionalised as an official organ of the Thai state in 1905, the Wachirayan Library of the Capital (hor phra samut samrap phra nakorn) - renamed the National Library after 1932 - was fundamental to the formation of what

---


could be called a Thai literary knowledge. The library functioned to give tangible form to a certain kind of knowledge - hitherto non-existent as such - about the Thai nation.

The raw material from which this knowledge derived was the kingdom’s literary heritage. Writing, contained in palm leaf (bai lan)⁴ or samut khoi⁵ manuscripts, stone inscriptions, and from the later nineteenth century in bound, printed volumes, was a potent symbol of knowledge. It was the vehicle of a great variety of knowledges coexisting in the kingdom, including Buddhism, Brahmanism, law, astrology, magic, medicine, and the many treatises or manuals (tamra) written for the preservation, adaptation and dissemination of diverse knowledges. Concomitant with the elite’s emerging conceptualisation of the Thai kingdom as a nation-state, the kingdom’s books and the knowledge they contained acquired new significance to the Thai court. They were seen as the possession of the Thai nation. Safeguarding this national possession in what was in effect (though not yet in name) a ‘national library’, was a way of securing knowledge about the Thai kingdom and its peoples. The library was a nationalising institution. It aimed to centralise disparate knowledges produced by diverse peoples in many different parts of a still loosely integrated feudal kingdom.

This chapter will trace the development of the idea of the national library between the 1880s and early 1900s, and its role in the formation of a corpus of Thai knowledge, a knowledge about the Thai nation. In particular it will examine the library’s involvement in the centralisation, collection and ‘preservation’ of the kingdom’s books; the classification of the library’s collection of books into several new categories of knowledge; and finally the dissemination, through publication, to the literate classes of a selected number of books, carefully edited by the library, in the form of Thai history, Thai literature, and other genres of knowledge whose subject was the Thai nation.

---

⁴ A type of manuscript made from leaves of the corypha palm. The text is inscribed into the leaf with a stylus, and the entire manuscript is comprised of several leaves bound together. Bai lan manuscripts are used mainly for texts of a religious nature.

⁵ A type of paper manuscript used by the Thais before the introduction of printing. It was made from the pulp of the khoi plant (streblus asper). Samut khoi were also known as samut thai, and came in two forms: samut thai dam, a black paper to be inscribed in white; and samut thai khoa, a white paper to be inscribed in black.