

**National Heritage and Nationalist Narrative
in Contemporary Thailand:
An Essay on Culture and Politics**

By

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1. World Cultural Heritage: A Critique

In contemporary perception vestiges of the past are like endangered species: the ones still surviving have to be protected to avoid their possible disappearance. Hence, similar to animals under threat of extinction, relics are kept in enclosed areas that safeguard and allow their display while lists of crumbling monuments are drawn up to establish a Noah's Ark of cultural remnants. Removed from daily vicissitudes, heritage becomes an essential element of "extra-ordinary" life, holiday time, when visiting a museum or an exhibition is a more likely event. Yet, just as captivity changes animal behaviour, the survival of heritage in "cultural zoos" alters its character and value. Furthermore, memory, which allows people to relive their history, never has an idealistic nature. It always is a function of present and particular perspectives, at the personal as well as at the collective level. Nevertheless, conservation of ruins is nowadays implemented with global aims under the formula of World Heritage, a list of natural and cultural sites to maintain for future generations. World Heritage has UNESCO as its great sponsor and national governments as its main executor. It is thus clear that, despite the stress on antiquity from which relics emerge and the posterity for which they are preserved, the establishment and consumption of a world cultural heritage is a social and cultural phenomenon which matters essentially in the present.

1.1 The Meanings of Cultural Heritage

According to the 1972 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage, "cultural heritage" is defined as the complex of monuments, buildings and archaeological sites "of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science" (Hewinson 1989:15). More recent definitions label as heritage not only physical objects (immovable as well as movable, like crafts, manuscripts and scientific collections) but non-physical features too, such as oral traditions, rites, performing arts, in sum everything generally named as folklore, or culture in the broadest sense. Of course, the more extensive the definition of heritage, the more problematic becomes the enforcement of an effective conservation policy, especially with regard to the financial constraints of developing countries. In any case, wide concern for heritage preservation can be considered quite a recent trend, which noteworthy developed during the last two or three decades, at the time of the massive expansion of international tourism.

It is indeed evident that attention to heritage is often accorded precedence when it coincides with, or promotes, economic gain from tourism. This consideration is reflected in the definition of heritage as a "cultural resource" or "cultural property," whose characteristic is to be "a unique and non-renewable resource" (Don Fowler, quoted in Pisit 1988:1). Hence, heritage preservation is not only essential for avoiding the waste of outstanding examples of human creativity, but because the waste of such attractions would badly affect the capacity of a country to become, or continue to be, a tourist destination. In turn, profits from a flourishing

tourism industry can contribute to a better conservation of the country's artistic patrimony.

Because of this, criticism tends to focus on those heritage policies which appear to be specifically designed to suit the interests of the tourism industry, and hence somehow in contrast with the aims of conservation. However, the point at stake in this chapter is one of priority, that is, cultural heritage as a source of meanings. It is nowadays a commonly accepted notion that heritage is a basic element in the definition of cultural identity (cf. Shennan 1989). Read, for example, the following two statements:

The cultural heritage expresses each people's historical experience and its collective personality. It is an integral part of cultural identity within the consciousness of individuals and of the community (Makangiasar 1986:12); Through the realisation of their cultural heritage, people become aware of and proud of their own contribution to the history of mankind and simultaneously they find concrete evidence of their cultural identity (Yamamoto 1986:21).

These statements subtend two main assumptions. First, heritage is valued not so much for its intrinsic worth but as a mode of signification, a sign, in which the *past* is the signifier (what it is showedⁿ), and the *present* the signified (what it is purported). Since any single specimen of heritage refers, in various respects, to that shared patrimony of historic territory, common myths, historical memoirs and mass culture which identifies a nation (Smith 1991:14), heritage connotes nationhood. (In this regard, the arrow of an Amazonian tribe and the Cheops pyramid can be seen as *equally* meaningful manifestations of the respective cultures which created them.) As such, heritage becomes a basic ingredient of national identity, along with language, religion, flag, geographic borders, customs, food, etc. And if all these elements have to be considered as cultural heritage according to its more extensive definition, then it is clear that heritage ends by representing national identity *tout court*.

The second assumption is that the meaning of heritage is at the same time *unifying* and *differentiating*. On the one hand, the unifying function on the national level is ^{projected to} ~~clubbed~~ on the universal one, since heritage ~~parallels~~ and assimilates every culture, by means of the contribution of its own originality and "outstanding universal value," in the great temple of human creativity. On the other hand, heritage identifies nations by distinguishing and typologising their specific cultural production. In sum heritage is, above all, a discourse about culture *as* identity, which tells people who they are by making visible, through arts and crafts, their past. This discourse is assertive because the statements it makes about the past claim authenticity resulting from the authority of scholarship (archaeology, epigraphy, etc.). Incidentally, there is no artistic "aura" without the authenticating function of scholarship, which establishes the objects deserving public admiration. The concept of aura explains why the large availability of visual and audio reproductions do not stop masses of people from traveling to see or listen to the original item, whether a painting or a monument or a performance.¹

Authenticity is thus what is apparently required by cultural artefacts and activities in order to be meaningful within the local context as well as in the appreciation of outside observers. In fact, heritage maintains unaltered its prerogatives even when it merely displays a "staged authenticity," to borrow the keen term introduced by MacCannel (1973). The term

¹I therefore disagree with Urry's (1990:84-86) thesis of the "anti-auratic" character of post-modern culture (a denial of the separation of the aesthetic from the social and of art from ordinary life), which would make cultural forms consumed not in a state of contemplation but of distraction. However Urry hits the target when he writes that the gaze within the museum, once premised upon the aura of the historical artefact, has changed substantially and mainly as a response to the pressure of consumerism (cf. further, note 9). The concept of aura is from Walter Benjamin's well-known essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," first published in 1936.

"authenticity" itself can be problematised when used with regard to cultural heritage. Let us see why.

1.2 Simulacra of the Past

At first glance heritage appears to be what has survived the wreckage of the past, the passing of time itself seen as operating as a kind of natural selection. This superficial impression is moreover consistent with the etymology, since heritage means what we inherit from our ancestors. In spite of this we should recognise that heritage is, in many cases, not so much what *fortuitously* survives but, rather, what is *consciously* selected in order to survive. Survival is ensured by national, and lately international, cultural policies which choose what deserves to be safeguarded for future generations and what does not; what should be shown in museum displays; which events or historical personages have to be commemorated through the erection of monuments and memorial buildings.²

Once they have been selected to survive, cultural remnants are constantly transformed (and hence, somehow up-dated) both directly, by protection, restoration, or iconoclasm; and indirectly, by replicas, emulations and fakes (Lowenthal 1985: Chap. 6). Transformed into objects of the present that speak about the past, relics become one source of historical knowledge. Yet the ~~standard~~ of veracity of such "commodified" or "artefactual" history is questionable, especially with regard to the commercially successful

²Thus Wallerstein (1991:98): "Since the state has become the major mechanism of allocating social income, the states are pressed to offer financial support to both the sciences and the arts, in all their multiple forms. And since the money available is inherently limited, the state must make choices in both the sciences and the arts. Clearly, in any given state, after 100 years of making such decisions, it is very clear that a 'national' culture will exist even if it didn't exist at the outset. A particular past, a heritage, is institutionalized."

historical reenactments in heritage locations, because sanitised and artificial interpretations of the past without the marks of violence, exploitation, and disease, tend to prevail in order not to ~~strike~~^{offend} the audience and spoil the recreational character of the visit (Uzzell 1989). In any case, heritage interpretation necessarily implies a strategy, either educational or recreational; and in the thinking of many cultural resources managers it is only the coupling of the two strategies that can give heritage a more significant value.

Given the strong evocative ^{potential} character of ruins, it is also clearly understandable that political leaderships have always been interested in exploiting archaeological remains as a way to gain "the generation, control, and allocation of one symbolic resource, the Past" (Fowler 1987:230). Material accomplishments of historic societies recovered within the boundaries of contemporary nation-states are commonly enlisted as "national" heritage. And instances of the utilisation of archaeology to sustain nationalistically biased interpretations of the past are countless. Trigger (1984:356) has suggested the categorisation of nationalist, colonialist and imperialist archaeologies, arguing that "the nature of archaeological research is shaped to a significant degree by the roles that particular nation-states play, economically, politically, and culturally, as interdependent parts of the modern world-system."³

Fowler (1987) offers some examples both in the sense of archaeology used for affirming a genealogical or a cultural continuity with the past, and hence the connection with the ultimate sources of power which legitimise

³However the author still believes in the archaeologist's search for objectivity, since "the findings of archaeology can only have lasting social value if they approximate as closely as possible to an objective understanding of human behaviour" (Trigger 1984:368).

the exercise of rule, and even the right to impose this rule all over the world; and, on the contrary, in the sense of affirming a discontinuity with a past which is not given any legitimising authority over the present.⁴ In post-colonial states the sweeping away of the foreign past has opened the way to the recovery (that often means the creation) of a "national" cultural identity and the "true" heritage dissipated during the colonial rule; and in order to dispute the charges of backwardness and immobility, archaeology has been called to provide proofs of self-development and autonomous local change. Thus, while cultural heritage has been recognised as a basic element of cultural identity, another fundamental point has been clearly spelled out:

The idea of protecting the archaeological heritage is intimately linked with various political ideologies, whether nationalist, colonialist or imperialist [but] since the archaeologists are themselves members of society, such ideologies have been concealed and represented as natural (Kristiansen 1989:24).

The awareness of these important implications in the uses of heritage has recently generated a debate among archaeologists about the ethical principles which should preside over the management of cultural resources (see Cleere 1989; Layton 1989a, 1989b; Gathercole-Lowenthal 1990⁵). Central questions are those of the criteria to apply to heritage preservation (e.g., selective versus comprehensive; restoration versus plain conservation); that of an appropriate legislation defining such criteria, which in any case will reflect socio-economical, ideological, and academic constraints. The

⁴The PRC, the case discussed by Fowler (1987:239), is one in which the national past is interpreted according to state ideology: "PRC purpose is to glorify and hence justify the present and the future by denigrating the evil past. . . . Qin terracotta army and the other great treasures from the past have become visible symbols of the strength and genius of the People throughout three millennia of oppression that ended in 1949." However, it should be observed that every time a discontinuity with the past occurs, the national history (or part of it) and its cultural production are *at least* reinterpreted (and often denied), and not necessarily from a Marxist perspective.

⁵All these books belong to a major series of twenty-three volumes resulting from the World Archaeological Congress held in Southampton, England, in September 1986.

question at stake is, thus, who has the right to make decisions about heritage in a context where the composition amongst the different parties involved (owners of archaeologically significant lands; dispossessed people with traditional claims such as Australian Aborigines and Native Americans; local communities, nation-states, international organisations) clearly poses a difficult task. Indeed, such is the difficulty to recognise with honest realism that "the question, then, is not whether archaeology and political ideology can be separated – they cannot – but, rather, how we can cope with the situation in a responsible way" (Kristiansen 1989:24).⁶

Acknowledging the impossibility of keeping heritage and ideology separate from each other means to implicitly acknowledge that vestiges of the past can only survive through the selective, and indeed political, action of conferring the status of heritage on something and denying it to something else. Now, establishing heritage through a selective process is what gives heritage its *paradigmatic* character. Heritage is paradigmatic because it provides cultural patterns (symbols, loci, rituals) gathered from the past which are meaningful in the present. In effect, cultural heritage represents, by definition, the whole repository of imagery created in every form of art since the beginning of mankind; it is thus clear that such a paradoxically immense storehouse of cultural paradigms can reasonably satisfy every requirement of signification. Moreover, the heritage of complex historic societies is likely to be used as a polyvalent source of cultural paradigms, as shown, for instance, by the disparate usages that have been made of the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome.

⁶Fowler (1987:241) concludes his critical analysis of the utilisation of archaeology in support of nationalism much more optimistically, affirming that even if "the refractory and 'un-self evident' nature of archaeological data makes inference about the real past an extremely difficult undertaking at best . . . by a continuing critical awareness of all the factors at play in doing of archaeology we will be able to approach and provide valid explications of the real past."

In sum, heritage – as structured by the processes of selection, restoration and exhibition – shows only selected and paradigmatic "slices of the past" which stand for the presumed historical reality. This is socially remarkable since, for those who trust the proclaimed authority of heritage institutions, these "slices of the past" represent indeed what the past was like. Concerned heritage managers may argue that the degree of veracity of a museum or an exhibition is a function of the honesty of scholarship applied to it, just as historians could say with regard to their works. But from a structuralist point of view, the relation between historical reality and any heritage display is exclusively a function of the latter's character of "text" or medium which communicate about the otherwise unknowable past, as theorised by Silverstone (1989:141).⁷ Consequently, heritage as an artefactual and intellectual construct resembling the past is, in fact, a simulacrum of it, the representation of an original which never was ~~and~~ reality in itself.⁸

As with the media in general, and visual and written historical narratives in particular – such as movies, documentaries, and novels inspired by history and historiography itself – cultural heritage works through its own peculiar strategy of representation to produce one version of the past distinguished by an effect of reality that in fact often blurs into a

⁷Baxandall (1990:34) makes this point very clearly: "It seems axiomatic that it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them. Long before the stage of verbal exposition by label or catalogue, exhibition embodies ordering propositions. To select and put forward any item for display, as something worth to looking at, as interesting, is a statement not only about the object but about the culture it comes from. To put three objects in a vitrine involves additional implications of relation. There is not exhibition without construction and therefore - in an extended sense - appropriation."

⁸Jameson stigmatises this question by arguing that in the present (post-modern) epoch we are "condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains for ever out of reach" (1984:65).

hyper-real dimension, a "realer-than-real reconstruction [of] the authentic" (Eco 1987:32). This effect of historical reality is thus a contemporary creation shaped by the representational strategies typical of the time in which it is realised (for example, the concept of museum display is greatly changing with the introduction of interactive technology);⁹ and necessarily having, as I will argue, a hegemonic character. Nonetheless, we can assume that a lesser or greater degree of historical veracity does exist in most heritage displays. Now, what matters for the present analysis is not determining the extent of this degree but how this degree is functional to the discourse of heritage.

1.3 Political Myth and Crisis of Legitimacy

In mythical accounts of the past such as legends and genealogies the core of historical events is constantly restructured in order to make sense of the present experience, like the existence of sexual taboos, social constraints, and so forth. Entering the field of mythology can be a very hazardous step because of the impressive quantity of scholarship in this regard. I shall recall here the opinion of a historian of classicism according to whom one of the main functions of myth was "to make the past intelligible and meaningful

⁹Urry (1990:129-132) points out three main changes that have lately altered the concept of museum: a broadening of the objects displayed, as the result of the pluralisation and contemporarisation of the conception of history; an widening of its character (living, open-air and interactive museums); a change in its relationship with other social (and, I would add, entrepreneurial) institutions like the shop and the café, which have forced the museum to become more market-oriented. Indeed, the museum shop is today an integrating - and sometimes, perhaps, predominant - part of the visit, and access to it is independent from the access to the displays. Likewise, we can imagine a future with a more functional role of the café of the museum, with waiters dressed in historical costumes and dishes based on recipes from Ancient Egypt to Futurist cuisine. However, this market-oriented development is yet to come in many Asian and also European countries - e.g., Italy and Greece - where the museum is still very much centered on the artistic, and in many cases, religious aura of the objects displayed.

by selection, by focusing on a few bits of the past which thereby acquired permanence, universal significance" (Finley 1965:283). The myth's eminent relevance for the present makes its subject-matter (generally the deeds of heroes) an eternal paradigm which does not necessarily require an insistence on its historicity (Tudor 1972:64). As Nietzsche (1968) said in his prophetic style, "the real word at last became a myth."

Common to mythology and cultural heritage as well is thus the processing of past events (objects in the case of heritage) in order to obtain selected and paradigmatic versions of history that are necessary to establish the origins of a given society. The original usage of the word myth (Greek *mythos*: speech, tale) is indeed for narratives about origins. The myth of origins of traditional societies has its equivalent in the myth of foundation of the modern nation-state which accounts for the establishment of the polity. This political myth, though "a feature of advanced societies" (Tudor 1972:14), shares with sacred myth the main characteristic of being a narrative which refers to the past but is told from the stand-point of the present, and in which the past is valued not for its veracity but for providing an explanation of the present condition through the paradigmatic content of the myth itself. The story which a political myth tells is often that "of a political society that existed or was created in the past and which must now be restored or preserved."¹⁰ Still a political myth is never the myth of a polity as a whole but "always the myth of a particular group" (Tudor 1972: 138-139).

This group instrumentality is stressed too by Raoul Girardet (1986:86-89;179-80), who asserts the concomitance of all political myths with the

¹⁰The other most common instance of political myth is that of a society to be built in the future, as in the case of millenarian prophecies, revolutionary ideologies, or literary utopias.

vicissitudes of the nation, and in the end, with a crisis of legitimacy as the spontaneous acceptance of the political status quo; namely, the crisis which arises when the issues concerning the rulers' right to exert power appear to be no longer self-evident. Crises of legitimacy are, according to Girardet, inseparable from a mental shock perceivable at the personal as well as at the collective levels, a shock that is at the origin of political myth. The development of the mythical production begins when a phenomenon of non-identification takes place in the collective consciousness, when a group in the society recognises and defines itself as different at the same time that it realises – painfully or violently – its singularity. Political myth is thus the instrument for the reconquest of an endangered identity as well as a constructive element of a specific form of social reality.

Relying both on Tudor's and Girardet's insights, I shall sum up that political myth expresses the ideology of a social group in a time of crisis, when that group realises that its established role is undergoing a transformation, either because it is endangered by internal or external pressure, or because it is ascending to a new position of leadership. This means that behind the pervasiveness of the foundation myths of ancient and modern polities we can always recognize the predominant agency of a single group (the Pilgrim Fathers, the bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks) whose particular history and interests are eventually internalised, in the process of rewriting the biography of the nation that follows every legitimacy crisis, as the history and interests of the whole society. Arguing about contemporary mythologies some forty years ago, Roland Barthes (1972:142) wrote, "Myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification and making contingency appear eternal."

The presence and the agency of a political mythology can be easily distinguished behind the tide of the long legitimacy crisis which runs through Thailand's last eighty years of history. Rama VI's egotistic projection of the kingdom as nation (*chat*), in opposition to the call of the Sino-Thai bourgeoisie for a "progressive" nationalism in the 1910s-20s; Phibun Songkhram's attempt, following the 1932 revolution, to outlaw the monarchy and modify the character of the kingdom after the model of the authoritarian nation-states; Sarit Thanarat's reinstatement of the symbolic centrality of the monarchy to legitimise his autocratic power in the late 1950s; the revival of royal symbolism in the 1970s to overcome the challenge of emerging political subjects to the military-bureaucratic state-system: all these instances show the periodic reworking – at times along orthodox lines, on iconoclastic lines at other times – of the basic themes of the foundation myth of the Thai kingdom, from which the contemporary polity still derives its symbols of legitimacy.

1.4 The Hegemonic Content of Cultural Heritage

I wish to return now to the general theoretical framework to conclude with an assessment about the content and function of heritage as discourse. As has already been pointed out, in order to establish itself the discourse of heritage observes, as historiography does, the indispensable condition of the principle of authenticity resulting from the scientific analysis of evidence. However, concern for authenticity vanishes in the actual purport of heritage in which, similar to myth, evidence of the past are not important *per se* but for the significations which they can convey with regard to the present. The discourse of heritage is thus a means to legitimise a political subject (class or movement, party, nation-state) by connecting its origins to the some

authoritative tradition. To this end a "staged" authenticity can, and indeed does work, as well as an "authentic" authenticity. Indeed, the practical value of heritage is by no means given by the past it comes from but, on the contrary, by its very presence here-and-now, a presence meaningful insofar as it suits a present quest for legitimisation.

As a source of cultural and political legitimacy, the discourse of heritage is intrinsically ideological, if ideology is defined "as the instrument of an appropriation of a rhetoric of legitimacy by power-holding or power-seeking groups" (Merquior 1979:35). In the hands of the ideologues of the nation-state the artistic achievements of the past embedded in the formula of cultural heritage become *topoi*, i.e., emblematic loci of the nationalist narrative (literally, the myth that tells the history of the nation) which expresses the hegemony of the dominant groups in terms of that shared patrimony of values and beliefs subtending the idea of national community.

The concept of hegemony, as elaborated by Antonio Gramsci, is always considered in a Marxian perspective as a function of the relations of production at the structural level. The critical point in Gramsci's analysis is that the ruling bloc's hegemony becomes pervasive and as such metabolised in the body of society (and not simply disguised as false consciousness) not so much by means of compulsion, but through consent which civil society (Church, School, political parties, newspapers, cultural organisations) gains on behalf of the dominant fundamental group as "intellectual and moral leadership."¹¹ Thus hegemony, economically grounded and socially

¹¹Hegemony is "the 'spontaneous' consent that the great mass of the population gives to the trend of social life as shaped by the dominant fundamental group. This consent is 'historically' due to the ascendancy (and hence, to the reliance) that the dominant fundamental group gains from its position and function in the field of production" (Gramsci 1949:9. My translation).

consolidated through consent, not only allows the ruling class to exert social control without direct coercion, but to actively make its values and beliefs that of the subordinated classes. That is why the political leadership of the dominant group should never be separated from its intellectual leadership; and why revolutionary struggle to win power always implies struggle for the assimilation and "ideological" conquest of intellectuals, whose huge growth in the democratic-bureaucratic state-systems is due not so much to the social requirements of production, as to the political needs of the dominant fundamental group (Gramsci 1949:9-13).

Intellectuals are those who materialise cultural heritage. Artists and architects, archaeologists and anthropologists, historians and art historians, museum curators and conservators, and even teachers and priests are responsible for creating, restoring, disclosing, glossing, explaining and vulgarising the cultural production of the past making it the object of public respect. After all, pushing admiration for the arts is a way to produce consensus; and since hegemony is carried on through intellectual leadership, formal democratic societies cannot do without artists and intellectuals.¹² Yet intellectuals do not constitute an autonomous class; they are, in Gramsci's reading, "organic" to the social group they belong to.¹³ It is not surprising, then, that museum displays all over the world present, in Horne's (1984:1) words, "dominant versions of reality [that] tend to suit dominant groups and to uphold a certain social order."

¹²Dictatorships too can hardly do without them, but in that case the value of artistic production is undermined by its *overtly* apologetic intent.

¹³We may agree that, generally speaking, the relatively free position of artists and intellectuals within the bounds of capitalist systems acknowledging the governing principles of constitutionalism and parliamentarism can account for "non-consenting" or "counter-hegemonic" cultural productions.

Indeed, the museum is the favourite locus of the reification of the myth of the nation, a temple-like architecturally designated area where the "secular ritual of citizenship" is performed (Duncan 1991), the forge where the model of national identity is cast through the juxtaposition of contrasting images of "sameness" and "otherness." Often born out of private royal collections, public museums, first established in Europe as a result of the secularisation of knowledge generated by the Enlightenment, have however retained as central "the function of the princely gallery as a ceremonial reception hall wherein the state presented and idealised itself" (Duncan 1991:93). Transplanted in colonial dominions, the museum had been an instrument, with the map and the census, to legitimise authority by cataloguing the local cultural, geographic and human resources, and thus defining the colony itself, and the post-colonial nation-state that followed (Anderson 1991). Likewise, in Lasswell's (1979) analysis, monumental architecture as "the signature of power" holds a central role amongst those rituals and objects of public admiration (*miranda*) which add, in the symbology of politics, to the articles of faith about the legitimacy of power (*credenda*), and it "serves as a focus for the populace's identification with the state" (Miller 1987:124). Monuments, official buildings, and the form of the city itself,¹⁴ are active elements of hegemonic assertion by territorially propagandising, whether through pure symbolism or actual function, the values informing the policies of the ruling classes.¹⁵

¹⁴Large avenues and boulevards, generally found in capital-cities, are clearly symbolic representations of the nation's greatness. For example, Paris' grand boulevards were built as part of Prefect Haussmann's reshaping of the city which magnified France's colonial fate in the second half of the last century; the same boulevards, by allowing the easy repression of popular demonstrations, underlined *practically* the reactionary character of France's Second Empire.

¹⁵A few years ago in Italy, a republic by popular referendum since 1946, the proposal to erect a monument to the anarchist Gaetano Bresci (who in 1900 killed King Umberto I) in his birthplace gave rise to a heated debate, and the proposal was finally abandoned. With regards to another example of oppositional statuary, we can notice that the monumental grave of Karl Marx in London has not to face the iconoclasm recently suffered by similar monuments in ex-

The hegemonic content of a "world heritage" is of course the more arduous to discern because of the supra-national and apparently non-political nature of the organisations involved: UNESCO by means of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS);¹⁶ Non-Governmental Organisations; private foundations. Moreover, the practical aspect of preserving the very existence of monuments of antiquity seems to be more compelling than the related question of who is going to gain what in these operations. All of us too, as individuals and "citizens of the world," are sincerely worried about the destiny of relics of the past which induce us to travel, to visit places, to take pictures, and in the end, to feel the emotion of attending the great show of history. It is nevertheless clear that the World Heritage listing is a way to confer legitimacy and international recognition upon the local governments that are called to cooperate with restoring programmes.¹⁷ Thus, to take a Southeast Asian example, in spite of the continuous violation of human rights by the military junta which rules Myanmar (Burma), the restoration of Pagan, hit by an earthquake in 1975 and recently listed as World Heritage site, has significantly benefited from international aid.

communist countries, where in fact they were symbols of the ruling power. For the irony of history, the greatest critic of capitalism is eventually honoured by a monument in the country of capitalism's birth.

¹⁶ICOMOS is a non-governmental organisation established in 1964 as an advisory body under UNESCO. National committees for ICOMOS presently exist in sixty-two countries.

¹⁷That the listing of World Heritage ^{has} ~~is~~ a power to carefully administrate is acknowledged by Dr. Roland Silva himself, President of ICOMOS: "Our proposal is that in 1993 no cultural monument or site be entertained for nomination until the professionals of ICOMOS have studied such nominations, as if it were a medical patient, and only on such inspections the proposals had been submitted for nomination or ejection. In terms of the expenses of the Specialist, such cost can be met by the host country as in the case with most UNESCO missions. Travel fares and professional fees need to be found through the host country or the World Heritage Body. This is, indeed, the professional way that Monuments and Sites should be handled at Nomination levels." (FAD 1992:55)

One question generally uncritically taken for granted concerns the wide recognition of approaches such as conservation and restoration of artistic artefacts that are, in fact, historically rooted only in the European tradition. And albeit with its best intentions World Heritage listing can be seen as the attempt to preserve the heritage of different societies as patrimony of the whole of humankind, freeing it from the parochiality of the singular state, still it is according to hegemonic parameters of technical and scientific reliability, involving the status of a nation as modern and civilised, that the idea of world heritage is implemented and valued.¹⁸

Still, perhaps the most significant point regards the feeling of nostalgia which some observers see as boosting the present interest for heritage, nostalgia explained by the crisis in reality of the contemporary age and the need for a past conveying certainties.¹⁹ Though nostalgia is typical of every generation, at least as the very human feeling of regret for lost youth, it is nevertheless true that, in an age of fast and often amazing historical changes, an idealised vision of the past as a valuable repository of traditions is likely to be transferred from conservative élites to mass culture.²⁰ And the "heritage industry," selling to the tourist consumer its

¹⁸This point is clearly made in the following statement of Prof. Ishizawa, director of the Institute of Asian Cultures of Sophia University, Tokyo: "The preservation and restoration project for historic cities clearly contributes to raising the academic standards of a nation. . . . The work at Borobudur has brought Indonesians to the summit of world competence in restoration techniques. The project also promotes interdisciplinary activities related to preservation and restoration, as well as to the reorganization and improvement of national research systems. . . . Perhaps the most important effect of the successful Borobudur Preservation Project is the solid confidence it implanted in the minds of the Indonesian people and those of other Asian countries as well." (Ishizawa *et al.* 1988:22-23)

¹⁹To put this in Baudrillard's words (quoted in Birch 1993:6), "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity."

²⁰Hewinson (1987) shows the correspondance between the boom in the early 1980s of the British heritage industry, marketing a particularly nostalgic version of the past, and the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, when consensus to conservative policies was won through

"improved version of the past" (Hewinson 1989:10), can rarely afford to offer too ~~much~~^{many} controversial or disturbing insights into the history of peoples and nations. Furthermore, the process of reading the heritage "text" by the tourist "spectator" implies an interaction which alters every single element involved; the tourist becomes an archaeologist, the indigenous citizen a heritage interpreter, the relic is faked by its replica, and our sense of historical perspective is blurred into a present "which has taken the stigma of the past" (Ankersmit 1989:151).

So far, I have attempted to present a critical approach to the question of cultural heritage. In the next chapters the analysis will move to the specific case of Thailand, where heritage has become a key concept in statements about national identity and in tourist promotion as well. Signals are indeed contradictory. It is now clear that interpreting heritage is always a way to interpret history, and this has led to debates among academics, intellectuals and state officials about the character that the Thai past should have. And while the majority of the Thai people, happily caught up in the task of becoming "modern," do not seem to worry much about the loss of aspects of their culture valued as "traditional," they have become increasingly surrounded by simulacra of a fictitious "Olde Siam" which mirror an idyllic golden age. What is certainly true is that, at a time when aspects of the past are continually transiting from the plane of daily reality to that of memory as a result of economic and social changes, the questions concerning national heritage in Thailand today have an undeniable political valency.

a nationalist revival which included the royal wedding of Prince Charles and the war against Argentina for the property of the Falklands (Malvinas) islands.

2. The Politics of Thai Heritage

Art and culture [*sinlapa watanatham*] reflect national identity [*ekkalak khong chat*] and form part of the historical heritage of every society. It is also generally accepted that art and culture play an important part in the meeting together of the populace, creating a sense of national unity. This unity will result in peaceful and orderly co-existence, making possible the preservation of the national integrity. Artistic and cultural preservation, research, dissemination and promotion have been entrusted to the Fine Arts Department. Its most important role is to maintain and preserve all aspects of the national artistic and cultural heritage as well as possible within the rapidly changing conditions of modern society. (FAD 1992:16)

This excerpt from a lavishly illustrated book published by the Fine Arts Department (FAD) overtly spells out the aims that Thai heritage is called to serve: to create a feeling of unity, internal order and national integrity. This might seem to overstate UNESCO policy but the book, in fact, celebrates the 1991 inclusion of the archaeological cities of Sukhothai (including Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet) and Ayutthaya in the World Heritage list. The forest area of Thung Yai-Huay Khakhaeng was also nominated a World Heritage natural site on that occasion. Such a confidence in the power of ruins by the local authorities is indeed admirable, and it may contrast with the fact that in Thailand, during the past twenty years, the threat of coercion and repression has been always intensely present, and in few occasions actually deployed. Still, the following discussion puts forward the thesis that the most recent and articulate formulation of a state policy on cultural heritage, albeit incapsulated in the long-term project of nation-building started last century, has been issued precisely in response to the deep crisis of legitimacy suffered by the Thai polity in the 1970s.

2.1 The Quest for a "National Heritage"

It follows from the arguments earlier that the programmatic and purposeful valuation of cultural heritage is instrumental to the process of nation-building. In Siam this process started in the second half of the nineteenth century and was, until 1932, led and achieved by the absolute monarchy through the imposition of its authority over peripheral semi-autonomous principalities. Politically as well as culturally, the obvious result of this process was "the conceptual conflation of monarchy and nation" (Anderson 1978:213). Not unlike the Western cases described by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the Chakri kings manipulated the past both to sanction change by means of the authority of historical custom and to sanction continuity by means of the normative values of an invented tradition. The transformation of the premodern kingdom into a centralised state was legitimised through the purely Thai myth of foundation of Sukhothai placed side by side with the Buddhist-Brahmanic cosmology of Khmer origin which since the time of Ayutthaya had provided political legitimation and a cultural identity for the monarchy.

Accordingly, a royal antiquarianism developed within the circle of the Siamese élite, as exemplified by King Mongkut's (Rama IV) own archaeological discoveries and Chulalongkorn's (Rama V) creation of the Antiquarian Society (*Borankadi samoson*) in 1907.²¹ This antiquarian

²¹Pisit (1988) translates it as Archaeological Society, noting however that for Chulalongkorn, the term "archaeology" (*borankadi*) covered everything ancient, including history, literature and tradition. I prefer therefore, following Byrne (1993), to render *borankadi* as antiquarianism, which does not imply the discursive property of an established scientific discipline like archaeology to make "objective" statements.

interest assumed a more definite state dimension in 1911, when King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) established the core of the Department of Fine Arts, followed in 1925 by the Archaeological Service, created after the model of the *École Française d'Extreme-Orient* and the British Royal Society. In the eyes of the Western-educated élite ruins were hence no longer evidence of the Buddhist law of impermanence (*anitcang*, from Pali *anicca*), but material proof of the imported pattern of linear historical development centered on the nation-state. The fact that this model was not imposed by Western foreign rule, as in other Buddhist polities such as Burma and Sri Lanka, but adopted by the ruling élite itself could make sense of the fact that Thailand, while showing a greater continuity in its political structure, has in fact been more open to certain features of Westernisation than its neighbours, as Tambiah (1976:525) has suggested.

While the leaders of the 1932 coup doubtless aimed to disrupt the "conceptual conflation" of monarchy and nation, the evaluation of that event as a watershed of Thai history has proven to be extremely problematic.²² On the one hand, 1932 undeniably had a strong impact on the monarchy as an institution, whose actual and symbolic power was virtually annihilated – due also to dynastic questions – for more than two decades, from 1932 to the late 1950s. It is important to be reminded that the creation of a national identity, whose legacy still persists, was achieved during the 1940s through Phibun's premiership in open antagonism with the monarchy: traditional court ceremonies were suspended, the Ministry of the Royal Household declassified, the palace's employees greatly reduced, the display of King Prajadhipok's (Rama VII) images prohibited and his property confiscated, and a member of the royal family, Prince Rangsit, a

²²See Bateson's (1993) review of three recent Thai books on the 1932 coup which, with other contemporaneous works, offer new data, perspectives and interpretations of that event.

Chulalongkorn's son, even sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment) for conspiracy (Pitipat 1990:26-27). Phibun's rhetorical advocacy of a new era marking a discontinuity with the past (Thamsook 1978:235) went as far as, according to Anderson (1977:21), delineating the separation of the ideas of nation and monarchy, "with the *state* (essentially the armed forces) as representative of the one and guardian of the other" (orig. emphasis). On the level of the Thai collective imagin^{tion}~~ary~~ this task was accomplished by the historical writings of *Luang* Wichit Wathakan by braiding together the narrative plot of "dynasty" and that of "nation-state" (Reynolds 1992).

On the other hand, however, the coup itself was at the root of the great ambiguity lying at the foundations of the Thai political system born out of the ending of the absolute monarchy. As Cohen (1991:26) clearly spells out:

While [the revolution of 1932] abolished the king's absolute power, the constitution confirmed his status as the nation's sovereign; but, concomitantly, it conferred sovereignty upon the nation itself. The principles of legitimation, the royal and the democratic, co-exist in modern Thailand without their relationship having ever been fully explicated.

The compromise expressed by the constitution of December 1932 not only explains the survival of the Thai monarchy, but its eventual resurgence as active political subject. In fact, instead of removing the monarchy as the major symbol of the past they were opposing, the promoters of the 1932 coup chose to retain it as source of political legitimation. Ben Anderson (1977:21) has incisively argued: "The leaders of the 1932 coup decisively put an end to the monarchy's direct, practical power without, however, attempting any serious or permanent undermining of its cultural centrality and 'nationalist' prestige."

The failure to establish in the symbolic sphere a myth of foundation purporting and promoting the new political order explains why the quest for political legitimation has rested, even after 1932, upon the Buddhist-royal heritage that the military have attempted to appropriate. This is shown, for instance, by the large-scale restorations of religious buildings implemented by the post-war Phibun government – in 1951 and 1956, two troubled years for Phibun, 1,117 and 1,239 temples respectively were restored (Thak 1978:717); and by Phibun's personal sponsorship of the 25th centennial celebration of the Buddhist Era in 1957, to which the monarchy replied by distancing itself from the ceremonies.

It was, however, only in the 1970s that Thailand experienced a real crisis of legitimacy of authoritarian-paternalistic rule when the long established hegemony of the local élite was endangered by a large popular movement composed of student, worker and farmer associations.²³ The 1970s crisis had its structural roots in the rapid modernisation begun by the Sarit government in the late 1950s, and in particular in the increase of graduates from secondary and tertiary institutions. Albeit unmistakably totalitarian, the Sarit regime, which survived him until 1973, had engineered the restoration of the symbolic preeminence of the monarchy as a way of overcoming its weakness of legitimacy. The revival of royal ceremonies and the public activism of the monarchs were the epiphenomena of the alliance that occurred after 1957 between the throne and the new military leaders to their mutual advantage (Thak 1979:309-325;

²³Girling, in a Gramsci-inspired analysis, has proposed three reasons for the Thai elite hegemony: dynastic modernisation, late social differentiation, and ethnic division of labor. These factors being rooted in the history of pre-1932 absolutist Siam, Girling sees the bureaucratic élite, whose hegemony was disputed by the democratic movement in the 1970s, as having simply "inherited the power and the authority of the monarchy" (1984: 388-89).

397-402).²⁴ This laid the basis for the reintegration of the monarchy into the political arena.

Thus, when in the 1970s the climax reached by the political confrontation required a resolute intervention, King Bhumibol acted unfailingly as *deus ex machina*. His personal intervention was manifest as support in favour of civil society in 1973,²⁵ as well as of its brutal repression three years later.²⁶ As Morell and Chai-anan (1981:68) wrote: "The King had remained the head of state, the focus of his people's loyalty and cohesion, the fount of legitimacy." Now, if legitimation issues from the monarch, whoever opposes a legitimacy so defined is liable to the most slanderous charge, that of *lese-majesté*. It was exactly on the grounds of such an accusation that army, police and paramilitary groups opened fire on the

²⁴Thak (1979:310) stresses the differences in the personal history and political culture between Pibul and those of his generation, who had participated in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932, and the following leaders like Sarit, Thanom and Praphat, who came from a different generation and had an entirely Thai background, which made it easier for them to make accommodation with the throne. "The king still had an aura of sacredness and purity to these élite, and its relationship with the throne reflected this."

²⁵"The king persuaded Thanom and Praphat to resign and, with Narong, to leave the country. Then, in a solemn address to the nation, he announced on October 14 the appointment of Sanya Thammasak as prime minister. The military was in eclipse, the king was at the apogee of his reign, and the students had triumphed over tyranny" (Girling 1981:193).

²⁶"At a time when our country is being continually threatened with aggression by the enemy, our very freedom and existence as Thais may be destroyed if Thai people fail to realize their patriotism and their solidarity in resisting the enemy. . . . Accordingly, the Thai military has the most important role in defense of our country at all times, ready always to carry out its duty to protect the country." Excerpt from the King's address of the 3rd of Dec. 1976, translated and quoted by Girling (1981:215). The original in Thai appeared in *Siam Chotmai het*, Dec. 2-8, 1976. Girling (208) observes that : "Throughout 1975 and 1976, it would appear, the king became increasingly convinced that the results of an open political system threatened the very foundations of the monarchy; that student, labor, and farmer leaders were 'communist agitators' or were influenced by them; and that even the demise of the Chakri dynasty, following the recent end of the monarchy in Laos, was a distinct possibility." Keyes (1987:96; 100) recalls that in that period, the King and the Queen used to appear from time to time with the uniform of the Village Scouts, a royalist movement established by the Border Patrol Police, which in turn had very close relations with the royal family; and that the appointment of Thanin - prime minister from October 1976 to October 1977 - was precisely the choice of the royal family.

students within the precinct of Thammasat University the morning of the 6th of October, 1976.

Like all the most dramatic instances of change resulting from crises of legitimacy, the struggle for an "alternative hegemony" which took place between 1973 and 1976 was a totalising phenomenon which extended to several levels, from work relations to family relationships (cf. Morell and Chai-anan 1981). In section 1.3 crisis of legitimacy was identified as the stirring factor for the development of political myth, which is the vehicle for a ruling or rule-seeking group to sustain and justify its claim to power. Now, I would argue that the shock brought on by the 1973 crisis put in place a mythologising process expressing, in terms of political imagery, the struggle which was fought, on the actual plane of a class war, between the ruling and the progressive blocs to defend or assert their hegemony. Morell and Chai-anan (1981:175) have acknowledged the importance of the symbolic level in the political confrontation of those years:

Many liberals were embarrassed about using the traditional, national symbols for political purpose, even if this would have been effective. In their view, this kind of tactic was premodern, and did not belong in political discourse. Although they considered themselves true nationalists who loved their king and respected the Buddhist religion, they were unwilling to "wrap themselves in the flag." In this regard, of course, they were simply indicating their lack of understanding of the true nature of modern Thai society, in which these premodern symbols retain enormous political salience.

It is, however, hard to understand how the democratic movement could have not blamed those nationalist symbols which themselves represented the *ancien régime* that it was trying to overthrow. The disruptive potentiality of the then very popular radical and Marxist literature which had been banned for a long time (Reynolds and Hong 1983) – particularly Chit Phumisak's "The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today" (*Chomna sakdina thai nai patchuban*) – was correctly valued in Anderson's timely analysis of the 1976 coup: "Simply to use a vocabulary of social processes and

economic forces was to refuse centrality to Thai monarchs as heroes in or embodiments of national history" (Anderson 1977:27).

The annihilation of the democratic movement through murder and harsh repression in the years 1975-77 was thus followed by the pervasive reaffirmation of the notion of national identity. This notion defines by a negative criterion its antithesis, namely, communism, that in Thai official discourse "is not categorised as the opposite number of capitalism, bourgeois, liberal or any political party [but as] an enemy of Thainess, that is to say, external to Thainess" (Thongchai 1988:420). The question which Morell and Chaijanan (1981:309) identified as "the core of the modern Thai political dilemma, [the] search for a new national identity" was temporarily answered by refurbishing the values and the attached symbols of the royalist slogan "nation, religion, monarchy" (*chat, sasana, phramahakasat*),²⁷ "watchword of the post-1976 coup regimes" (Girling 1981:139).²⁸

Reynolds (1991:14-17) makes a précis of the stages of the state cultural campaign started soon after the coup of October 1976 to reaffirm the official notion of Thai identity. In January 1977 the Office of the Prime Minister began publishing the monthly magazine "Thai Identity" (*Ekkalak thai*); in February 1979 the National Culture Commission was appointed by royal decree; at the same time the government established the National Identity Board (*Khanakammakan saemsang ekkalak khong chat*), charged with the promotion of national culture; in January 1981 the Board started the publication of "Thai Magazine" (*Warasan thai*). Thereafter a

²⁷The origin of this slogan is usually ascribed to the anglophile King Vajiravudh who, according to Vella (1978:xvi), coined it after the British "God, King, Country."

²⁸Notably, in the monarchical revival there was no trace of the term "constitution," introduced in public life and activities as the fourth pillar of Thai national identity during the 1930s (Barmé 1993).

subcommission on national ideology issued a eight-fold definition of nation as 1) territory, 2) populace, 3) independence and sovereignty, 4) government and administration, 5) religion, 6) monarchy, 7) culture, 8) dignity, even if this definition was not exhaustive.

My point here is that the emphasis on national heritage has been part of this instrumental cultural policy implemented after the crushing of the democratic movement as a means for the reestablishment of the hegemony of the dominant élite through the revival of the myth that legitimises its rule: the myth of the always independent and sovereign Thai nation which will find a successful future by following the same course which has already provided a successful past (escaping from colonialism, from communism, and eventually from third-world status). It is obvious that, from a historical perspective where signs of discontinuity such as revolution or civil war are erased by state discourses, it is possible to regard even the most remote past as a constituting and legitimising part of the present. The Thai nation, born according to the nationalist narrative with the kingdom of Sukhothai, has always retained throughout seven centuries of development the same political and religious creeds: monarchy and Buddhism. This asserted continuity has made Sukhothai the foundation myth of the modern Thai polity, the prototype of a golden age to restore after the crisis.

The monument to King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai as father of the nation towers today within the precinct of what is the emblem of cultural heritage as a primary instrument of state rhetoric, Sukhothai Historical Park. It should be noted that the implementation of this and the other three parks of Muang Sing, Phanom Rung and Ayutthaya began in 1977, with the inclusion of their projects in the Fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1977-81). This meant a considerable effort in

the midst of a serious economic crisis, and at a time when the priority was fighting a Communist Party of Thailand at the height of its popularity. Particularly in the case of Sukhothai, the project has also been a means for the government to obtain international support for its cultural policy, a support culminated in the 1991 World Heritage nominations. The following Fifth Plan (1981-86) brought to nine the number of the historical parks with the inclusion of Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet, Phimai, Si Thep, Phra Nakhonkhiri. In the same period a committee headed by the then prime minister Prem Tinsulanonda took on the organisation of the Ratanakosin Bicentenary, which brought about the restoration of the main ~~Bangkok's~~ ^{of Bangkok} monuments. The great 1982 celebrations, promoted as the bicentenary of the House of Chakri and of the capital itself, had a large popular attendance which highlighted the recompacted national unity around the institution of the monarchy.²⁹ This unity formed the basis for the economic boom and the injection of self-esteem which have marked the 1980s.

From Buddhist kingdom to modern nation-state (Keyes 1987) and from kingdom to NIC-dom (Reynolds 1991), the Thai monarchy has been able to fully regain, after the eclipse of the 1903s-50s, its centrality as symbol of continuity, delineator of the limits of innovation, and ultimate legitimator of change (cf. Eisenstadt 1973). The interlacing between the House of Chakri, the foundation myth of the Thai polity, and national heritage which materialises that myth is clearly seen in the appointment of

²⁹The aims of the 1982 celebrations were clearly spelled out by a government publication: "Seven objectives of the Bicentenary as follows: to promote the Thai image and identity; to honour and commemorate the Great Chakri Dynasty [*sic*]; to make better known the contribution of religions [*sic*] to the nation and society; to revive and promote the ancient culture and heritage; to strengthen national unity among Thais both within and outside the kingdom; to create in young people a proud and positive feeling toward their country; and to encourage both Thais and foreign residents to work together in projects which will benefit the Kingdom, the national security, and the people" (Foreign News Division 1982:24).

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn – who holds a M.A. in oriental epigraphy from Silpakorn University – as guardian of the cultural patrimony of the country. This appointment followed a more important one, in 1977, of Sirindhorn as crown princess, next in line to her brother in succession to the throne. This decision was taken as a consequence of the rumours about the crown prince at a moment when the monarchy strongly needed to regain popularity after the events of 1976. From her regular attendance at openings and art performances to her research as a Ph. D. student, Sirindhorn gives the Chakri commitment to national heritage all the authority of her double role as scholar and as princess (and possible heir).³⁰

The national heritage had thus become a favourite locus of the nationalist narrative that, after the achievement of social pacification and the obliteration of the 1970s crisis, has been built, more or less explicitly, on the parallel between the greatness of the past and the exceptional economic growth of the 1980s. As the critique in Chapter 1 has pointed out, the discourse of heritage affects not only the internal propagation of dominant values but also the international status of a nation as modern and developed. Since the mid-1980s the aim of businessmen and politicians has been to make Thailand the leading country within mainland Southeast Asia, a region whose full economic potential is still to be realised. But such an aspiration requires a proper degree of influence, even in terms of cultural patronage: Thailand today, thanks to its level of development, can present

³⁰It is no secret that many in Thailand would prefer to see Princess Sirindhorn rather than her much less beloved brother succeeding King Phumipon. This apparently remote eventuality, cause of excitement in every circle of Thai society, is even insinuated in another government publication: "Throughout Thai history, succession to the throne has always been through the male line; recent constitutional amendments, however, now stipulate that if there is no male heir, the Parliament may approve succession of a royal daughter to become the ruling monarch, thus breaking a tradition of 700 years standing and providing further proof of the monarchy's modern views." (National Identity Board 1991:47). For an example of the identification of Princess Sirindhorn with the protection of the national cultural heritage cf. *Silapakorn* (1991, 34:1).

itself as a model and a sponsor for its neighbours in the field of heritage management. An example of that is offered by the new headquarters of the Seameo Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA, in Si Ayutthaya Road, nearby the National Library and the FAD's Archaeological Section): opened in November 1992, the building is "hosted by the Royal Thai Government," as the commemorative plate states. And this has meant that the multinational SPAFA is housed in a building with typical, although modernised, Thai architectural features.

Meanwhile, in a society that is enjoying, at least in part, a growth in the standard of living, the larger availability of economic means and leisure time is making more and more people interested in the heritage of their country. Such interest is reflected in the by now fully developed Thai cultural industry: books and magazines, exhibitions and travels with a focus on the arts are becoming normal features in the life of Bangkok's middle-class. Beginning with the 1970s, the revival of national heritage led to publishing ventures like those of the monthly magazines "Ancient City" (*Muang Boran*) since 1974, and "Art and Culture" (*Sinlapa Watanatham*) since 1979, which set the tone for art journals in Thailand, directly intervening on questions of restoration and art history and theory. The state also, through the many FAD publications, has its share in this flourishing market. To mention just two examples, in 1989 the periodical "Heritage" (*Moradok*) was established, and in 1990 the monographs of the "Thai Culture Series," first published in 1960s, were republished in a new full-color format at very affordable prices. Indeed, images of a mythical-historical repertoire are found today in an array of products: from t-shirts printed with art objects, such as a tea-cup of the Chulalongkorn era (actually an item of *chinoiserie*), to new year cards with mural-like drawings inspired by an idyllic version of Siamese antiquity. Likewise, Prasat Phimai is used as

the backdrop for a smart television advertisement for Fuji film, where a contemporary pop-singer and his band come to life from the bas-reliefs of the temple.

Whilst some of the questions related to the marketing and consumption of cultural sites are at stake in the next chapter, the following two sections provide detail of the politics of Thai heritage, looking at what can be broadly defined as the two "parties" involved in the struggle for the attribution of meanings to heritage, namely, the "government party" constituted by the FAD, and that of its critics.

2.2 National Heritage and Its Preservers

The FAD (*Krom sinlapakorn*), under the Ministry of Education, is the government office entrusted with "the responsibility of protecting and preserving every type of art in Thai heritage to maintain the national cultural identity" National Museums Division 1991:47). First established in March 1911 by Vajiravudh, who ordered the transfer of the royal court craftsmen and the Museum Department from the Ministry of Education to the new body, the FAD was subsequently disbanded in 1926 when King Prajadhipok amalgamated it with the Royal Museum and the Vachirayan Library, founded in 1905, into the Royal Institute (*Silpakornstan*). At the head of the new institution Rama VII appointed Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the famous brother of Chulalongkorn, who, as Minister of Interior from 1892 to 1915, was the architect of the centralisation of the provincial administration. Damrong, officially regarded as "the father of Thai history" (Breazeale 1971), had already been appointed, after his resignation from the Ministry, as the chairman of the Vachirayan Library, whose epigraphic section had been directed since 1917 by George Coédes. In

his new office Damrong gave shape to the main cultural institutions of the kingdom that were to be inherited by the post-1932 governments.

In May 1933, after the establishment of the constitutional monarchy, the FAD – including what became the National Museum and the National Library – was reinstated under the direction of Wichit Watthakan (arguably the most influential Thai intellectual of this century),³¹ and finally began its activities in January 1934. Barmé (1993:114-115) argues that behind the reestablishment of the Department were not only political aims but hopes of commercial benefits related to tourism and the sale of crafts. After several revisions of structure, the FAD was finally transferred in 1958 to the Ministry of Education. According to the 1991 Royal Decree, it is divided into 12 divisions: the office of the secretary, finance, personnel management, music and drama, the national archives, archaeology, national museums, literature and history, art education, architecture, the national library, and traditional arts.

The FAD's Division of National Museums (*Kong phiphithaphan sathan hængchat*) is articulated into nine sub-divisions.³² Amongst these are the Bangkok Sub-Division of National Museums (including the National Gallery, the Silpa Bhirasri Memorial, the Royal Barges, the Royal Elephant and Benchamabophit National Museums), and the Sub-Division of the Regional National Museums, which manages thirty-one museums allocated to nine regions.³³ Albeit definitely less numerous in the southern

³¹Wichit was acting Director-General during the period 1933-35, before his official appointment in 1935 (Apinan 1992:29).

³²These are: General Administration; Export Permit; Curatorial Staff; Registration and Storage; Conservation; Exhibition Technique; Education and Public Relations; National Museum Bangkok; Regional National Museums.

peninsula (five out of thirty-one), national museums are thus a common presence in many provincial cities, where they remind the population of the unitary, if not homogenous, cultural character of the nation. Thai national museums owned in 1991 a total of 100,711 artefacts and employed 873 people (including officers, permanent and temporary personnel); in the same year, there were 1,339,409 visitors, of which 289,928 were foreigners (National Museums Division 1991: 35;22;34). National museums are open from Wednesday to Sunday (excluding national holidays), from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and their admission-fee is 5 Baht for nationals and 10 Baht for foreigners, with the exception of the Bangkok National Museum which charges double the amount. Students and Buddhist monks enter free of charge. The most recent museum, the National Museum of Thai Rice Farmers in Suphanburi province, has been inaugurated in 1993. But in spite of the great role that rice cultivation has played economically and socially in Thai history, this museum is merely a celebration of a period spent by Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn in 1986 working in the paddy fields of the region.

From the legislative point of view, the Act on Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums, B.E. 2504 (1961) provides the guideline for the conservation of cultural resources through their listing on the National Register of Ancient Sites.³⁴ Pisit (1988:5) remarks that the list in fact "includes almost only sites relating to Buddhism." In 1985 the sections 10 and 11 of the 1961 Act have been updated in the 21 points of the Regulations for Monument Conservation, commonly referred to as the

³³The regions and their respective number of museums as following: 1) Central region: 5 museums; 2) Western region: 6 museums; 3) Lower Northern region: 4 museums; 4) Upper Northern: 4 museums; 5) Eastern: 1 museum; 6) Lower Northeastern: 4 museums; 7) Upper Northeastern: 2 musuems; 8) Upper Southern: 3 museums; 9) Lower Southern: 2 museums.

³⁴For the text of this act, cf. *Government Gazette*, 78:66, August 9, B.E. 2054 (1961).

"Bangkok Charter" (text in Ishizawa *et al.* 1988:120-22). Among them, articles 1, 11, 12 and 14 state:

1. "Conservation" refers to the act of keeping and maintaining a monument in order to retain its values. This comprises protection, maintenance, preservation, restoration and repair.

A. "Preservation" refers to the act of keeping the monument in its original state and preventing it from further damage.

B. "Restoration" refers to the act of putting back to a former state.

C. "Repair" refers to the act of repairing and improving a monument to its original state. However, the original and the newly constructed part should be in harmony with each other and be detectable from each other.

11. The conservation of parts of the most valuable paintings, sculptures and antiquity which are attached to or placed within a monument should only be dealt with by means of preservation or stabilisation to retain their original value as much as possible. This is except consecrated objects which have been worshipped continuously. It should be approved by the committee before the work is carried out.

12. The conservation of ruins should be enhanced by collecting ancient objects and fragments for complete or partial restoration. It is possible to reconstruct the missing parts necessary for such restoration.

14. Archaeological buildings that are consecrated places well-known to the local people must be restored without any alteration in colour or style since it may diminish their values or credibility of [*sic*] the people.

The drawing up of this code followed the criticism caused by the restorations carried out at Sukhothai since 1977, that Srisakara (1987:34) stigmatised as the "'legally authorised' process of destroying ancient and historical sites." The response of the FAD to the charge of altering archaeological evidence through unjustified reconstructions has thus been the issuing of an *ad hoc* set of regulations giving the FAD more freedom than the Venice Charter (ICOMOS's programmatic document drawn up in 1964 at the very moment of the foundation of the council) in fact allows. Central to the concept of "mimetic" restoration underlined in the Bangkok Charter is that common people have a religious appreciation of archaeological remains which does not correspond to that of art historians. As Nikom Musigakama, FAD's deputy director-general, put it during a symposium on the Sukhothai experience held in 1987 at the end of the ten-year restoration project:

We tried to restore the head [of the Buddha images] in order to satisfy the local people. In fact, if the local people are not satisfied with the cultural heritage, they will destroy it. This is a fact in the communities here. We tried to make the local and intellectual people satisfied and appreciative. But if we serve only the local people, the intellectual people may not appreciate. So what happened is that until now . . . we have not done anything because we don't know how to decide. (Ishizawa *et al.* 1988:27)

Nikom, perhaps unintentionally, subscribes to one of the points of the critique of Chapter 1. Cultural heritage, far from being an untouchable legacy of the past from which it derives its importance, is a construct which can be modified in order to enhance its present appreciation and social utility. It is not surprising, then, that "conservation" for the FAD can be extended as far as improving the aspect of a monument to make it look more "appropriate" to its context and function. This outlook explains the presence of the several replicas of the Buddha that today, against the precepts of modern archaeology, populate the ruins of the historical parks of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, and that naturally horrify the critics of the FAD.³⁵ Still, the FAD has a point in arguing that, since in Thailand popular appreciation of an archaeological site comes primarily from the religious respect it commands, the restoration of the stupa of Sukhothai and, for instance, Borobodur – the world's biggest Buddhist architectural complex located in central Java, in a predominantly Islamic nation – has to fit different local realities. At the same time, this comparison shows how the immediate political utility of a restored Sukhothai for the Thai state is, in terms of national pride and patronage of religion, hardly paralleled by what the Indonesian government is gaining internally by the restoration of Borobodur.

³⁵Amongst the FAD's advocates of this approach to archaeological restoration, there could be some reminded of the following locus from Inscription No. 2 (mid-fourteenth century), referring to the reign of King Lithai of Sukhothai: "[The men] paved the floor of the great Mahabihara with bricks; when it was finished and perfected they went [...] to search for old broken stone statues of the Buddha to worship, bringing them from as far away as two or three days' travel, to set them in the Mahabihara. At some places they found a neck or a body, at some places they found the hair or an arm which had fallen away ... at some places they found a shin or a leg, at some places they found a hand or a foot... They brought them there to piece together and repair with mortar, to make them as beautiful and fine in form and appearance as if they had been created by Indra; they brought them there to mend and restore into large, fresh-looking, and exceedingly beautiful statues of the Buddha. They filled the Mahabihara with them, placing them in many rows and niches" (Prasert and Griswold 1992:393). I thank Dr. Tony Diller for pointing out this passage. to me.

However, it would be rather naïve to criticise the FAD for being solely responsible for the alteration of antiquities when that process is in fact inherent in the very practice of heritage conservation, which always means the preservation of a particular interpretation of the past. Certainly, the FAD cannot avoid blame for learning nothing from its own errors, in particular letting out on contract large-budget projects to inadequate^{ly qualified} firms and disregarding the advice of local communities and academics.³⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that even local communities are now expressing their opinions about, and criticism of, the FAD's work on matters such as conservation of cultural artefacts, comes as the result of a stronger awareness of the importance of heritage that the FAD itself has considerably fostered in the last twenty years. Notwithstanding significant reservations, the FAD's decisive role in transforming the preservation of cultural heritage into a major national issue should be acknowledged.

2.3 National Heritage and Its Opponents

As I have just indicated, the official approach to national heritage is not without its critics. Since the 1970s, which saw the reformulation of state cultural policy, in particular that concerning the artistic patrimony, some academics and intellectuals have been outspoken in their opposition. One pole of criticism is represented by the school of Local History (*prawatisat thongthin*) which is bound up with the movement of Community Culture (*watanatham chumchon*) and with the NGOs operating in the countryside. The magazine *Muang boran* is the school's stronghold with regard to

³⁶The most recent controversy has concerned the FAD's restoration of Chedi Luang in Chiangmai, a 10 million Baht project completed in 1992 which has stirred widespread criticism. Alerted by this experience, the Chiangmai community has been able to stop another project concerning the restoration of Wat Singh (Suthon 1993).

archaeology and art history. The other pole is represented by independent scholars who may or may not have appointments in universities, and voice their criticism from authoritative seats like the Siam Society, the direction of SPAFA or other international bodies. This section provides a sketch of both parties.

At the core of the Community Culture movement and its academic branch, the Local History school, there is the dream of inverting the apparent state of things, that is, restoring the peasant class (and *its* heritage) to the centre of the political, economic, and cultural Thai universe (Chatthip 1991). Inspired by populist and egalitarian feelings contrasting with the dominant values of the *nouveaux riches* urban class, this movement, which the expanding presence of the Non-Governmental Organisations on the national scene is making more influential, can be defined with an oxymoron as composed of "traditionalist progressives." The writings of Sulak Sivaraksa (e.g., 1980), the social critic charged with lese-majesty in 1984, can be taken as examples of what the group pursues, though Sulak is not personally linked to any school. Typical complaints are: the destruction of the village/community (*ban*) culture as a result of the industrial development started in the 1950s; the prevailing of the authoritarian (royalist) version of Buddhism against the (allegedly) democratic faith of Sukhothai; the obliteration of Siamese identity as a consequence of the imitation of Western culture and consumerism.

On these premises, the archaeologist Srisakara Vallibothama – associate professor at Silpakorn University and editor of *Muang Boran* since its establishment in 1974 – has criticised for two decades the FAD policy as responsible for the destruction of archaeological evidence in order to develop heritage sites into tourist attractions, and for depriving local

communities of significant parts of their culture and beliefs in the name of the "national" heritage. Srisakara's (1992) latest attempt is to revolutionise the paradigm of official historiography by affirming the agency and autonomy of the Buddhist communities of the Khorat Plateau at the time of Khmer supremacy between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, well before Sukhothai's sovereignty. A similar argument is found in the book about the kingdom of Chenla by historian Dhida Saraya (1992), who puts forth the thesis of Isaan as an independent area of civilisation within mainland Southeast Asia.

The aim of the Local History school is to replace the dominant narrative of the centralised kingdom-nation embedded in the continuity Sukhothai-Ayutthaya-Bangkok with the theory of a multicentered network of polities which had constituted the premodern kingdom of Siam.³⁷ While the switch of focus from the kings to the people, that is, from the events of the *histoire événementielle* to the societal structure underlying the *longue durée*, is reminiscent of the major challenge to Western historiography by the *Annales* school since the 1930s, the implicit intent is denying the historical (if not the political) validity of the Bangkok-dominated Thai state created by Chulalongkorn's administrative reforms in the late nineteenth century. As Chatthip (1991:133) argues, the emphasis on the agency of local communities, seen as antithetic and antagonistic to state and capitalism, bears an anarchistic character challenging the hegemony of the Bangkok-based political and economic élites. However, it bears also a strong anti-modern, utopian bias whose implications lie outside the present discussion.

³⁷The most informed review of the nominalistic question Siam vs. Thailand as a mirror of the confrontation between a multiethnic, pluralistic conception of the kingdom *versus* an ethnically homogeneous and politically authoritarian model, is Preecha (1988).

From the mere point of view of heritage management, Local History scholars seem to rest in a doubly contradictory position. On the one hand, the FAD is criticised for pursuing an unscrupulous heritage policy aimed at marketing the artistic patrimony to the *foreign* tourist's superficial quest for sightseeing; on the other hand, the rigid conservation ethic underlying this criticism does not belong at all to indigenous tradition but is, in fact, a Western import. The discrepancy of this standpoint is magnified by the failure to recognise that Thai village culture itself, by placing importance on ancient sites only when they are considered to be imbued with magic power (*saksit*), has been one factor of heritage dissipation. Of course, this remark does not dispute that the responsibility for the destruction of a significant part of archaeological remains lies in the decades of massive looting; but if looting is a crime instigated by knowledgeable collectors, its perpetrators are mostly villagers, who unconsciously sell out art treasures for a few Baht (cf. Byrne 1993). Local History demands that the management of heritage resources be entrusted to the local communities, in contrast to the FAD's policy of centralisation. Such an aim requires, first of all, education about the importance of cultural heritage, to prevent the perpetuation of practices like looting. And to this end, the FAD has been giving an important contribution.

At the other end of the spectrum to these intellectuals culturally and politically committed to villagers, we find, also engaged in the polemics against state heritage policy, cosmopolitan scholars, often Western-educated, who articulate their criticism without a clear supporting ideology. Piriya Krairiksh, the incumbent president of the Siam Society, can well be regarded as exemplificative of this second group. In 1977, as the curator of a major exhibition at the Bangkok National Museum, Piriya challenged the official classification of Thai art originally outlined by Prince Damrong in 1926 – a

classification reflecting the benchmarks of the nationalist narrative – by arguing that art styles can be linked to historic periods only when historical sources are abundant and reliable, which was not the case with Thailand. Therefore he established a new classification based on the criteria of style and provenance with four headings: Mon, Khmer, Thai and the Peninsular styles (Piriya 1977).³⁸ This replacement of historical periods with an ethnic categorisation uncovers, as Apinan (1992:2) points out, a dynamic concept of culture, according to which art styles "have lives of their own and cannot be made neatly congruent with the rise and fall of a monarch or an empire."

However, Piriya's most controversial exploit came a decade later when he questioned, followed by other Thai and Western scholars, whether King Ramkhamhaeng had really been the author of Sukhothai Inscription No. 1, discovered by the future King Mongkut in 1833 during his years as a monk (Piriya 1986). This time the impact of his thesis was by no means confined to art historical circles because it involved, as Princess Galyani (the King's sister) wrote in the preface to the collection of essays published by the Siam Society, "the most important piece of evidence for the early history and development of the Thai nation" (Chamberlain 1991:ix). Scholars have, on the whole, disagreed with the thesis of the inscription's inauthenticity proposed by Piriya, who, on his part, has come to the conclusion that Mongkut himself was its author (Chamberlain: Chap.6).³⁹ Still, the whole

³⁸Piriya can be easily identified as the unnamed target of Na Paknam's strong criticism, in the introduction of his book on Thai art history (1985:2-3): "It is unfortunate for Thailand that some Thai scholars rely so much on Westerners in thinking and disregard themes that Westerners have not researched or documented. . . . Such an action on the Thai part is shameful. Furthermore these very Thai scholars were in the habit of accusing those with opposite view as blind nationalist. However, they have attracted a lot of followers and the Fine Arts Department which held a major arts exhibition at the National Museum had done away with significant arts periods. This is a manifestation of disgrace to Thailand's history. While scholars throughout the world have not confirmed that Dvaravati art belongs to the Mon race, Thai scholars have simply jumped to that conclusion."

debate is much more significant for the political rather than for the philological questions it has raised. In fact, if a distinguished art historian like Piriya can argue that the most important material evidence supporting the nationalist narrative is a fake, and this assertion does not provoke any overreaction from the monarchy, what degree of self-confidence in its pervasiveness has that narrative achieved?

³⁹A demonstration of the resonance of the Ramkhamaeng controversy beyond the academic circle is in the following passage from a recent government publication: "Much of what we know about Sukhothai in the 13th century derives from King Ramkhamhaeng's stone inscription of 1292. The inscription is problematic, but it is considered to be a seminal source of Sukhothai history as well as a masterpiece of Thai literature Even allowing for some hyperbole in King Ramkhamhaeng's inscription, it is probably true that Sukhothai was prosperous and well-governed." (National Identity Board 1991:12).

3. Consuming Heritage: The Tourist Dimension

In his pamphlet against the British "heritage industry," Robert Hewinson (1987:9) wrote, "Instead of manufacturing goods, we are manufacturing *heritage*, a commodity which nobody seems able to define but which everybody is eager to sell" (original emphasis). Whether this is indeed the case, there are few problems in identifying the ideal consumer of such a commodity in the tourist, "a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change" (Smith 1989:1).⁴⁰ Indeed, museums such as Paris' Louvre or Florence's Uffizi attract some five million visitors per year, and museums are just one aspect of the appeal that historic cities and sites have as tourist attractions. With regard to holiday destinations where the focus is not on the material past, it is the chance of experiencing an exotic culture via its distinctive forms, from handicraft to religious ceremonies, which often prompts the tourist's visit. It is revealing, in this regard, that even Thailand, whose popularity among holiday-goers is predominantly due to its hedonistic appeal, is now promoted as a destination for "cultural tourism," as if the word "culture" could thaumaturgically purge tourism of its disturbing aspects by dignifying it.

⁴⁰After this rather sensible definition, Smith (1989) adds a tourist typology made up of five different categories (ethnic, cultural, historical, environmental, recreational) which are somewhat overlapping and incongruous. Wood's (1984) conceptual reformulation of Smith's categorisation focuses on ethnic and cultural tourism, the second differing from the first for the attention is more on artefacts than on the concrete cultural activities of people. Cohen's (1979) phenomenological typology includes "experiential," "experimental," and "existential."

In fact, tourism is, first and foremost, an inescapable business activity in which national governments often have more than a feeble interest; and the preservation of cultural (and natural) heritage can hardly be divorced from the necessity of their being marketed as tourist attractions. So, whether or not tourism constitutes the biggest threat to the conservation of cultural resources, it is likely to affect the way a host society regards its heritage and, in the end, the very way it relates to this heritage. When marketed as "authentic" and "traditional," artefacts and cultural practices, whose preservation and revival tourism may foster, promote perceptions and definitions of national and cultural identity.⁴¹ Therefore we could discover that, despite the stress which planners and critics place on international tourism, cultural productions staged for the tourist – including heritage attractions – influence perhaps more the domestic than the foreign spectator. Such a concern, rather than an evaluation of tourism's impact on Thai heritage or its management as a tourist attraction, is the topic here.

3.1 The Context of Thai Tourism

Albeit the origins of an élite tourism in Thailand dates from the late 1920s, and royal sponsorship of tourism can be said to have started even earlier with Chulalongkorn (Meyer 1988:61-63), the actual beginnings of

⁴¹Two main theoretical formulations have dominated the debate about "tradition" and "authenticity" in tourism studies. MacCannel (1973;1976) initially argued that the commodification of cultural forms for tourist consumption destroys their original meaning which is therefore replaced by a "staged authenticity." Cohen redefined authenticity not as a given quality, but as a socially constructed concept and therefore "negotiable" on the basis of the guest's and host's own views. Moreover, since "commoditisation often hits a culture not when is flourishing, but when it is actually already in decline" (Cohen 1988:382), mass-tourism's demand for cultural products can be considered a powerful incentive to make local people again interested in vanishing aspects of their tradition. For an useful review of this debate, see Wood (1993).

mass tourism has been the result of the Sarit era's push for development in the late 1950s. The rapid growth of the service sector, particularly in Bangkok, was of great support to the burgeoning tourism industry. Although there was no explicit underlying government policy (Meyer 1988: 67-68), 1959 was the year of the establishment of the Tourist Organisation of Thailand. In the same year the new air-line company, Thai Airways International (Thai), was created through a joint-venture with, and under the initial management of, the Scandinavian Airline System. Sarit's obsession with the "cleanliness" (*khwamsahat*) of the façade of society as proof of an achieved standard of "civilization" (*khwampen araya prathet*), and the extensive world tour of the Thai royal couple in the same period were also of great help in promoting the image of the kingdom abroad.

If the beginning of tourism precedes the Vietnam War era, this period, however, left its lasting mark on it. The tourism sector greatly benefited from the huge flow of American aid spent in the development of infrastructure, particularly roads. The presence of U.S. military bases in the northeastern provinces caused the mushrooming of hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs and massage parlours, and the same happened in Bangkok, destination of the American soldiers on their five days "Rest and Recreation" leave. During the second half of the 1960s, when the annual growth rate of revenue from tourism was about 27% (Bangornat 1982:7), the percentage of R&R visitors from the total tourist arrivals fluctuated between a minimum of 16% (1966), and a maximum of 23% (1968); and the percentage of their expenditure between 28% (1966) and 53% (1968) of the total tourist expenditure (Meyer 1988:73).

In the mid 1970s, in a regional climate of communist triumphs and rising Islamic fundamentalism, Thailand was virtually the most pleasant

and safe country to visit in Southeast Asia. Thai guerrilla warfare was a rural phenomenon which never endangered safety in the cities. In the period 1973-76 the main target of demonstrations were Japanese economic interests, though one of the most memorable strikes in the social history of Thailand concerned the employment conditions at the Dusit Thani Hotel in Bangkok, at that time under American management (Meyer 1988:76-78). In the second half of the 1970s, in the midst of an economic slowdown, tourism became a major source of foreign exchange earnings. In the Fourth Economic and Social Development Plan (1977-81) for the first time an entire section was devoted to tourism development, and in 1979 the Tourist Organisation of Thailand was upgraded to the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT). Thereafter, the 1980s saw a spectacular growth of annual tourist arrivals, from the 2 million of the beginning of the decade to the 5 million at the end, figures largely outclassing those of the neighbouring countries.⁴² Tourism revenue grew from the 17 million Baht of 1980 to the 110 million of 1990, constituting since 1982 the biggest foreign exchange earner (Somchai 1992:8).⁴³ Decisive factors for this huge increase in tourist arrivals have been the dramatic reduction of air-fares and the expansion of international air-links as a result of the "deregulation" policy. Bangkok, today a regional hub challenging Singapore's supremacy, is experienced by many travelers as an en-route stop-over between the Asian-Pacific region and the Middle East and Europe.

⁴²In 1990 Malaysia received 7 million international visitors (almost 2 million more than Thailand) as a result of the Visit Malaysia Year promotion, though this figure includes the many day-tripping Singaporeans. In any case, 1990 Malaysia's estimated tourist receipts at US\$ 1,520 million (US\$ 47 per day) compare badly with the estimated US\$ 4,400 million of Thailand (US\$ 103 per day). Another notable difference is found in the 1989 share of tourist expenditure for shopping, which accounted for 16.7% in Malaysia and 36.9% in Thailand. Figures from the respective national tourist boards, in Walton (1993:224).

⁴³Since tourism provides a source of foreign earnings, it is considered in economic terms as an export product. However, the impossibility of storing and exporting such a product, which is consumed at the time and in the place of its production, makes the tourism industry more similar to the services sector.

Since the 1980s the generic formula of cultural heritage has become a keyword of tourist promotion thanks to special events such as the Ratanakosin Bicentennial in 1982; the celebrations for the sixtieth birthday of King Bhumibol in 1987, coupled with the promotion of the Visit Thailand Year;⁴⁴ and the ceremonies for the longest reign of Thai history held in 1988, followed by the Thailand Arts and Crafts Year. The second half of the 1980s saw also a major change in government interventions in tourism. Under the sixth plan (1987-91) budget allocations have started to be made directly to the TAT in order to develop both short- and long-term plans with a wide ranging brief, from monument restoration to road construction. Today the TAT maintains thirteen regional offices within the country and as many overseas to promote Thailand in Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America.

Yet steps to repackage Thailand as a more presentable tourist destination have hardly succeeded in mitigating the reputation of the country as the most notorious recipient of sex tours in Asia (Ritcher 1989). International tourist arrivals, still showing a high male ratio, have been dominated since the 1970s by visitors from Asia, whose share was nearly half of the total arrivals of the decade and increased further in the 1980s. Asians are followed (1989) by tourists from West Europe (15%, referring to four countries only), USA (5.5%), Australia (4.5%). In Asia, ASEAN countries constitute the main tourist-generating region (23.5%) with Malaysia and Singapore as the dominant sources; Japan follows (11.5%); the

⁴⁴The 1987 Visit Thailand Year has been the model for the subsequent 1990 Visit Malaysia Year, 1991 Visit Indonesia Year, and 1992 Visit ASEAN Year.

NICs: Taiwan, Hongkong, Korea (18.5%); India (2.5%); other countries, particularly in the Middle East, account for the remaining 19%.⁴⁵

In 1991-92 a decrease in tourist arrivals was recorded for the first time since 1976: the concurrence of the world recession, the Gulf War, the February 1991 coup, and mainly the May 1992 crisis broke the dream of indefinite growth. Besides, the deterioration of local resources is pushing the Thai tourism industry to look for new markets to exploit, such as Burma and Indochina, an option acknowledged by the same TAT (a tourism agreement with Laos was signed in 1992) and by many Thai investors who are extending their business in the region (TAT n.d.*). Indeed, environmental issues have become in Thailand a pressing concern, but despite steps such as the 1992 Environmental Act, the incapacity of provincial governmental bodies to enforce the legislation against polluters and illegal builders in big tourist resorts like Phuket Island and Pattaya is evident. In Bangkok the dramatic levels of air pollution and traffic jams are already inducing tourists to shorten their stay or even skip the capital. Thus, "culture and nature" (*watanathammachat*), the TAT's promotional catch-phrase for the early 1990s, sounded like unintentional sarcasm or an exorcism for a future that poses serious questions about the sustainability of tourism growth (Parnwell 1993).

This outline would be incomplete without considering the domestic dimension of tourism, but because of the lack of statistics these comments are merely descriptive (an isolated figure for 1987 shows a number of 8.7

⁴⁵Rounded off percentages calculated on 1989 figures, in Walton (1993:226). It is useful to remind that until 1979 international tourist arrivals were registered after citizenship, and not according to the country of residence. This fact led, for example, to greatly overestimate the number of British visitors, many of who were, in fact, Hongkong Chinese. Record of the tourist's country of residence is taken since 1980 (Meyer 1988:79).

million domestic tourists). The Thais are considered to be people inclined to internal mobility, and this is particularly true at the time of feast-days and festivals. The religious function of making a pilgrimage to a Buddhist shrine in order to acquire merit (*tham bun*) has been always coupled with the hedonistic aspects of a journey (*pay thiao*). Indeed, pilgrimage as a motive for travelling is found in every society and epoch. Nevertheless, since merit-seeking travellers used to stay at relatives' and friends' places or in cheap guest-houses, this form of domestic tourism has been for a long time overlooked by the TAT as a negligible source of income, as well as not affecting the demand for international-standard infrastructures.

If this argument was correct in the past, it could hardly be valid any more. The growth during the last decade of an affluent urban strata, particularly in Bangkok, has naturally increased the number of people traveling for pleasure. While traditional destinations and means of transport like trains and buses are still very popular,⁴⁶ the well-off desire to experience the status of tourist as a privileged category typical of modern and developed countries. Thus, for instance, Bangkokians now spend their week-ends at beach resorts like Pattaya and Huahin, the royal resort where the Victorian-style Railway Hotel has been recently refurbished as one of Thailand's top hotels.⁴⁷ Or they go to visit what Central Thais regard as the "exotic" region of the country, Isan, where the recently restored Khmer temples have become a big attraction. The TAT itself is trying to meet its past shortcomings; in planning events, it devotes much space to local fairs and festivals which essentially appeal to domestic tourists (TAT n.d.**).

⁴⁶For instance, second and third class seats on the afternoon Bangkok-Chiangmai train during Songkran festivities are booked out weeks in advance.

⁴⁷It should be noted that recent Western appreciation for the tanned body generally goes against the aesthetic ideals of Asians, who appreciate fair skin. Accordingly, the ritual of sun-bathing does not attract Thai people, not even at beach resorts.

Some inferences can be put forward at this point before proceeding further. First, it is clear that the transformation of Thailand into a major tourist destination since the 1960s has been due to structural and political factors which had made its degree of development and stability, both essential to the tourism industry, without equal in the context of the region thirty years ago. The sole cultural factor that can somehow be considered conducive to tourism is the Buddhist religion, because its non-conflictual attitude towards believers of other faiths is not a barrier, either real or psychological, between hosts and guests, as is Islam in neighbouring countries.⁴⁸ Moreover, Buddhist iconography has long appealed to Westerners, youth above all. Second, it is common knowledge that Thailand's popularity as tourist destination has much to do with the tourism of the three-S (sand, sun and sex), and this despite the fact that, with Pagan and Angkor out of reach, Thailand's monumental heritage has been for decades the only easily accessible in mainland Southeast Asia. The recent stress on culture in tourist promotion appears to have been also a way to overcome the notoriety of the country as a sex heaven, which the pressure of churches, social organisations, concerned individuals, and eventually AIDS has transformed in the 1980s from a major attraction into an embarrassing burden. Third, though *farang* remain curiously more visible to the eyes of Thai, and even Western, critics of tourism, they are only a relative minority; Asians constitute today the bulk of international arrivals, and recreational facilities such as the spreading golf courses clearly reflect the propensities of these tourists, as well those of the local élite.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Thus Wood (1984:365): "It is striking, for example, how unmarketable Islam seems to be in Indonesia and Malaysia." Islamic moral regulations are indeed perceived as limiting tourism development in these countries, where a "double-standard" morality is applied to tourist resorts and facilities. Further, people such as Israeli citizens are prevented from visiting Islamic countries.

Finally, it has to be taken into account that the expanding local middle-class has become in recent years one important source of holiday-goers and that, in visiting up-country areas, this class adopts a "tourist" attitude which underlines its own divergence, in terms of status, habits, culture, from provincial people.⁵⁰ Domestic tourists from a modern urban context can be no less keen than foreigners in their longing for the "quaint," and are certainly more receptive than them to stagings such as festivals and national celebrations which exploit the folk patrimony and the repertoire of traditional symbols.

3.2 Thai Heritage as a Tourist Attraction

Cultural heritage, quite loose a term in any case, becomes despairingly vague when placed in the context of tourism. In this thesis the focus is on the built heritage, i.e., historic sites and cities, ancient monuments and museums which are popular tourist attractions in Europe and North America. I have just questioned, on generic premises, whether the same holds for Thailand when we refer to the mass of foreign visitors. Now, in order to trace a satisfying picture of the local "cultural tourism," I will discuss both statistical and impressionistic data concerning the response of foreign and domestic tourists to heritage attractions. An evaluation of the TAT's marketing strategy for heritage is also among the aims of this section,

⁴⁹Indeed, it would be interesting to study why the stereotype of the ugly American (tourist) is so persistent, even in the face of a change in tourist trends in Southeast Asia which is by now an accomplished reality.

⁵⁰Particularly in multiethnic Southeast Asian countries (but also in Australia or the USA where the indigenous populations have outlived Western colonisation), exoticism can be experienced "at home." For the case of Javanese elite tourists looking for exoticism in Tana Toraja see Volkman (1990).

while the role of this agency in shaping, through tourist promotion, the globally perceived image of Thailand will be discussed in the next section.

To begin with, some illuminating inferences can be drawn from the statistics of the Annual Report of the National Museums Division (1991:33-34). In 1991, from a total of 5,086,899 foreign tourists, only 289,928 (that is, about 6%) visited a national museum. This figure compares with 579,749 paying Thai adults, to which should be added 382,968 students and 57,668 monks, all of whom enter free, to obtain a total of 1,020,385 national visitors.⁵¹ The Royal Barges Museum, a stopping point of boat tours along the Chaophraya, was the museum most patronised by foreigners: 90,120 international visitors out of a total of 100,687. However, only 58,518 foreigners (less than 1.2% of tourist arrivals!) visited the Bangkok National Museum, probably the richest art collection in Southeast Asia, which has an admittance-fee of a mere 20 Baht and offers weekly guided tours in six foreign languages.⁵² The museum is just a few metres from the certainly more spectacular Grand Palace-Wat Phra Keo, arguably the most popular heritage attraction in the country, for Thais and foreigners alike.⁵³ It is clear that this proximity does not help because few are bold enough to couple the visit to the Grand Palace with one to the museum. In any case, the Bangkok National Museum, with a grand total of 210,573 patrons, rated in 1991 only

⁵¹The 1991 grand total of 1,339,409 visitors includes also 29,096 official guests.

⁵²The six languages are: Chinese, English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese. Besides, the TAT Bangkok brochure lists the National Museum as the fourth main city attraction, after the Grand Palace-Wat Phra Keo, the annexed Coins Pavillion, and the recently restored Vimanmek Palace, which can be all visited with the 100 Baht admission-ticket (for non-Thai visitors) to the Grand Palace.

⁵³I have been unable to collect the attendance figures to the Grand Palace. Still, that Bangkok's royal complex is the country's most visited monument seems to me a reasonable assumption.

as the second most visited among the national museums after that in Phra Nakhonkhiri, in Petchaburi province.

The museum at Phra Nakhonkhiri is part of the historical park established in the area of the summer palace built by King Rama IV on the top of a hill. There were 259,367 Thai paying adults, ten times more than foreigners, out of a total of 310,334 patrons. The impressive popularity of this site with Thais could have something to do with its close association with King Mongkut, and perhaps with its proximity to the capital which allows one-day trips. A rather different distribution of visitors is found at ancient Sukhothai. There, the Ramkhamhaeng Museum had 66,232 patrons, of which 38,026 were foreigners; of the Thais only 10,203 were adults, while 13,702 were students and monks, and 4,301 were official guests (more than for any other museum, which clearly proves the role of Sukhothai as a showcase for national heritage). The museum's ratio roughly reflects that for the Historical Park, where foreigners account for almost half the attendance (they were 207,870 out of the total of 433,476 patrons in 1989). The decennial creation of the Park has required a considerable financial investment, justified not only in terms of national pride, but also of economic return. The promotional emphasis on Sukhothai, added to its World Heritage status, can certainly be taken as one reason for its success with foreigners.

However, apart from this exception, other important heritage sites do not attract many foreign tourists: this is manifest from the 1991 figures for Phimai Historical Park, an impressive Khmer temple in the Northeast, and for the museum at the famous prehistoric site of Ban Chiang. The Historical Park of Phimai had 181,866 Thai and 26,491 foreign patrons;⁵⁴ at

Ban Chiang, out of a total of 45,408 visitors, 29,283 were Thai paying adults and only 5,162 were foreigners, that is, 0.1% of that year's tourist arrivals.⁵⁵

Although it is not a piece of national heritage properly speaking, a historic site which is extremely popular with Western tourists is the River Kwai (*Khwæ*) Bridge in Kanchanaburi, just 130 km. northwest of Bangkok. Memories and images of the "Death Railway," perhaps boosted by David Lean's film *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, are arguably the strongest reasons to visit this place. The bridge, however, shows how a heritage site that is testimony of a tragic past can be transformed into a kind of fun park mini-rail, or just a picturesque element of the landscape. Without doubt, interpreting heritage in the case of the River Kwai Bridge would be a controversial operation, touching on questions such as the war atrocities perpetrated by present-day Thailand's major investor, Japan; Thailand's publicly forgotten role as Japan's ally in Asia; and the bridge's value as an icon of the Allies' antifascist war, but in whose construction almost nine-tenth of the victims were in fact Asian prisoners. Thus, between the "cold" and the "hot" interpretation of historical sites (Uzzell 1989), the TAT has opted for jocular: a week-long festival at the end of November with "rides

⁵⁴Figures collected *in situ*, January 1993.

⁵⁵Student attendance figures at national museums deserve a separate comment since they show a rather different perspective, which, however, arguably reflects teachers' choice rather than those of students who are counted in the statistics. The most visited was the Bangkok National Museum, next to Thammasat and Sinlapakorn Universities, followed by the Chao Samphraya in Ayutthaya, where students (many of whom flowing from the capital) accounted for 60% of the attendance. Surprisingly, in third and fourth places we find the museums of the two southern provincial capitals of Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat; from this datum we can infer that the two museums, where the heritage on display is not so much "Thai" but that of the Hinduised states of the Malay Peninsula, are the main recipients of school-groups within the south of Thailand. Yet the highest number of student patrons in 1991 did not belong to any national museum, but to the innovative permanent exhibition of the Ayutthaya Historical Study Center.

on vintage trains" (TAT n.d.**:23), and whose hallmark is a *son et lumiere* presentation simulating an air attack.⁵⁶

The possibility of making sense of a visit to the River Kwai Bridge comes from two other places in Kanchanaburi city: the war cemetery, with the graves of 6,982 Allied prisoners of war (POW); and the JEATH war museum, whose acronym stands for Japan, England, America and Australia, Thailand, Holland. This is a private museum (20 Baht admission) established in 1977 by the abbot of the nearby Wat Chaichumpol and run by the local monks: it exhibits a collection of POW photographs and personal objects in a bamboo hut built in the manner of those of the prison-camps. Visiting this small and honest museum is a disturbing experience, of the kind few tourists associate with the idea of a holiday in Thailand. This is, perhaps, why many prefer to end their visit further up, at the bridge.

From these statistics and observations the hardly surprising result emerges that only a few of the million foreigners who every year visit Thailand have any interest in the local heritage; and even then, this interest is mainly confined to landmarks such as the Grand Palace-Wat Phra Keo and, outside Bangkok, the Sukhothai Historical Park. This datum appears both in line with Thailand's established image as a destination for a recreational holiday, and with the local tourism industry's main market, that of the package-tours made of large tourist groups with their pre-selected itineraries.⁵⁷ But even in the case of individual and "alternative" travellers,

⁵⁶This is how the site is presented in the TAT Kanchanaburi brochure: "The bridge over the River Kwai is internationally famous, thanks to several popular motion pictures and books. The black iron bridge was brought from Java by the Japanese Army and reassembled under Japanese supervision [!] by Allied prisoner-of-war labour as part of the 'Death Railway' linking Thailand and Myanmar. Still in use today, the bridge was the target of frequent Allied bombing raids during 1945, and was rebuilt after the war ended. The curved spans of the bridge are the original sections. The bridge . . . is the focal point of a riverside area of restaurants, souvenir, handicraft and jeweller shops."

who generally stay for longer periods and arrange their own journeys, the focus of interest is not so much on historical or archeological sites but on living cultures, i.e., the northern ethnic minorities settled around Chiangmai (see Meyer 1988: Chap. 8; Cohen 1989).⁵⁸ Hence, despite differences in attitude and motivations held by international tourists, I shall argue that, allowing for exceptions to the rule, their experience of ubiquitous cultural heritage has basically two dimensions.

The first dimension is the particular setting of the holiday, which in Thailand owes much to the gilded Buddhist architecture, "exotic" not only to Westerners but also to the preponderant Malaysian and Singaporean visitors. Temples impress tourist perception of the built environment with a uniquely Thai "colour." The second dimension is that of handicraft souvenirs which nurture (with photos) later recollections of the trip.⁵⁹ Because of the focus of this thesis on the built heritage, I will refrain from discussing the topic of handicraft and "tourist art."⁶⁰ I just wish to point

⁵⁷Package tours have their own peculiar destinations such as Mini Siam, a display of miniaturised reproductions of famous architectures in the vicinity of Pattaya, which attracts a huge number of groups from Singapore, Hongkong, Taiwan. Only a few patrons are Thai, who arrive in family groups; Westerners seem to have not interest in it (the only ones I met during my visit in December 1992, were a British teacher and his child, who were travelling with a Hongkong group). Much more popular both with Thais and *farang* is the nearby Nong Nooch Village where elephant and a "cultural" shows, featuring scenes of Siamese and Northern Tribal life, are staged twice a day.

⁵⁸That the popularity of Chiangmai, the second most visited destination after Bangkok, does not rest on cultural appeal *strictu sensu* is shown by the attendance figures at Chiangmai National Museum: just 26,034 visitors in 1991, of which only 7,690 were foreigners (Nat. Museums Div. 1991:34). It is nevertheless true that, despite the evident commercialisation, Thai people still have a strong religious motivation for visiting Chiangmai temples, in particular the hill sanctuary of Doi Suthep.

⁵⁹It is important to recognise that the tourist journey is actually made up of five distinct stages: anticipation; travel to the destination; on-site behaviour; return travel; recollection (Jackson 1989). A particularly emotional recollection stage can be the reason for a second trip to the destination.

⁶⁰Handicraft is variously presented in many case-studies as the aspect of cultural heritage which more clearly typifies the process of cultural commodification implied in the encounter between hosts and guests. As basic references, besides those given in footnote 41, see Graburn (1976; 1984); Cohen (1993).

out, *en passant*, what appears to me as a basic difference: on the one hand, handicraft can, as the product of a "tradition," connote identities, whether ethnic or national; on the other hand, the capacity of the built heritage – "the visible past" – for evoking historical memories is not matched by handicraft, because of its dominant practical-decorative function. It is of course remarkable that 36.9% of tourist expenditure in Thailand in 1989 was for shopping, against the 16.7% of Malaysia and 18.6% of Indonesia (ASEAN Industry Report 1990, in Walton 1993:224). This figure may suggest something about the appeal and variety of Thai handicrafts though concealing the actual tourist choices in a market spanning from industrially or mass-produced items to objects of art made according to traditional craftsmanship, which include also antiques, whether authentic or fake, often illegally sold.

If the above data can be explained by the different preferences of foreign and domestic tourists, it is also possible to see this gap, at least in part, as a result of the way heritage is promoted to tourists. The impression is that those perhaps least persuaded of heritage's viability as a tourist attraction are within the TAT itself. TAT's marketing strategy of presenting festivals at heritage sites in order to provide them with some appeal, rather than making the most of their artistic and historical value, clearly stems from an idea of monuments and ruins as intrinsically uninteresting. The focus is thus on having fun (*sanuk*) while ruins are relatively in the background, as a sort of second-rate attraction. This is a strategy hardly effective with foreign visitors: in fact, the few who are culturally motivated are attracted by the monuments *per se* rather than by the attached fairs, while fairs are not a stimulus for all of those who look suspiciously at everything "cultural." Quite the contrary is true with regard to local excursionists, who, in their selection from a number of leisure options, may

regard festivals as inducements to visit an ancient monument rather than some other place.

Amongst the seventy-nine tourist events staged in 1992, sixty-five had a folk, religious or historical background (TAT n.d.**). These stagings are held at several heritage locations, like Phetchaburi, Phitsanulok, Lampang, Phanom Ruang, Phimai, Kamphaeng Phet, Ayutthaya and many others; but the most famous is the three-day Loi Krathong festival celebrated in November amidst the remains of Sukhothai, and during which a *son et lumiere* show with performers in traditional costumes is staged at Wat Mahathat on the full-moon night. This extremely popular event has been presented since its first staging in the early 1980s as a genuine tradition from the time of Sukhothai, and its attendance by Princess Sirindhorn in 1987, the year of the completion of the Park's restoration, was surely a sort of royal recognition of this Broadway-like historical reenactment.⁶¹ Srisakara Vallibhotama, a fierce critic of the Sukhothai Historical Park, has claimed that besides the improper restoration of archaeological sites for tourism exploitation, "historical legends were written . . . which are entirely against the history, e.g., the Loy Krathong Festival at the ancient city of Sukhothai" (Srisaka 1992:22). Still, this festival is largely a national attraction, as is proven by the fact that it substantially increases only Thai attendance of the Park, at its peak in November.

⁶¹In this regard, it is timely to recall the persisting ban in Thailand on the genuine Broadway production of *The King and I* (the musical and the film), based on the memories of the English Mrs. Anna Leonowens, tutor of the royal children at the court of King Rama IV. Despite the ban, Queen Sirikit attended the show during a tour in the USA in 1985, and met the actor Yul Brynner who played, both on stage and on the screen, the role of Mongkut, winning for his interpretation the 1956 Oscar as best male actor. Indeed the ban appears extremely unfair if we consider how much both film and musical have contributed to the romancing of "The Land of Smiles."

In conclusion it is perhaps useful to stress that heritage sightseeing in Thailand involves mainly domestic spectators in an ever-increasing number thanks to rising standards of living and education. Of course, this is not a totally recent phenomenon; heritage has been traditionally experienced via pilgrimages to religiously significant monuments and school excursions, which continue to be part of the social life of a majority of the Thai population. The historical sites restored in the last decade and the new museums established have added to an already existing patrimony, logically becoming attractions for the educated middle-class which can afford travelling for leisure. While I will not repeat here my earlier arguments objecting to the common tenets about cultural heritage, clearly representations of the past offered by various heritage attractions – museums, historical parks, local festivals and *mises en scene* – may constitute an influential source from which the Thai community derives its historical imaginary.

Besides the datum concerning domestic tourism, it is however evident that, despite the recent emphasis on culture and traditions in tourist promotion, Thailand is still predominantly experienced by foreign visitors as a typical escapist holiday destination with little or no attention at all paid to local culture, with the exception of the scenographic function of temples and street rituals, and handicraft souvenirs. I have already hinted at a sort of unwillingness by the TAT to really challenge the notorious character of Thai tourism, whether because of actual distrust about the appeal of heritage to international tourists or because of Thai scepticism about foreigners' capacity for understanding their culture. This argument is developed in the next section, which looks at the marketed depiction of Thailand as "The

Land of Smiles," and questions the extent to which this cliché of the exotic country *par excellence* (Urry 1990:108)⁶² is, in fact, perceived as real.

3.3 Promotional Narrative and "Tourist Heritage"

Nowadays, a holiday abroad starts well before arriving physically *in situ*. Its very beginning is in its anticipation at home, when the destination is selected and initially experienced by gazing at the deluge of images of brochures, tour operators' catalogues, travel and geographical magazines, sometimes with accompanying videocassettes. This impressive flood of visual messages is correctly said to create expectations and stereotypes that the actual journey is often supposed to confirm and consolidate.⁶³ In the jargon of tourism analysis it is said that tourists select their holiday destination on the basis that its naive image (the image formed through the mass of information) exceeds their evaluative image (the aspiration level) by the greatest amount (Ashworth and Goodall 1988:232). This formula maintains the marketing of the image of destination countries as crucial in the process of holiday selection. Information adding up to the destination's naive image is generated from two kinds of sources: informal, such as

⁶²About Bali, Vickers (1989:2) writes that "more than any other tropical island Bali has become the most exotic of exotic locations, a fantasy of all the splendors of the Orient and the beauties of the Pacific." Yet Bali's fame is not at all extended to the whole archipelago constituting the Indonesian nation-state. Indeed some visitors have problems in locating Bali as part of Indonesia (Wood 1984:365). By contrast, it shows up the *national* character of "Exotic Thailand."

⁶³Michael Friedel (1993:64), a professional photographer, ironically describes the osmosis linking "*Homo touristicus*" to "his inanimate prostheses and necessary accessories – his camera equipment, his mini-buses and a tourism infrastructure developed to ensure harmony between the photographers and the photographed." Friedel can easily satirise the fact that "*Homo touristicus* never goes anywhere to learn anything. He goes to verify what his friends have told him, or to impress them with new, bigger and better locations, from which he can bring back more exotic images." Still, professional photographers like Friedel are the very progenitor of "*Homo touristicus*," the creators of those images which induce the mass followers to travel and emulate their models.

friends, the tourist's past experience, etc.; and formal, i.e., the media in general and promotional materials in particular. In his analysis of tourist operator brochures, Selwyn (1993:123-125) shows the dominance of four motifs: natural and built sites, with a range of suggestions from the mystical to the raucous; beaches and boundaries, which demarcate the tourist's territory; smiles of local people, generally children, who form the human landscape (friendly by definition) of a holiday; magnificent food, a hedonistic element that I personally read as a metaphor for the appropriation (also sexual) of the exotic Other.

Of course, this inclination to shape, to exoticise, the ethnic and cultural Other is by no means a novelty. The Orient in particular is now acknowledged as the typical example of Western imperialist conceptualisation of the Other, after Said's (1978) controversial study. Since its invention, photography has played a major role in creating and popularising images of exoticism, and the contemporary mass-media diffusion has just magnified this trend. The main difference with the past is that today it is the Other which creates and markets the images of its own "otherness." The wording and images of brochures of state agencies like the Tourist Authority of Thailand, the Malaysian Tourist Development Corporation, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (duplicated in the advertisements of the national air-carriers) are statements made by these boards on behalf of their respective governments. Whether the given brand is "Exotic Thailand," "Fascinating Malaysia," or "Surprising Singapore," the aim of national tourist boards is not to sell holiday packages, like tourist operators do, but to highlight the destination's attractions and, above all, to present a high profile of the country. This marketed image is a construct reflecting official viewpoints that make the promotional literature of such

tourist boards nothing but a variation on the theme of the nationalist narrative.⁶⁴ So, for example, in a TAT brochure (in English) we can read:

Giving a unique character to the land and people is a quintessential quality of "Thainess" which stems from a strong adherence to traditions that have evolved over more than 700 years of independent development. . . . At the same time, Thailand is a modern dynamic nation, firmly planted in the 20th century and eyeing to the 21st with confidence. Throughout the land there is thus a remarkable blend of the old and the new. This means that while the cultural heritage has been preserved to an extraordinary degree, the visitor can also appreciate the comfort and convenience provided by the most up-to-date facilities. (TAT n.d.***:2-3)

In this excerpt, echoing of motifs of state propaganda are manifest, and indeed the same statement could have been found in one of the several publications edited by the National Identity Board or the National Culture Commission. The message, peculiar to a romantic way of looking at the Orient, is that of a culture where dichotomous elements coexist smoothly rather than causing conflict: development is said to have been "independent" (a hint to the lack of colonisation in the country's past); modernisation is assumed as a goal already achieved which has spared deep-rooted institutions such as the monarchy and Buddhism, still honoured and valued as pillars of society (in contrast to what modernisation brought about in the Western world); and cultural heritage has been, of course, preserved "to an extraordinary degree," despite the fact that till very recently private collectors could buy in Thailand all kinds of antiques. The TAT, often criticised for its modest contribution to tourism planning, has been highly successful in marketing Thailand as "The Land of Smiles" through a voluminous literature, and perhaps thanks also to the very photogenic

⁶⁴Selwyn (1993:123) tells about the brochure of a British tour operator that describes Thai people ". . . all as Peter Pans, eternal children who have never grown up." No such a statement could ever be found in TAT brochures, where, however, the Thai passion for *sanuk* is said, with a remarkable boldness, to have been documented in the first evidence of Thai writing, the famous Ramkhamhaeng's inscription: "All Thai festivals are characterized by a strong sense of *sanuk*. This has been true since the very earliest days of the nation. A famous stone inscription, dating from 1292, describes how the people of Sukhothai, the first Thai capital, went on merit-making. . . . There, seven centuries ago, can be seen the same elements present in nearly all contemporary festivals and public events . . ." (TAT n.d.**:1)

character of the country and its people, "an archetypal presentational society," as defined by Mulder (1992:159). Indeed, this image of "The Land of Smiles" would appear to have crossed the limits of tourism promotion to become, in the eyes of many, the very nature of Thailand (cf. National Geographic 1982, 162:4).

Nevertheless, how much state promotion affects the tourist's eventual choice is open to question. Reviewing earlier researches, Ashworth and Goodall conclude that the official "supply" image projected by the destination country's tourist board is rarely the most decisive source of information about it. Media reports, the tourist's personal experience, and second-hand experiences gathered from acquaintances, are more effective than promotional literature in shaping the destination country's naive image held by the potential visitor. The possible mismatch between the supply and the naive images detracts from a destination country's ability to realise its tourism development potential (Ashworth and Goodall 1988: 222; 231). Indeed, tourist boards often try hard to counteract the negative image generated by other sources; this seems just the case with Thailand, whose sex and drug trades have often had wide coverage in the media and, without doubts, in travellers' tales. Instead figures suggest that this "vicious" image has for a long time favoured, rather than discouraged, tourism. It is a significant datum that in 1985, when sex tourism was still very attractive, up to 57% of the total foreign tourists were on their second visit (Meyer 1988:256).

In other words, the well-known racy reality of Thai tourism does not detract from the enchantment of "The Land of Smiles." Rather, it gives it character: Bangkok's infamous Patpong Road – with its succession of go-go bars and peep shows, now also filled with a night bazaar – is innocently

gazed upon by many tourists, even in family groups, as a "typical landscape" of the city, an "authentic" Bangkok sight, according to tourist mythology. The TAT has apparently been trying hard for some years to erase such an unpleasant public image (the *image* only, though), but the fact is that this image is something that the majority of foreigners identify with the fabled "Land of Smiles," and a pragmatic, not moralistic, approach to this question has to acknowledge that. To put it bluntly, and somehow sarcastically, Patpong is a sort of "heritage site," the legacy of decades of a certain Thai tourism that has come to be regarded, rightly or wrongly, as its very essence. The serious question is that behind the carnivalesque façade there exists the reality of violence and the exploitation of women.

3.4 Heritage and Tourism, the National and the Global

In a perceptive article written a decade ago about the state's growing involvement in the process of cultural change in Southeast Asia as a result of tourism development, Robert Wood (1984:366-368) argued:

There is reason to believe that state definitions of tourist attractions, embodied in tourism planning, marketing and development, affect local perceptions of national identity and cultural heritage. . . . These state choices are also often embodied in state-sponsored cultural productions officially put together for international tourists but which become part of local elite culture as well. Several Southeast Asian countries have constructed large tourist parks outside their capital cities purporting to provide an overview of their cultural diversity and heritage. . . . While tourism thus involves the state in interpreting the past through new means, it also introduces what may be the quintessential symbol of modernity: the "international-standard" hotel. . . . State tourism policy thus not only affects the definition of the "traditional," but the definition of the "modern" as well.

Developments in the last ten years, during which Southeast Asia has had one of the fastest growing tourism industries in the world, have on the whole confirmed Wood's observations. By way of conclusion to this chapter I will gloss them, focussing on how, in this short time-span, the terms of the dialectics between the "traditional" (heritage, authenticity,

national cultures) and the "modern" (globalisation, "staged authenticity," world culture) have changed within the Southeast Asian, and specifically the Thai, context.

The first remark is that today the sight of modernity in Southeast Asia is, at least in the cities, by no means limited to the international-standard hotels, but includes much of what is around them; by contrast, the nostalgic flavour of the past has been recreated precisely in hotels. The case of Singapore is very representative in this regard. The most visited country in the region and Thailand's direct competitor, Singapore has based its unique "character" and popularity (not only with tourists but also in terms of internal consensus) on its modern outlook, its technological advancement, and its material wealth. Nevertheless, the massive clearance of old quarters in the 1970s was subsequently regretted for having deprived the city-state of a large part of its colonial and ethnic architecture and, with it, of a characteristic element, one much valued by tourists. Consequently, the refurbishment of the colonial Raffles Hotel has been marketed not as a matter of private economic enterprise, but as the recovering of a major asset of Singapore's heritage. Bangkok's equivalent, The Oriental Hotel, frequently rated as the best hotel in the world, can be seen in much the same perspective.⁶⁵

⁶⁵The first hotel's structure was built by two Danish sea captains in 1876. In 1886 Captain H. N. Anderson, founder of the East Asiatic Company (whose building still lies next to the Oriental), tore down the existing structure and employed an Italian architect to design a new building, today designated as the Authors' Residence, and the very highlight of the hotel, which includes two other wings, respectively completed in 1958 and 1976. The Residence's name is due to the legendary writers who stayed at the Oriental, after whom the four suites of the old building are nominated: Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, and James Michener. Their books and other memorabilia are part of the suites' furniture (Buckley 1992:150).

The present popularity of the colonial imagery, in large part an aspect of the heritage industry itself, is indeed a cultural phenomenon deserving a separate analysis. Here it is just possible to notice that nostalgia for the colonial epoch is a pervasive trend extending from films (e.g., *The Sheltering Sky*, *The Lover*, *Indochine*) to clothes and furniture fashions (e.g., "This is the luggage of another era, when travel was an adventure, getting there was as much of an event as being there ... "). What emerges as this phenomenon's dominant meaning is the feeling of regret that the masses of consumers have for a past when tourism was, socially and culturally, an elitistic experience, and hence a status symbol. Paradoxically, the "democratisation" of tourism which has allowed more and more people to travel widely abroad is itself felt by the tourist masses as having spoiled the "aristocracy" of this experience. Given the obvious impracticability of reducing the volume of tourism, the stress is now on the quality (cultural and material) which distinguishes the holiday of the classy traveller from that of the mass-tourist.⁶⁶

Likewise, competition for the tourist market in Southeast Asia, much more pronounced today than even only a decade ago, requires an emphasis on the unique traits of each destination country, which explains the focus of promotion on "culture." Culture, much more than tropical beaches, is seen as capable of differentiating societies from each other. Of course, and only philistines can be shocked by it, the definition of culture in the context of tourism extends in practice to everything that is marketable, from food to kite-flying, including the physical remnants of the past transformed by

⁶⁶A new luxury train, the Eastern and Oriental Express, has operated since August 1993 linking Singapore and Bangkok in a 42-hour journey which allows patrons to "get the best of two worlds – the luxury of the train and Asia at your fingertips." Amongst the other attractions of the train, "the decoration for each carriage was inspired by the 1932 film *Shanghai Express*, with Burmese emblems carved here and there" (Conway 1993).

scholarly discourses into "heritage." The point, only apparently paradoxical, is that the more the process of globalisation, that has in the tourism industry a main agent, homogenises habits and landscapes all around the world, the more the past and its forms, superseded by development, are iconicised as the only reliable sources of national identity. According to Smith (1991:159): "This is only to be expected, given the centrality of memory in forging identities and cultures, which is why the basic motifs, ideas and styles of post-modern cosmopolitanism are folk or national in origin."

We come thus to the second remark on Wood's analysis, concerning the way tourism affects the interpretation of the "traditional." A parallel can be drawn here with the somehow paradigmatic case of Britain, where 56% of the recently opened museums belong to the private sector (Urry 1990:106), and in the late 1980s, there were some 1,250 private museums (Hewison 1989:19). As Urry argues, these private initiatives inspire new ways of representing history as well as of commodifying the past; and although the trend in Britain seems to be toward trivialisation (Hewison 1987), the coexistence of manifold interpretations of the past could have in theory a liberating effect: to couple the actual plurality of histories with a plurality of heritages and, in the end, to deprive the state of its monopoly of the official national history.

The "Ancient City" (*Muang boran*) is a private open-air museum located some 30 km. from central Bangkok on an area of 8 square-km. Opened in 1972 in the presence of the Thai monarchs, it was built by the biggest Mercedes-Benz dealer in Thailand. The exhibit presents a hundred small-sized replicas of monuments and buildings (and even some original ones, dismantled and reerected here) found all over the country, and

reproduced here with a philological attention to detail.⁶⁷ Built before the main FAD's restorations, the "Ancient City" has introduced, through its "staged heritage," two generations of Thai students to the art and architecture of the country. The educational rather than commercial end of this enterprise became even clearer in 1974 with the establishment of the homonymous magazine; since then, this rather unique synergy has championed peasant society, depicted as an Arcadian realm of benevolence, in contraposition to the moral and cultural deterioration brought about by modernisation (notwithstanding the owner's main business). Despite the valuable scholarship and craftsmanship which distinguish the "Ancient City" from similar attractions, Thai tradition is emphasised here again nostalgically and uncritically, while avoiding the reality of conflict and domination in the past.⁶⁸

In any case, the number of private museums in Thailand is extremely limited. In a country where the ethos of private entrepreneurship has proved to be the engine of a successful economic development, it is remarkable the extent to which the "heritage industry" has been, *at least* until now, a sort of state monopoly. If this has prevented national museums and heritage displays from becoming too market-oriented and thus retaining more of their original character, it has also been a means to ensure that the interpretations of the past conveyed by these institutions were not contrasting with state definitions of national and cultural identity.

⁶⁷For example, the murals inside the replica of the Grand Palace's Dusit Maha Prasat depict events at the time the hall was built (the First Reign), unlike the murals of the real building, executed during the Sixth Reign.

⁶⁸The visit to the "Ancient City" inspired the wife of Indonesian President Suharto to build a similar theme-park, Mini Indonesia (*Taman Indonesia Mini*). Because of the initial opposition to the project of Mini-Indonesia, Suharto made of its realisation a test about the solidity of its leadership.

Teasing out the implications behind the official interpretation of major Thai heritage sites is the aim of the next chapter.

4. National Heritage Sites: *Topoi* of the Nationalist Narrative

This chapter is a sort of guide to a selected number of Thai heritage sites. The Greek word *topos* itself originally means site, place, but it is used in textual analysis to designate an image or theme recurrent in, and hence emblematic of, the work of art of an individual or a period. As a presence easily recognisable in the territory of literary and figurative texts, a *topos* has a special capacity for evocation. Now, it is tautological to say that every heritage site is spatially located; however, only a few heritage sites are, in the narrative through monuments outlined here, *topoi* as well, that is, only few have a place not just in Thailand's geographical space but also in Thai collective consciousness as national icons. Their popularity makes such monuments naturally referential of those ideas and feelings about the past that are uttered by the pervasive state discourses of history, identity and nationhood. A journey to these sites through Thailand's territory is thus also a journey in time through the layers of the official past sanctioned by the nationalist narrative, from the Khorat Plateau's Khmer-dominated principalities of the tenth-thirteenth centuries to Thai independent kingdoms of the thirteenth-eighteenth centuries in the Central Plain, Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, to the modern Bangkok-centered nation-state.

Of course, the sites dealt with in the following exposition are but a few samples of the Thai heritage that is today available to the visitor thanks to the excavations and restorations carried out by the Fine Arts Department (FAD) in the last three decades. However, the choice is not arbitrary.

According to the Thai *weltanschauung* that allocates every element its proper place in a hierarachic order, there exists a hierarchy of monuments as well. The archaeological sites described in the first two sections all belong to the restricted category of historical parks (*utthayan prawatisat*).⁶⁹ With regard to Bangkok's historic sites, the choice is easily justified because they instantly conjure up Thailand's uniqueness. In fact, much more is at stake in the capital, because there originate the symbols of legitimacy that imbue the actuality of the Thai polity.

4.1 Remnants of Thailand's Khmer Past

In the late 1980s, after years of restoration work by the FAD, three outstanding archaeological sites were reinstalled in the national heritage's main catalogue under the entry "historical parks." These monuments lie within Thailand's borders, have been recognized for some time by Thai people as part of their patrimony, and have been labelled for years by art historians as examples of "Lopburi art." Yet, artistically speaking, they are not Thai at all. In fact, the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) now promote these heritage sites as "the finest Khmer monuments of the Angkor period to be seen outside Kampuchea." (TAT c: 6). They are shrines that the Khmer built along the road to Angkor, the heart of the most powerful polity in mainland Southeast Asia between the ninth and the early fifteenth century. The three monuments, and the relative historical parks in question, are Prasat Muang Sing, Prasat Phimai, and Prasat Phanom Rung.

⁶⁹There are nine established historical parks in Thailand. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 cover seven of them. The remaining two are the archaeological site of Si Thep, in Phetchabun province; and the royal palace built by Rama IV on the top of a hill at Nakhonkhiri, in Phetchaburi province.

The first inauguration, in April 1987, was that of Muang Sing Historical Park (Kanchanaburi province), where excavation started in 1974 and restoration began in 1982. Chronologically, however, the sanctuary (*prasat*), built in the Bayon style of Jayavarman VII (1181-ca. 1218), is the latest and the westernmost among the three. Located at the center of the walled town of Muang Singh, the shrine was apparently a Mahayana temple, as the unearthed stone statues of Avalokitesvara and Prajñāparamita suggest. The structure of the tower (*prang*) is of laterite, with stucco decorations showing the unusual presence of Dvaravati, Khmer Bayon and proto-Thai styles (Subhadradis 1979). In a small exhibition hall, the excavation's findings are now on display, including the statuary, carvings, implements and pottery shards. The park includes a parking area, services, and a tin-roof hall for the reception of school students.⁷⁰

Phanom Rung Historical Park (Buriram province) was unveiled by Princess Sirindhorn the 21 May, 1988, on "Thai cultural preservation day," after a twelve-year genesis begun in 1977 under the Phanom Rung Historical Park Project (restoration by anastylosis had however already started in 1971). According to Subhadradis Diskul (1979), the sanctuary was a sort of work-in-progress developing from the middle of the tenth to the early thirteenth centuries, thus pre-dating in its original core Angkor Wat itself. The temple lies along the road connecting the old Khmer capital with Phimai and was dedicated to Siva, the deity worshipped in many of the Khmer courts. Phanom Rung has a special place in the revival of national heritage for the resonance of the anonymous appeal, eventually successful, made in 1988 through some Thai newspapers to have returned a lintel stolen from the

⁷⁰In 1992 only, the total revenue from the entry tickets at Muang Sing Historical Park has been about 1.300.000 bath (Thai 5 baths, Foreign 20 baths entrance fee).

sanctuary in the mid-1960s and exhibited since 1967 in the Art Institute of Chicago, an episode which has been acutely analysed by Charles Keyes (1991).

Phimai Historical Park (Nakhon Ratchasima province) opened in 1989 after a long period of restoration work initially started in 1964 with the supervision of the French archaeologists B. P. Groslier and P. Pichard, supervisors also of the restoration of Prasat Phnom Rung, whose plan and style are similar to those of Prasat Phimai. The implementation of the park's project started, however, only in the early 1980s under the Fifth National Plan. Prasat Phimai, the biggest Khmer temple in Thailand (and hence, outside Cambodia), was built, according to Subhadradis Diskul, in the first Angkorian style during the reign of Suryavarman II (the builder of Angkor Wat) in the first half of the twelfth century, and then restored by Jayavarman VII towards the end of the century (Pisit and Subhadradis 1976:161). The temple's stone carvings show a variety of motifs, from Tantric Buddhist to Hinduist; moreover, some of their features are moreover peculiar to Prasat Phimai only. Srisakara (1990:235) sees the Buddhist Mahayana subjects of these carvings as demonstration of the fact that the area of the Mun River valley, where Buddhism had flourished earlier before Angkor's expansion, retained the original religious creed even during the period of Khmer dominance.

Prasat Phimai, unlike most Khmer temples facing east, is turned to south-east in the direction of the road to Angkor. Some scholars, however, suggest that it pre-dates, like Phnom Rung, Angkor Wat itself, and that the lotus-bud shaped superstructures of their towers may have indeed provided the model for the more glorious follower (Sonthiwan 1986:12). This Historical Park, at the centre of Phimai small town, is an example of the upgrading of local heritage to national relevance in a way which balances

the grandeur of Sukhothai. Not far from the sanctuary is the office of the Sixth Division of the FAD, where excavations are carried out in the proximity of other Khmer remains, including a hospital, a reservoir, and a landing stage for ceremonies. Between 1989 and 1992, in the four years following its inauguration, Phimai Historical Park has been visited by the remarkable number of 834,505 people (734,987 Thais and 99,518 foreigners).⁷¹ Another 10,861 people have, in 1991 alone, visited the local museum (National Museums Division 1991:33).

Besides these three historical parks, the July 1992 issue of the TAT *Exotic Thailand* bulletin advertised the reopening of Khao Phra Vihan (Preah Vihear in Khmer), another famous Khmer hill sanctuary built in the eleventh century during the reign of King Suriyavarman I and consecrated to Siva. The temple, on the Thai-Cambodian border, had been at the center of an international dispute over its ownership between the two governments which was eventually solved by the International Court of Justice in 1962 with the acknowledgement of Cambodian rights (Keyes 1991:279). However, the temple lies now in the territory controlled by the Khmer Rouge; the fact that in the above-mentioned bulletin the entrance-fee is given in Baht suggests that Thai authorities may presently have some form of management over the access to the temple, originally designed to be approached from the northern side, which is today that on the Thai border.⁷²

⁷¹Figures obtained *in situ*, January 1933.

⁷² The admission-fees to Pheah Vihear, unusually high for Thai standard, are as follows: Baht 60 for Thai adults, 20 for children, 5 for Thai students in uniform; and Baht 200 for foreigners (100 for children). It is worth noting that Preah Vihear has been included by Smitthi and Moore (1992) in their recent glossy book on Khmer temples in Thailand.

As we have seen, the three parks containing the renovated shrines all opened in the late 1980s, a few years before it was again possible to visit Angkor Wat as a result of the treaty signed in Paris in October 1991 among the four parties involved in the Cambodian civil war. The slowness and uncertainty of the peace process in Cambodia most likely induced the FAD and the TAT to make available as soon as possible the national patrimony of Khmer architecture. Now a three-day visa for Cambodia can be easily obtained in Bangkok, and once in Phnom Penh it is possible to reach Siemreap by land. Still, the very closeness of Angkor Wat to the much more perilous "sanctuaries" of the Khmer Rouge in the jungle along the Thai border still conditions, and every now and then jeopardises, tourists going there. The Khmer shrines in Thailand have thus become for foreigners a sort of substitute for Angkor Wat, and tour-operators in Bangkok sell package-tours of a few days to Isan's Khmer temples, which are quite hard to reach by means of public transport. Prasat Muang Sing, in the western province of Kanchanaburi, can be visited instead on a day trip from Bangkok.

I shall argue that economic gains from tourism constitute one main reason for the "rediscovery" of the Khmer temples in Thailand. Unquestionably Khmer art, thanks to the change in the political climate (if not in the reality) of the region, is enjoying a revival that tour operators, museums and publishers are trying to exploit; and the development of tourism as a propellant for the economic take-off of Isan, the poorest region of Thailand, is pivotal in the "Green Northeast" Government Project. The historical parks of Phimai and Phanom Rung undoubtedly constitute excellent attractions. Moreover, they fit into the greater plan of repackaging Thailand as a destination aimed at the "cultural tourist." The attempt to promote the region as a tourist destination may explain the present trend of

stressing Isan's unique cultural profile, a trend which goes against one hundred years of effort to make the Northeast conform to the national standard. Today Isan's characteristics are seen as potential attractions to exploit: the distinctive language and cuisine, the Khmer cultural heritage and a rural environment strikingly divergent from the industrial landscape of the Central Plain make the Northeast the real exotic core of "Exotic Thailand," an alternative travel destination of great appeal to both foreign and domestic tourists looking for "authenticity."⁷³

Still, beyond the commercial aims, a more ideological intent can be discerned from the restoration of Thailand's Khmer remnants insofar as it is manifest that the great mass of visitors to these parks are Thais themselves. Keyes (1991) has argued that the elevation of the Khmer heritage in Thailand from local to national relevance is a way to sustain Thai claims to the legacy of Angkor, a legacy for which a competition has existed since the time of the French protectorate between the Cambodian and the Thai monarchies. Indeed, in the 1860s, King Mongkut ordered a model of Angkor Wat to be built within the precinct of the royal chapel, Wat Phra Keo. Nevertheless, the enormous iconic potency of Angkor Wat appears today to rest firmly within the cultural heritage of the Cambodian nation.⁷⁴ Is it, then, precisely Angkor's legacy that the Thai state is articulating a claim to by means of its heritage policy?

⁷³Revealing in this regard is the following paragraph is taken from the TAT booklet (p. 2) on Isan: "The Northeast is a singularly distinctive region. The inhabitants of Isan speak their melodious dialect, have a delicious, highly spiced cuisine, and a colourfully vibrant and oftentimes boisterous folk culture. Isan boasts several archaeological significant excavations and shrines. . . ."

⁷⁴Keyes himself (1991:264) mentions the fact that the silhouette of Angkor Wat has been on the national flag of every Cambodian government since the country's independence in 1954.

After having been besieged twice by the Siamese, possibly in 1369 and 1389, Angkor was finally abandoned in the early 1430s, when King Ponhea Yat decided to move further south to Basan, and then to the site of present-day Phnom Penh. The city was apparently abandoned since then, although it is likely that local people had still knowledge of it. Since the establishment of the French protectorate over the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1863 (three years after Mouhot's discovery of the city ruins), obtaining the territory with Angkor, under Siamese suzerainty since 1769, became a major concern for King Sisowath, "the most important event of the reign" (Chandler 1992: 150). Eventually, the provinces of Siemraep and Battambang were extorted from Siam in 1907 as one of the conditions for settling the question of the 1893 war reparations.⁷⁵ The Siamese élite did not lose interest in Angkor, as shown by the lecture "Angkor from a Siamese point of view" which Prince Damrong gave in English on the 28th of July 1925 at the Siam Society, soon after a visit to the site (Davis 1989:85). The legacy of Angkor was naturally of some relevance to the Thai monarchy, whose origin and ceremonial directly descend from it. This genealogical legacy was, however, already self-evident and did not require further legitimisation, as Chulalongkorn's updating of the sovereign's prerogatives decisively moved away from the beliefs in the king's sacrality. Hence, I suggest that the Siamese élite was engaged in competition not with the Cambodian kings but with the French, and not for Angkor's legacy, but for the status of Angkor's owner, the status of *colonial* (rather than colonised) country. A point not to undervalue is that the ownership of the magnificent ruins implied control of a substantial territory

⁷⁵King Chulalongkorn "collapsed in remorse" at the extent of the territorial losses and for the next twelve months "the wheels of government almost completely ceased to turn", as Girling (1981:48, n.92) recalls by quoting Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand*, Yale U.P. (1969: pp. 95-96). Notably, Angkor ruins remained under French control even during the brief period 1941-46, when the two provinces, considered since 1907 as Siamese unredeemed territories, were reannexed thanks to the Japanese help and the pliability of the Vichy collaborationist government.

for which a war, though short, had been fought between France and Siam in 1893.

It is the fate of monumental ruins like those of Angkor to laud not only the greatness of their builders but that of their conquerors alike. This is particularly true in the case of Angkor and the Thais, as I shall argue. It is very important to consider that the first document showing the existence of Siamese as an ethnic group is an Angkor Wat bas-relief depicting a band of *Syam Kuk* mercenaries from the Chao Phraya valley beside recruited Lopburi troops. Of them, Wyatt (1984:30) writes in his royalist history of Thailand that "they were becoming a force to be reckoned with." In effect, this bas-relief speaks to us with afterwit. It proves the endurance of the Thais, *already* there at the time of Angkor, and *still* there when Angkor was no more because they – the subordinates turned masters – depopulated it. Inheriting the Khmer legacy was possible for the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya because, like Rome with Greece, it had earlier subjugated Angkor. At the beginning of this century, the possession of Angkor switched from the Thais to the French. Yet this discontinuity in rule implied the equivalence of the rulers, with Siam equated to France on a level of relative superiority in comparison to the other "uncivilised" Asian élites, "incapable" of running their own countries and, incidentally, taking care of the artistic inheritance of their ancestors.

It is difficult to say what the fate of Angkor would have been without the French construction of the myth of it as a wonder of the world, a construction that, in the best tradition of Orientalism, brought together genuine and valuable scholarship and the rationale for colonialist domination imbued in the equation that by salvaging Angkor, French rule was salvaging civilisation *tout court*. Still, the colonial grandeur of French

Indochina is by now a memory good only for movie nostalgia. Among the contenders of one century ago, it is the Kingdom of Thailand that has succeeded in imposing its regional supremacy, not by means of imperial armies but through present-day warfare, namely, business, whose conceptualisation as war is unfolded in the historical novel "Three Reigns" (*Sam kok*), a publishing success of impressive dimension in Thailand in recent years (Reynolds 1992b). Subtending Thailand's leading position in mainland Southeast Asia is the *mission civilisatrice* carried on by the FAD, whose expertise in the restoration of Khmer temples (that include also Prasat Banphluang, Surin; Prasat Kamphaeng Yai, Sisaket; Muang Tam, Buriram; Phanom Wan, Nakhon Ratchasima) has matured enough to ask for a revision of the stylistic paradigms established by French scholarship: "The special qualities that exist only in Khmer works in Thailand are now being recognised, and it is likely that soon a new means of classifying Khmer art in Thailand will be created," as we read in a recent "made in Thailand" sumptuous coffee-table book enriched by Sirindhorn's foreword (Smitthi and Moore 1992:31).⁷⁶

Meanwhile, to the affluent Thais who go to Angkor as tourists and investors the national press presents, not surprisingly, the Cambodian ruins with the same stereotypes and racial bias which contributed to the French mythicisation of Angkor. The myth naturally asks how such indigent people as the Cambodians could have ever been prosperous enough to build a monument like Angkor Wat.⁷⁷ Of course, the bas-relief depicting the

⁷⁶The book mentions Sirindhorn's confutation of Coedes' interpretation of Inscription K. 384, found at Phanom Rung. The inscription, whose content according to Coedes refers to the Angkorian King Suryavarman II, is instead seen by the Princess as praising the local ruler Navendraditya. The authors take the Princess' reading as evidence of the fact that the rulers of Phanom Ruang were autonomous rather than vassals to Angkor (Smitthi and Moore 1992: 268).

⁷⁷"The shortage of everything in Cambodia left me wondering how the country could even really have been rich enough for the ancient Khmer kings to have constructed those

Siamese army is recommended as "a-must-stop for every Thai who visits the Angkor" (Kasetsiri 1993:84),⁷⁸ and there is no need to ask why:

They [the Siamese army] are regarded by Western historians as the barbaric mercenaries who worked for the Khmers. Whether it is, the "Siamese warriors" is one of the most important record of the pre-empire [*sic*] Siam. . . . Since the fall of the Angkor in the year 1431, the battle for the local economic power has just started.

Indeed, it was in the late 1980s that the (then) Thai prime minister Chatichai launched a foreign policy synthesised in the slogan of transforming the Indochinese battle-fields into market-places. Since then, the economic and political élites of the country have worked to pave the way for Bangkok's regional supremacy. That way goes through the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, just like the old way to Angkor. It is thus perhaps no wonder that the ancient sanctuaries along that road have become resplendent again.

4.2 Ancient Capitals of a Manufactured Nation

According to several scholars, modern Thai identity is the result of the interaction of two models or traditions, those of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, the two kingdoms that in Thai official discourse epitomise the past of the nation-state or, to put it correctly, its projection into the past. Whereas the Sukhothai tradition offers a paternalistic and fairly

unequalled stone sanctuaries. I'm more willing to plump for the ready answer that they were created by gods" (Nilubol 1993). This theme of the contrast between Angkor's greatness and the Khmer people's status, although fully developed by French colonialist discourse, had been already expressed by Thais at the time of Ayutthaya: "The old Siamese histories testify that [Angkor] was so exquisite and ingenious that no human being could have built it. Therefore, they say that angels from heaven came to help in building this magnificent city in Cambodia" (Jeremias van Vliet, *The Short History of the Kings of Siam* (1640), trans. Leonard Andaya. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1975, p. 60. Quoted in Reid [1988:67]).

⁷⁸This and the following quotation are from Kasetsiri's article's summary in English, very likely an editorial work.

egalitarian model, the Ayutthayan tradition accounts for the highly hierarchic social structure and the divine character of the monarchy. There is, however, a major difference in the way the two traditions have been internalised in Thai collective consciousness. The legacy of Ayutthaya was acknowledged since the establishment of the Bangkok kingdom in 1782, fifteen years after Ayutthaya's fall: Rattanakosin's social and economic structure, its conception of kingship and religious practices, even the plan of its capital had Ayutthaya as their proclaimed model. On the contrary, the heritage of Sukhothai was recovered after centuries of oblivion and notably during the crucial stage, from the reigns of Mongkut to Vajiravudh, that changed the aspect of the traditional kingdom and laid the foundations of the modern nation-state.

In fact, the two traditions of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, opposing and complementing each other like *yin* and *yang* in the Taoist universe, can be seen as the result of the mythologising activity sustaining the process of nation-building in modern Siam. Brahmanic cosmology, the source of legitimacy in Ayutthaya, had been retained in its function by the first Chakri kings. Yet, to the eyes of King Mongkut that esoteric myth of foundation was probably an obstacle to a closer relationship between the sovereign and his subjects at a time when, looking at the events in China, Burma and Vietnam, a greater national unity could work as a barrier against colonialism. The danger that Siam was facing required a new foundation myth to fortify the fabric of the kingdom. The stone inscription which Mongkut claimed to have discovered in 1833 wondering around the ruins of Sukhothai, whether a genuine document or written *ex novo*, served exactly this purpose.

As a result, Thais learnt that before *sakdina* society, where everyone was ranked and the king was a deity who could not even be looked at, there had been a golden age in the past of Siam, a time when whoever wished to express a complaint directly to the king could do that by simply ringing a bell; and the king himself allowed free commerce without imposing tolls. Even Mongkut's moralising reform of the *sangha*, which led to the establishment of the Thammayut order, was to bring back the essence of Thainess to a state of mythical purity and strength (cf. Tambiah 1976).⁷⁹ Indeed, Mongkut desperately needed legitimation for the changes he was pursuing, and he found this legitimation in the authority of the indigenous tradition of Sukhothai.

The peculiarity of this Siamese "invention of tradition" is that Sukhothai as the foundation myth of the modern Thai polity did not replace Ayutthaya as a result of a change in the power-holding group. Rather, the two myths became complementary in legitimising a monarch with both the titles and roles of "righteous ruler" (*dhammaraja*) and "divine ruler" (*devaraja*). Mongkut's aim of linking the Chakri dynasty with the Kingdom of Sukhothai had propitious support in the fact that Rama I himself had allegedly discovered the ruins of the old city hidden in the thick of the jungle, and had ordered the removal of numerous Buddha images to Bangkok, including the seated bronze Buddha today at Wat Suthat. Mongkut, on his part, identified the alleged Ramkhamhaeng throne, the Manansilapatra, which was placed in the Dusit Maha Prasat, in the Grand Palace.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ ^{One} It should be reminded that only during Mongkut's reign Buddhist scriptures began to be written in Thai. Until the fourth reign, Pali Buddhist texts written in Khmer script had been retained, and there were many monks versed in that language (Na Paknam 1985:39).

⁸⁰ "King Ramkhamhaeng's stone throne was called the Manansilapatra, which stood in the 'Sugar Palm Grove,' and is associated with stories of the king's righteous administration: He

The definitive stamp on the myth of Sukhothai was the work of King Vajiravudh. He created a nationalist mythology, similar to Wagner's Nibelung cycle, centered on the character of Phra Ruang, a legendary king from the Chronicle of the North. Phra Ruang – whose deeds Vajiravudh told in the genres of a traditional dance drama, a modern drama and a musical, written between 1912 and 1924 – is in fact Rama VI's *alter ego*, the hero of the independent kingdom of Sukhothai (read Siam) who demands his subjects to "not destroy our nation but combine your spirit and your strength to preserve the state." (Vella 1978:209;211). Vajiravudh's cry for the contemporary condition of Sukhothai was expressed in a travel account entitled "A Journey in the Land of Phra Ruang" (*Thiao Muang Phra Ruang*), reprinted for the occasion of a royal cremation in 1977, the year the green-light was given to the Sukhothai Historical Park Project. However, although an initial registration of Sukhothai archaeological sites was conducted in 1935, funds for the restoration of the ruins were not available until the early 1950s, during Phibun Songkhran's post-war government.

The interest Phibun took in preserving the national heritage was one form of his attempt to appropriate the symbolism which legitimises royal authority. The existence of two myths of foundation at the root of the Thai polity made possible a split of roles. While the king could retain his *devaraja-dhammaraja* prerogatives, Phibun, during his post-war premiership, and especially Sarit afterwards (the latter, though, bowing to the monarch's symbolic preminence), tried to take on the role of "father of the population" (*phokun*), setting them directly in touch with the feelings

is alleged to have sat on it when affairs of state were being transacted and to have received the homage of his vassals. The remarkable tradition is that on *uposatha* days the king invited monks to come to the palace and sit on the Manansilapatra throne to expound the dhamma" (Tambiah 1976:85).

and the needs of the people. Money for the restoration of the Sukhothai monuments (among those, Was Sa Si, Wat Si Chum, Wat Si Sawai) started by the FAD in 1953, were obtained from the State Lottery Bureau, while Wichit Wathakan, friend and intellectual mentor both of Phibun and Sarit, used his literary talents to revive the figure of Phokhun Ramkhamhaeng, pseudo-historical hero of a populist mythology which had its roots in Vajiravudh's plays:

There are not important men in Sukhothai and there is not ruler of men. In Sukhothai there are only father and children. . . . I am the father of all who reside in *Muang Thai*. . . . I am Phokhun Ramkhamhaeng. . . . There is not ruler in Sukhothai, only father, father of city and Phokhun.

(From "The Prowess of Phokhun Ramkhamahaeng" by *Luang* Wichit Wathakan, in *Thak* [1978:749])

In 1964 the government approved the project for the preservation of the ancient cities of Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet, and in the following five years excavation and restoration works were carried out by the FAD at these sites. Meanwhile, a request made to UNESCO to provide assistance led to a visit of experts in 1968 and, subsequently, to a supporting international campaign launched in 1979. In 1976 the archaeological area of Sukhothai was declared a national historical park, followed by Kamphaeng Phet in 1980, and by Si Satchanalai three years later.

The Master Plan of the Sukhothai Historical Park Development Project (UNESCO 1982) – prepared by a multidisciplinary team of Thai specialists since October 1976 (the same month the period of open politics was violently brought to an end) – was included in the Fourth and Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plans (1977-1986), and formally approved by the Thai government in October 1978. The project has been divided into two five-years phases, with a total budget allocation of Bath 220.6 million (about US\$ 9 million).⁸¹ The gigantic project, covering a 70

⁸¹For the detailed outline of the project expenses see Ishizawa and Kono (1986:58).

square-kilometer area with 193 monuments, included six sub-plans: land use, archaeological excavation and restoration, landscaping improvement, community development, realisation of facilities, and tourist promotion (Ishizawa and Kono 1986: 51). In practice this has meant the resettlement of 200 households, the construction of roads, water resources and infrastructure as car-parks, rest-rooms, an information centre and an open-air theatre. The Thai government provided 153 million Baht between 1977 and 1988; the international community, through UNESCO sponsorship and single state (mainly Japanese) bilateral cooperation, contributed about 18.5 millions Baht, while 5 million came from private Thai donors (FAD 1988:30-32). The Sukhothai Historical Park was finally opened on November 14, 1988, to celebrate the king's fifth cycle and the the "Year of the Longest Reigning Monarch" (*Raja Manglapisek*). Eventually, the archaeological compound of Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet was nominated, along with Ayutthaya, a World Heritage site in August 1991.

The FAD restoration aroused a wave of criticism, mainly voiced by the magazine *Muang Boran*. Whereas some, even within the FAD itself, have blamed inexperience and haste, the critics' main charge is the alteration of archaeological evidence through arbitrary reconstruction of monuments in order to suit the interests of the tourism industry pursued by the TAT cooperating with the FAD in the implementation of the Historical Park. Dhida Saraya, a historian who initially joined the committee that drew the master plan, has written of "newly created environments stemming from historical fictions and myths . . . a park rich in fantastic structures and recreational sites reflecting no trace or shadow of the urban setting and planning of the past" (Dhida 1987:40). The FAD replied to the charge by asserting the historical veracity of the park, whose shape and landscaping

have been drawn from the description of the city found in the Ramkhamhaeng inscription: and this, ironically or opportunely, just at the time the inscription's authenticity was under debate. Finally, in order to stop the quarrel, the FAD issued in 1985 a new set of regulations for archaeological restoration referred to as the Bangkok Charter, discussed earlier.

However sound the criticism may be, the Sukhothai Historical Park has been very successful. Since the year of its opening, there have been 433,476 visitors in 1989; 396,150 in 1990; and 373,338 in 1991.⁸² Moreover, these figures have to be read against the background of the relative unpopularity, in terms of visitors, of Sukhothai amongst the Thais (*Silpakorn* 1991, 34:1). Besides, the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum, opened in 1964 within the walled area of the city, had in 1991 66,232 visitors, 38,026 of whom were foreigners, ranking as the fifth most visited national museum (National Museums Division 1991:33). It is clear that the general public who visit the park is not concerned with methodological questions of the restoration of archaeological sites. The monuments impress exactly because they look not like scattered ruins, but recognisable architecture. The landscape is luxuriant, with trees, plants and reservoirs. Concrete roads connecting the monuments allow the park to be visited at an easy pace, whether by coach, bicycle, or local tram-car. The entrance-fee is a mere 20 Baht for foreigners and 10 for Thai for the walled-area, and the same fee is charged for the main monuments outside the city wall, such as Wat Si Chum and Wat Phra Phailuang, a negligible charge even for family groups, whom I met, wishing to picnic in the park's evocative surroundings.

⁸²These figures were collected at the office of the Sukhothai Historical Park. They do not refer to the calendar year, but to the twelve-month period between October and the next September.

At Ayutthaya, a major part of the restoration was done by the FAD in two phases: in 1956 (Wat Boromphuttharam, Wat Lokkayasuttha, Wat Thammikarat, Wihan Phra Mongkhonbophit), the year of the highest peak of restoration of Buddhist monuments under the Phibun regime (Thak 1978:717); and mainly during the first half of the 1970s (Wat Mahathat, Wat Ratchaburana, Wat Phra Si Sanphet, the Royal Palace). In effect, an initial preservation project was approved by the government in 1969 with a budget allocation of one million Baht per year, but the project for the realisation of the Ayutthaya Historical Park over an area of about 3 square-kilometers on the island city has been implemented only since 1977 under the fourth plan. In 1989 the annual budget allocation was about eight million Baht (Peerapun 1991:118). The 1991 listing of Ayutthaya as a World Heritage site may lead to an arrangement of the archaeological sites modelled after the Sukhothai Historical Park, including the removal of settlements from these areas.

However, because of the Burmese ravages of 1767, what remains of Ayutthaya is in quite a poor condition, worsened by subsequent resettlements and new constructions during the last two hundred years.⁸³ For this reason, the nomination of Ayutthaya as World Heritage site makes the most of its role as a cosmopolitan economic centre as well as originator of modern Thai culture (*Silpakorn* 1991, 34:4). Yet, given the scantiness of its archaeological remnants, the image of Ayutthaya is essentially one passed

⁸³A fine reconstruction of Sanphet Prasat, the royal palace in the early Ayutthaya period, is in the "Ancient City," Samut Prakan. The palace, with a cruciform shape, was apparently built in 1448 by King Borom Trailokanat, the eighth monarch of Ayutthaya. The palace, whose architecture became typical of the Ayutthaya style, was where foreign dignitaries were granted audience. Of course, with bricks as the only remains, the replica has been essentially based on Thai and European accounts of the time, matched with contemporaneous artefacts.

on, through reports and, in particular, maps, by contemporary Western visitors, from the Dutch E. Kaempfer and Jeremias van Vliet to the French Simon de La Loubere. Besides, the criteria for its World Heritage nomination apparently avoid a thorny question which has for decades been at the center of Thai historical and political debate. The question whether the *sakdina* society of Ayutthaya was a feudal system based on slavery, whose power-relations survived almost unchanged in the new kingdom established in Bangkok fifteen years after its fall. And this would be one aspect of the heritage of Ayutthaya unquestionably hard to magnify.

In addition to the ruins scattered in the island area, in Ayutthaya there are two national museums: Chao Samphraya, which with 93,868 visitors (9,688 of whom were foreigners) in 1991 ranked as the fourth most visited museum in Thailand (Annual Report 1991:33);⁸⁴ and Chankesam, much less visited (12,594 visitors), but in itself a piece of national heritage. The original palace, destroyed in 1767, was the prince's residence built during the reign of King Maha Thammaracha for his son, the future King Naresuan, and subsequently used as the Front Palace. Mongkut rebuilt the palace, making it a residence for his visits to Ayutthaya. Within its walls there is a four-storeyed observatory restored by Mongkut according to the original foundations of the time of King Narai, and used by Rama IV for his hobby of astronomy. The exhibition housed in the wooden pavillion was initially established by a local prince in 1907 and then proclaimed a national museum in 1936 (Na Paknam 1985:144-46).

⁸⁴The construction of the museum, inaugurated by King Bhumibol in 1961, was financed through the sale of small Buddha images found during the excavations at Wat Ratchaburana. The museum itself appeared later to have been erected on top of an archaeological site (Peerapun 1991:115).

Almost opposite to the Chao Samphraya National Museum, stands an impressive white building fronted by a large fountain and "designed in a modern Thai architectural style emphasising functional aspects of buildings situated in a hot and humid environment."⁸⁵ The building houses the Ayutthaya Historical Study Centre inaugurated in August 1990 by Princess Sirindhorn, and built with considerable Japanese financial support (990 million Yen), but with a "philosophy" mainly born out of Bangkok-based academics, including the archaeologist Srisakara Vallibothama and the economic historian Chatthip Nartsupha. The project was originally intended as a museum to be built on the area occupied by the Japanese settlement at the time of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. In this site, donated to the Thai government by the Thai-Japanese Association, stands today what is the annex building, a sort of mausoleum located in a pleasant park along the bank of the Pasak River. The enlargement of the original project has led instead to the realisation of the main building on Ayutthaya isle, where a permanent exhibition is on display.

This exhibition is indeed somewhat of a novelty by the old-fashioned standards of Thai museums. It is organised in four sections, each presenting a perspective on the Ayutthaya Kingdom: Ayutthaya as a capital, as a port city, as a centralised state, as a village community. Thanks to technological devices such as video-monitors, sound effects, interactive maps, and more traditional displays such as dioramas, scale-models, and replicas of royal and religious paraphernalia, the museum aims to explain rather than impress, as the organisers, with a hint of polemics, point out:

⁸⁵This and the following quotation are taken from the Ayutthaya Historical Study Centre brochure.

The Museum of the Ayutthaya Historical Centre is different from other museums in Thailand by virtue of its special features. It does not focus on collecting and arranging displays of priceless antiques such as Buddha images, pottery, and jewelry, leaving visitors to imagine for themselves what the social and cultural life of the Ayutthaya Kingdom was like from looking at these valuable objects displayed without any coherent theme.

What has been the response to the Ayutthaya Historical Centre during its first calendar year of activity? A parallel with the visitor figures for the national museums is telling: although the Centre as a private institution charges far more than public museums,⁸⁶ with a total of 174,325 visitors (96,981 students; 70,626 adults; 6,718 foreigners),⁸⁷ it has been outclassed in 1991 only by the National Museum of Phra Nakhonkhiri (301,334 visitors), and that of Bangkok (210,573 visitors)⁸⁸ (National Museums Division 1991:33). But if we look only at the student figures, then the Ayutthaya Centre has received more students than *any* other national museum. Particularly striking, then, is the parallel with the visitor attendance at the two national museums in Ayutthaya: the attendance at the Ayutthaya Centre is alone 70% larger than the sum of these two. These figures suggest that the time has come to tell young Thais their own past in a more appealing way.

Part of the excursion to Ayutthaya is, for many tourists, the visit to the Summer Palace of Bang Pa-in, a short trip from the old capital, whether by road, railway, or boat descending the Chaophraya. The palace is strongly associated with Rama V, although it was originally built by King Phasatthong, and used thereafter as country residence of the Ayutthayan kings. Abandoned after the fall of the city, the residence was discovered and

⁸⁶The entrance-fee to the Ayutthaya Historical Study Centre are: 20 Baht for Thai adults; 5 Baht for single students and school-groups free of charge; 100 Baht for foreign adults; 50 Baht for foreign students.

⁸⁷Statistics collected at the Ayutthaya Historical Study Centre, December 1992.

⁸⁸These last figures include also the two non-paying categories of monks and official guests.

renovated by King Mongkut. Chulalongkorn built various pavillions there in the Thai, Chinese, Victorian, Renaissance and Classical styles between 1872 and 1876 (these buildings are not open to the visitors). Bang Pa-in is a perfect example of the royal patrimony that has come to be identified with the national heritage. The SPAFA report (1987:43) describes Bang Pa-in as "one of the most significant palaces in Thailand due to its historical background as well as being a national symbol." Bang Pa-in is very popular with both Thais (pupils are typical patrons here, too) and foreigners for its daintiness, the original coexistence of several "exotic" architectures amidst luxuriant gardens, a nostalgic grandeur that makes this place the Versailles of Thailand. Unlike museums and historical parks managed by the FAD, the palace is under the management of the Bureau of the Royal House^{hold}. To add an odd touch, just on the opposite bank of the Chaophraya bordering the Palace area, there is Wat Nivet, built by Chulalongkorn between 1876 and 1878 in the shape of a neo-Gothic church for the Thammayut sect, the reformed Buddhist order established by his father, Mongkut.

With almost half a million visitors each per year, Sukhothai and Ayutthaya are the most popular destinations of Thais and foreigners interested in the art and history of the country. As monuments of national pride, as material evidence of Thailand's past and of its place amongst the great world civilisations, and as big tourist attractions, the ruins of these two cities are the most articulated examples of what I have called *topoi*, i.e., heritage sites whose emblematic function in the mythology of the state overwhelms their historical and artistic value, hindering the possibility of a critical approach. It is sufficient, in this regard, to imagine what ~~would be~~ of Thai national history as it is generally taught would be, without the centrality ascribed to Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, which were, in truth, two localised kingdoms whose suzerainty never extended to the area covered by

the present nation-state. This section has suggested how they have become loci of the nationalist narrative, showing also that their remains had been salvaged randomly since the 1950s, and only since the late 1970s systematically under the historical parks' project. Thus, for a long time the ruins of the deserted *wat* of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya had been meaningful to local people only as religious, and by no means nationalist, icons. Their Buddhist statuary used to belong to the magical realm of popular belief. In order to serve the secular religion of nationalism, these so empowered Buddha images have now been turned into museum pieces, and their worshippers from pilgrims into mundane sightseers.

4.3 Symbols of Legitimacy in Thai Urban Space

Contrary to archaeological parks, where "museumified" monuments are isolated in a sanitised environment, historic cities offer the clearest example of heritage transformation through time. There, surviving architecture from the past tends to acquire new functions and meanings according to a changing urban space accomodating new economic, aesthetic and ideological instances. The form of a city is thus rarely definitive but a work-in-progress, the transitory result of continuous alterations. Particularly in capital-cities, where political power needs to manifestly address and be addressed, construction and reworking of monumental and historic buildings is a primary vehicle of propaganda. This section approaches Bangkok from this point of view. Admittedly, it may appear ludicrous to argue about Bangkok's symbolism when the consequences of three decades of uncontrolled urbanisation have now reached the verge of social breakdown, a risk that even the monarchy does not underestimate.⁸⁹

Yet, even a glimpse at Bangkok's symbolically significant urban areas will reveal something about the nature of the Thai polity.

On the 21st of April 2525 of the Buddhist Era (1982), Bangkok celebrated the bicentennial of the Chakri monarchy and of its own foundation. A performance of 2,525 *lakhon* dancers was held under a full moon in the Grand Palace to open the celebrations. The organising committee, with the then prime minister Prem Tinsulanond as chairman, selected fifty-eight buildings and monuments to represent the heritage of the historical period started in 1782, the Ratanakosin Era (FAD 1982).⁹⁰ More than 1,000 million Baht were spent in improvement and restoration projects (Meyer 1988:92). Some 2,000 artisans worked exclusively at the royal complex of the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Keo, with a budget of US\$ 8 million (Buckley 1992:108). Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn herself was the president of the committee for the restoration of the royal wat, partly financed through a public donation. A monument with the emblems of the last four Chakri kings was placed in the precinct of the temple in correspondence with those of the first three Chakri, of Rama IV, and of Rama V. Another US\$ 3.5 million were spent to renovate fifty-one royal barges (dry-docked since 1967) which were then paraded in a ceremonial cruise along the river Chaophraya (Buckley 1992: 121). The occupancy rate in first class hotels catering to foreigners did not rise during this period but the smaller hotels were fully booked because of the many Thais who went to Bangkok to be present at the celebrations (Meyer 1988:92). The 1982 royal apotheosis exemplifies the applicability of Geertz's concept of the theater-

⁸⁹Recently, Queen Sirikit made a public appeal to solve the problem of endless Bangkok's traffic jam. See *Bangkok Post*, August 12,1993.

⁹⁰The fifty-eight sites were grouped in five headings: seven royal and princely palaces; twenty-one wats; fourteen monuments, including the Democracy Monument; fourteen old buildings, including the Fine Arts Department and Vajirayan Library; three characteristic sites, namely, the City Pillar, Sanam Luang, and Sanam Chai.

state within the context of the contemporary Southeast Asian nation-state, where the externalisation of power constitutes the very essence of its legitimacy, and the condition of its centrality in the sociocultural system.

The persistence of the Indo-Buddhist conception of kingship as source of legitimacy is demonstrated by the enduring sacredness attached to the royal palace, which in Buddhist Theravada polities such as Thailand replaces Mount Meru as the cosmological center of the universe (Tambiah 1976:97). The architectural complex of the Grand Palace and the adjacent Wat Phra Keo is arguably the most visited among the national monuments. Yet a discrepancy exists in the way Thais, who enter it free, and foreigners, who pay a 100 Baht entrance-fee, approach the royal compound. While foreigners wonder around as tourists, the visit of Thai people "constitute a form of pilgrimage, during which obeisance is made to the politico-religious symbols of the realm" (Cohen 1992:40). Cohen argues that a normative quest for merit instead of a request for assistance, the non-accessibility of the Buddha image, and the absence of a popular festival adjoining the temple mark the difference between the worship of the Emerald Buddha and that of the other most venerated Buddha images of the country, as well as Wat Phra Keo's status as the sole formal politico-religious center in present-day Thailand.

The establishment of the Grand Palace-Wat Phra Keo as the formal politico-religious center of the Thai polity dates back to the very moment of the foundation of Bangkok. Because of its nature as a planned city, Bangkok presented until the 1860s a concentric arrangement of urban space underlining its role as capital. An inner city ring, containing the royal citadel and the city pillar, was separated by a wall and a canal (Klong Lot) from an outer city ring; this one enclosed through the city walls and a moat

(Klong Ongang) an urban area of 3,5 square-km. (Korff 1986:21-22). This layout was drawn in close resemblance to the plan of Ayutthaya (Wenk 1968: Chap. 2). Buildings like the throne hall (Dusit Maha Prasat), the royal wat (Wat Phra Keo), the palace of the second king, corresponded closely to Samphet Prasat, Wat Phra Si Sanphet, and Chankasem Palace respectively in the old capital. Only in 1786, when the cosmological as well as the political orders were reestablished in and around Bangkok, was Rama I's coronation performed according to Brahmanic ritual, and the city officially named as *Krungthep Mahanakhon Bovorn Ratanakosin*, etc.⁹¹ Town-planning was thus a major vehicle to symbolise the continuity between the new and the old capitals and, hence, between the Ayutthaya-centered and the Bangkok-centered kingdoms, despite their evident differences. Ironically, it might be said that, at the time of its foundation, Bangkok looked more like a historical park than a new city.

Between the 1860s and the 1950s, Bangkok's growth did not follow a concentric pattern, but was concentrated southeast of Ratanakosin (the commercial area), and the northeast (the new administrative and royal buildings). This phase of urbanisation reflected the transition from the *sakdina* system to capitalist penetration (Korff 1986:33-77). New Road (Charoen Krung), started by King Mongkut in 1862 to connect the Western settlement with the Chinese quarter and the royal palace, and Ratchadamnoen Avenue, built by Chulalongkorn at the end of the century to link the Grand Palace with his new residence in the Dusit area, typify the lines along which the pattern of Bangkok's urban development occurred. By the end of the last century "a rough 'quartering' had become apparent:

⁹¹The name of the city was slightly altered during the reign of Rama IV, when the city's horoscope was reformulated in order to coincide with the personal horoscope of Mongkut. A new city-pillar was also celebrate this second "baptism" of the capital (Cook 1992).

the port area along the southern half of New Road . . . the consular and European residential area . . . the 'market' area of Sampeng . . . the administrative, religious and cultural focus of Thailand – the Grand Palace" (Sternstein 1966:68-69). In effect, albeit committed to the development of the capital, Mongkut and his successor wished to leave their mark on the Grand Palace, which was conspicuously enriched during the Fourth and Fifth reigns. After the general renovations by Rama III, Mongkut added several buildings, including a pavillion, Amphonphimok, in the original Dusit Hall group. Chulalongkorn built the Chakri Maha Prasat, begun in 1876 and completed in 1882 for the Chakri centenary, and characterised by the hybrid of a European-style structure and a Thai roof (Dhaninivat 1990:4-17). Also substantially altered was the aspect of Wat Phra Keo, particularly by Mongkut; the temple was again totally restored for Bangkok's centenary (Subhadradis n.d.: 26-31).

Rama V's abolition of the institution of the second king led in 1887 to the utilisation of three halls of the Front Palace for a public exhibit that became the core of the National Museum in its present location at Na Phra That Road. The museum, then open twice a week, was given the status of directorate in 1889 under the Department of Education (replaced by a ministry in 1892). The creation of the first public "museum" (the English word used to name the new institution) dates however back to 1874, when Chulalongkorn opened to visitors Mongkut's private collection in the Grand Palace (Dhanit 1990:3). The National Museum of Bangkok ("national" was added in 1933 when Wichit-directed FAD took over control of it) includes at the present three galleries: the Thai history gallery, housed in one of the original buildings; the art and archaeological collections, housed respectively in the new southern and northern wings opened in 1965. Besides, there are other buildings belonging to the original Palace of

the Front, such as that exhibiting minor arts, the Buddhaisawan Chapel, and the Mangkhalaphisek Pavillion.

During the fifth reign monument construction first moved outside the ring of Ratanakosin. In 1897 King Chulalongkorn visited some European capitals including Paris, whose topography had been recently refashioned with large boulevards. It is plausible to assume that the visit gave Rama V the idea for the realisation of a complex urban space, equally significant at the practical and symbolic levels, to project internationally the image of Bangkok as a capital-city in line with European standards and adequately representing Siam, one of the few sovereign states in Asia. The result was the northern Dusit district,⁹² consisting of the Suan Dusit residence, Wat Benchamabophit (the Marble Temple), and Anantasamakhon Throne Hall. The significance of this building was both in its imposing dimensions and in its location at the end of the grand Ratchadamnoen Avenue, Bangkok's Champs-Élysées, where the Siamese élite had made a show of its modernity in motorcar parades since the later years of the fifth reign (Smithies 1986:40). However, the throne hall was completed only after King Chulalongkorn's death, and because of the 1932 coup, it never acquired a firm association with the monarchy. The building, where on the 10th of December 1932 King Prajadhipok promulgated the first constitution of the country beginning a new era, became the seat of the national assembly but with feeble symbolic power; another assembly hall was opened in 1974 whilst the old one is usually closed to the visitors. Because of the delay in the completion of the throne hall, to celebrate his forty years of reign in 1908 Rama V unveiled the 11th of November his

⁹²The name of the district comes from Wat Dusit, built by Rama I on the spot where Chulalongkorn erected in 1899 Wat Benchamabophit, which in fact is properly named Wat Benchamabophit Dusitwanaram.

equestrian statue facing that building, and which is said to have had an extraordinary impact on the population (Apinan 1992:16).⁹³

Chulalongkorn's Suan Dusit residence is another major piece of national heritage recently restored to splendour thanks to the sponsorship of Queen Sirikit. The highlight of the residence is the 31-room teakwood Vimanmek Mansion, transported there in 1901 from its original location at Koh Si Chang, and inhabited by Rama V until 1907, when he moved to a European-style house (Smithies 1986:20). The restoration, conducted between 1982 and 1985, transformed Vimanmek and the other four buildings of the Dusit compound into a nostalgic yet impressive museum about the fifth reign and the Chakri House as pillar of the nation. Vimanmek offers to its predominantly Thai visitors a full insight, bathroom included, into the daily life of the royal family at the beginning of this century, amidst the furniture and memorabilia of the king and his relatives, which demonstrate almost an obsession with Victorian taste. And indeed, the exhibit leaves no doubt about the "modernity" of this Southeast Asian court, whose lifestyle and accoutrements – e.g., shower-head and electric light – were in no way inferior to that of its Western counterparts. On the contrary, it is true that few European monarchies could, at that moment of socialist frenzy, boast of the same admiration and love that the Thai population had, and still has, for Chulalongkorn. The identification of the Siamese with the Western royal élites is explicit in the exhibitions housed in the concrete buildings, with pictures of Rama V's European tours, paintings by the many European artists appointed to his court, and a

⁹³The place where the equestrian statue lies is the gathering point for the worshippers of Rama V, whose following has risen to the level of a real cult in present-day Thailand. See Nithi (1993).

collection of gifts presented to the kings of Thailand by foreign dignitaries in the period from the fifth to the present reigns.

The construction of monuments for Bangkok's 150th anniversary was, in a time of economic crisis and social discontent, far less lavish than in the past. One of the main works commissioned for the occasion was a bronze statue of Rama I –realised, after a design of Prince Naris, by the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci ⁹⁴ – to be placed at the Pramane Ground. King Prajadipok eventually decided to place it at the foot of the Memorial Bridge, the first spanning the Chaophraya, inaugurated on the 6th of April 1932 (Apinan 1992:25). The spot, at the junction of Thonburi and Bangkok, exalted the historical significance of the huge statue of Phra Phuttayotfa, apparently disavowing his own prophecy of the hundred and fifty years of limited longevity of the Chakri dynasty. Two months later, however, the monarchy was toppled, and in 1939 Feroci was realising in typical Fascist style the bas-reliefs for the Democracy Monument, designed by Mew Aphaiwong and commissioned by Phibun to celebrate in 1940 the eighth year of the constitution.⁹⁵ Positioned in the middle of Ratchadamnoen Klang, the monument relies on heavy symbolism.⁹⁶ Apinan (1992:41)

⁹⁴Feroci was borne in Florence in 1892. He was appointed a sculptor of the Fine Arts Department in 1924, and was later a founder of the School of Fine Arts, Silpakorn University and Silpa Sueksa School of Art. In this role, Feroci, who in the 1940s took the name of Silpa Bhirasri and Thai citizenship, was the main promoter of modernism in Thai plastic and figurative arts, fostered through an annual National Exhibition established by Feroci himself. Feroci was first professor and then dean of Silpakorn University. He died in Bangkok in 1962.

⁹⁵Reynolds (1992a:319) refers to a metal plate, secured into the roadway facing Rama V's equestrian statue, carrying the text: "On this spot, at dawn on 24 June 1932, the People's Party created the constitution for the benefit of the nation." The plate – removed, according to a rumour, during the Sarit era – is, for Reynolds, "probably unknown to most Bangkok residents."

⁹⁶The four visual "slices" created by the four wings may signify either the pillars of king, religion, nation, constitution, or the army, navy, airforce, police; height and radius of the monument each measures 24 meters, the date (24th of June) of the coup; the 3 meter high bowl sustaining the constitution, refer to the third month (June) of the traditional Thai calendar;

mentions that the monument's propagandistic intent was largely misinterpreted, with the soldiers rushing with rifles seen as defenders of the monarchy instead of the constitution. And it certainly was for its name, rather than for its iconology, that the Democracy Monument gained a great popularity in the period 1973-76, when its image was used by the progressives as a political emblem. Another major piece of Phibun's architectural propaganda, the Victory Monument, inaugurated on Constitution Day, the 24th of June 1941, and furnished with Feroci's martial sculptures, had a similar fate: its position in the urban context was badly chosen, rendering its meaning obscure (Apinan 1992:46).⁹⁷

It is remarkable, however, that apart from the construction of these isolated monuments, not even during the anti-royalist Phibun regimes was there any attempt at reformulating Bangkok's urban ideology.⁹⁸ Phibun, who was an admirer of Mussolini, certainly did not try to emulate his urban policy, which during the 1920s-30s brutally altered Rome's historic areas in order to recover archaeological remains useful to delineate the continuity between the Roman Empire and Fascist Italy. Nor, obviously, was Bangkok affected by the flourishing of official architecture and monuments to independence that reshaped the aspect of several Asian capitals at the end of the period of colonialist domination. The military-bureaucratic élite that has ruled Thailand since 1932 has showed a remarkable lack of concern – whether because of its cultural limits, disinterest, or satisfaction with the

the 75 cannons buried around the monuments symbolise the year 2475 of the Buddhist Era, i.e., 1932 A.D.

⁹⁷The monument was intended as a celebration of the short war fought in 1940 against France along the Indochinese border, and which yielded back to Thailand the former Siamese provinces of Siemraep and Battambang (cf. above, footnote 74).

⁹⁸Keyes (1987:70) mentions the fact that Phibun fostered the plan for a new capital in the central part of northern Thailand, at Phetchabun. The plan caused a negative reaction, and when in 1944 the parliament voted against the Phetchabun scheme, Phibun resigned from his Prime Ministership.

monarchy's heritage – for conceiving a symbolic urban space balancing that of the royal city. On the other hand, Bangkok has had since the mid 1950s a monstrous expansion, unplanned and ubiquitous and with a rapid population and geographical growth, resulting from its integration into the networks of multinational capital (Korff 1986:76).

In conclusion, from the perspective of its symbolic significance, Bangkok has remained the capital of the Chakri and, *as such*, the capital of Thailand. Its core, Ratanakosin, today officially nominated a historic area, unquestionably maintains its character as the heart of the city and of the whole nation, as is shown by its thick urban fabric which groups a majority of the most significant buildings and institutions of the country: the National Museum, Thammasat and Silpakorn Universities, Wat Mahathat, the offices of the FAD, the Ministries of Defense and of Foreign Affairs, Wat Pho, the city's foundation stone (Lak Muang) and, naturally, Wat Phra Keo and the Grand Palace. Here it is still possible to be spectator to offerings of *likhai* dancing to the spirit housed in the city-pillar's shrine, Brahmanic ceremonies of ploughing and cremation staged at Sanam Luang, and sprinkling of lustral water upon the thousand worshippers who attend the ritual of the seasonal changing of the robe of the Emerald Buddha performed by the King. And it is here that Bangkok's population, made up of people coming from all over the country, pays its tribute to the collective symbols, traditions and myths of the nation, testifying to its identification with, and sense of belonging to, the same community.

5. Conclusion: Restoring Heritage, Edifying Myth

Culture (*watanatham*) and heritage (*moradok*) are words which have definitely acquired great currency in Thailand during the past fifteen years or so. Part of this popularity is certainly due to the resiliency of these two words, a resiliency which, in Thailand as everywhere else, turns out to be very useful for dignifying the most disparate features. Still, this development in the language signals also a specific phenomenon in Thai society: the appearance of a generalised consciousness of national heritage, which is now inculcated even in the youngest students. Certainly, education about one's cultural patrimony is a principle which can hardly be questioned. However, the magnitude of the national mobilisation around the theme of cultural heritage in Thailand suggested a critical scrutiny.

This study has looked at the particular case of Thai heritage through a wider critical lens which has magnified that aspect of every cultural heritage usually concealed by its enshrinement amongst the most valued assets of a country and ultimately, by virtue of the concept of "world heritage," of the whole of mankind. This concealed aspect is the political relevance of the cultural heritage of a nation, and its specific association with the foundation myths legitimising every polity. The contents of political myths are presented, just like those of the myths studied by anthropologists and classicists, as an indisputable tradition which asserts reliability and commands respect. Their characteristic form is that of the nationalist narrative, a mythology consisting of selected historical tales relating to a

heroic past, which comes to be perceived by the national community as its collective past.

Despite these premises, a political myth can be challenged and, eventually, replaced. The occasion for this is a crisis of legitimacy of the political order or, in Gramscian terms, a crisis of hegemony of the ruling bloc. The resolution of a legitimacy crisis achieved through the establishment of a new political system necessarily brings about the replacement of the foundation myth of the obsolete polity with a myth legitimising the new order. The solution of the crisis of legitimacy which occurred in Thailand in the early 1970s was not, however, a change in the political set-up, but the reimposition of the *ancien régime*. Such a political restoration required nonetheless a regeneration of the foundation myth of the polity, a "face-lift" enabling that myth to be still significant after the rejection by a part of the Thai population of the symbols and the criteria of legitimation of the military-bureaucratic state-system.

Although violent repression and coercion – which the Thai ruling élite has never hesitated to use ruthlessly to defend its own position – can result in apparent order, even the generals who were once more in power from 1977 understood that, in order to achieve the more substantial political pacification required by the gravity of that crisis, a new consensus was necessary. And there is no stronger consensus than that premised upon a community of history and destiny which identifies people as members of the same polity and makes them participants in the myth of its foundation. Consequently, Thai state cultural policy implemented thereafter has fostered by every means the individual's identification with the nation, its glorious past and its promising future. Now, whilst no time-machine has yet been

invented to materialise a peoples' future in front of them, heritage does offer this possibility with regard to the past.

The salvaging of ruins which, with few exceptions, had been left for centuries at the mercy of the passing of time, has become in the second half of the 1970s the focus of government policy, international sponsorship, and national pride. The bureaucratisation of heritage, through the registration of ancient cities as national properties, has been the first step towards this aim. The implementation of effective restoration and conservation plans, which had previously proven to be problematic, has naturally been the essential pillar of the new heritage policy, as confirmed by the importance attached to the "historical parks" projects. In this regard, this essay has shown the extent to which, for better or for worse, the Fine Arts Department has influenced the final outcome. The selection of which heritage to recuperate and give centrality to at the national level has underpinned the whole operation. The restoration of national heritage has thus been perhaps the least immediately evident amongst the several forms taken by nationalist rhetoric in the late 1970s and 1980s to propagate the myth which formed the ideological basis for another fifteen years of conservative order, until the return of the Thai people to the front-stage of politics with the demonstrations of April-May 1992.

As an exercise in "de-mythification," I have tried to gloss the sub-text of the nationalist narrative told by means of those heritage sites which I have defined as *topoi*, monuments chosen to symbolise the stages of development of the Thai nation-state according to the official historical perspective. It will probably be clear to the reader that this exercise has focused almost exclusively on the implications of the "visual transmission" of nationalist discourse through heritage, while neglecting the aspects, and

the possible consequences, of the "reception" and decodification of its messages. However, the data and inferences presented allow us to conclude that, at least in quantitative terms, heritage is an important medium to shape knowledge and ideas about the past in contemporary Thai society.

Because of the institutionalisation of Thai national heritage as the response of the dominant élite to the threat to its hegemony, the lack of a monument or memorial gravestone to honour the martyrs of October 1973 and October 1976, and those so rapidly forgotten of May 1992, is not surprising. I had looked in vain for any possible evidence for such a monument, or at least a project for it, when finally, in an issue of the *Bangkok Post* about the twentieth anniversary of the 1973 student uprising, I read a revealing story written by a reporter about a monument which was never built (McDonnell 1993). After the uprising of October 1973, the National Student Council of Thailand, which had been the main promoter of the popular protest, collected four million Baht for the construction of a monument commemorating the victims of the riot. The Sanya government (1973-74) promised to pay half the cost, and a piece of land on the corner of Ratchadamnoen Avenue and Tanao Road, with the remains of a government building burned down during the demonstrations, was set aside for that aim. After the coup of October 6, 1976, eight million Baht were reportedly confiscated from the student organisations. In 1989, a temporary monument was erected on the spot originally reserved to build the memorial and which is now occupied by lottery kiosks. The two-meter high monument, made of cement and portraying five youths intertwined around a flag, was realised by the artist as an unfinished piece of work to remind the people of the occultation of the money they donated to build a real monument.

It is thus that the young Thais killed in their homecountry in the name of national security do not yet have a place bearing witness to their sacrifice, where the loss of their lives can be publicly honoured and admired as the highest example of true patriotism. Yet the absence of such a monument is as eloquent as a presence. It clearly shows how much Thai civil society has still to endure in order to transform the painful memory of those events into the foundation myth of a new, more legitimate, political order, in which progressive thought and quest for change can be internalised as part of the collective civic patrimony. At seminars and conferences about the future directions in Thai politics, there are always some speakers asserting the irreversibility of the process of democratisation, and others warning about the threat of the resurgence of authoritarianism. Perhaps the day that the monument to the victims of repression is built will be the day the Gordian knot of Thai politics will have been undone forever.

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