The Making of the Siamese Monarchy's
Modern Public Image

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This thesis is my own original work. No part of this thesis has been previously included in a thesis, dissertation, or report submitted to this or any other institution for a diploma or other qualification.

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Abstract

Studies of King Chulalongkorn’s reign (1868-1910) have been essentially concerned with the process of political and institutional change that characterized the period, the so-called Chakri Reformation. However, one of the most intriguing aspects of this period was the transformation of the public image of the Siamese monarchy as this acquired visibility in the late nineteenth-century global arena.

In this study I examine selected social practices, cultural artefacts, and public ceremonies as the means which enabled the ruling elite of Siam to claim the status of civilized individuals and instigators of progress, a claim which had bearing on their hold on power. The aim of the present study is two-fold. First, to provide a perspective on Siamese modernization unlike that of the existing political, institutional, and economic histories of the period. Second, to highlight similarities and differences with the Western experience of modernity, for which the last quarter of the nineteenth century represented a critical stage.
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Introduction

In 1996 King Bhumibol celebrated his golden jubilee: fifty years of reign that have made him the longest-reigning monarch gracing a throne today. On that occasion he received a visit by Queen Elizabeth II, whose own reign began in 1953. This exchange of royal courtesy had a notable precedent in the visit that, ninety-nine years earlier, King Chulalongkorn had paid to Queen Victoria a couple of months after her diamond jubilee was celebrated in the streets of London. The jubilee set a record of sixty years of reign which became a touchstone for fellow monarchs -- including, as we shall see, Chulalongkorn himself. A reception was held for the King of Siam in Osborne House’s Indian Room on 4 August 1897 at which were present, along with Queen Victoria, the Prince and Princess of Wales (the future Edward VII and Queen Alexandra), Prince Charles of Denmark, and the king of Belgium, Leopold.¹

It is always amusing to pause and ponder on the ironic implications of history’s unfolding. Commenting on the royal meeting that took place in Bangkok in October 1996 some opined that, between these two remnants of a bygone era, the Thai monarchy today enjoys by far the preferable position by virtue of deeply rooted taboos and a legal code that still makes lése-majesté a crime.² In announcing King Chulalongkorn’s visit in 1897, however, the British Press Association had condescendingly pointed out that “the King of Siam is coming to Britain not on a ordinary state visit ... but with a view of educating himself in the matters of British customs and resources”.³ In fact, the king’s visit to England was but one stage of a journey throughout most of Europe and Russia whose centenary has just been celebrated as Thailand’s entry into the modern world.⁴

¹ Bangkok Times, 6 September 1897.


³ Quoted in the Bangkok Times, 11 September 1897.

⁴ Sinlapa watthanatham (one of Thailand’s oldest and most popular monthly magazines on history and culture) has been running a series of articles for the centenary of Chulalongkorn’s 1897 tour; see also the monographic issue of the Thai Fine Arts Department’s magazine, Sinlapakorn 40, 2 (1997).
Whether 1897 really was such a turning point is arguable, but it is unquestionable that Chulalongkorn’s first European tour represented a crucial test for the process which provides the subject of this thesis: the reconfiguration of the public image of the Siamese monarchy as a modern, enlightened institution in the fifth reign, particularly its latter half. The transformation affected courtly etiquette and forms of patronage; domestic and monumental architecture; and state pageantry. This is not to say that every aspect of court life and state ceremonial were transformed. Polygamy, to mention an “exotic” institution par excellence, was officially retained until the 1910s, while the performance of Brahmanic rituals continued throughout the period of the absolute monarchy. This study, however, is concerned only with innovations which were modelled on Western usage and can be said to have been purposefully introduced by the Siamese ruling elite to raise their status vis-à-vis their European counterparts and thus assert their leadership in the face of colonialist encroachment.

As C. J. Reynolds has pointed out, a concern with mastering modernity runs through the past one and a half centuries of Thailand’s history. In this regard, it is tempting to argue that the import and promotion of selected features of modern Western culture -- from geography to photography, from realist art styles to the Grand Tour -- by kings such as Mongkut (1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) made the dynasty a mediator of modernity, intimately associating the two and providing the former with a lasting aura of authority. The extraordinary intellectual ability of these sovereigns to appropriate whatever features of the Western “other” they saw as being organic to their political project is evidence of an agency that, independently from what judgement is passed on the nature of that project, runs counter to the idea of the Orient as the inert object of Western colonial domination and ideological representation. Nor should it come as a surprise that the modernizing thrust of the fourth and fifth reigns is seen today by some Thai intellectuals as an anticipation of what would appear a

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6 Craig J. Reynolds, “Thailand”, in Anthony Milner and Mary Quilty (eds), Australia in Asia: Communities of Thought (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1996), pp. 103-4.
quintessentially late twentieth-century phenomenon, globalization. A hint at the critical issue of the emergence of a modern public image of the monarchy can be found in F. W. Riggs’ thirty year-old study on the modernization of the Thai bureaucracy. Riggs argued that the reforms implemented in the fourth and fifth reigns, “although directed primarily toward transformations in the total polity, indirectly also changed the character and the public image of the monarchy itself”. Yet, despite their immediate visibility as signifiers of both royal authority and -- in the specific context of later nineteenth-century Siam -- “civilization”, the social practices and cultural artefacts that collectively made up the monarchy’s public image have been largely neglected by scholars. Significantly, such a lack of attention is contrasted by the popularity of the turn-of-the-century Bangkok court society as a subject of non-academic history in Thailand today -- a phenomenon well worth studying in itself and to which I shall return in the next section.

Thailand’s historiography has often been stigmatized as having long been dominated by a Bangkok-, royal-centred perspective. Despite, or perhaps because of this, in-depth studies on the role of the monarchy in the modern period are wanting, as Benedict Anderson lamented almost twenty years ago. This thesis is intended as a contribution in this sense but from a perspective unlike that of political, institutional, or economic history which have dominated the study of fourth and fifth-reign Siam. Instead, following the lead of the growing academic literature on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of power to be reviewed below, my thesis focuses on social practices, cultural artefacts, and public rites as the

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8 Fred W. Riggs, Thailand (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966), p. 93. See also Tambiah’s criticism of Riggs in his World Conqueror. Appendix to Ch. 11.

9 In the later nineteenth-century Euro-American world, the term “civilization” (“civilisation” in French, “civilizzazione” in Italian, “Zivilisation” in German) was used with virtually the same meaning as the term “modernization” which came into use in the post-War War II period. For the lexical fortune of “civilization” in later nineteenth-century Siam see Charnvit, “Siam/Civilization”, pp. 6-7.

means whereby the Siamese ruling elite laid claims about their status as civilized individuals and instigators of progress which had bearing on their hold on power. The overarching contention advanced here is that the reinvention of the monarchy’s public image by means of those practices, artefacts, and rites was as important as the politico-institutional reforms in boosting the international prestige of the dynasty and guaranteeing its survival in the high colonial age.

On this account, this thesis has three aims. First, to describe how an image of modern Siam first emerged in conjunction with the Chakri’s political project of maintenance of power. Second, to understand this process in relation to the global environment of the later nineteenth century so as to highlight both similarities and differences with that constellation of social and cultural trends which is emblematic of the Western experience of modernity. Third, to offer a case study in the adaptation of an exogenous symbolic idiom of authority to a context which has been often referred to as an ethnic and cultural “melting pot”. The rest of this introduction explores the historiographic and more general theoretical issues that underlie the subject of my thesis, and briefly outline its structure.

I

Although the chronological time-span of this study encompasses the fourth to the sixth reign (that is, the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century), its focus is really on the fifth reign. The contention that a coherently articulated modern public image of the Siamese monarchy emerged in this period is hardly controversial, and accords with the established historiographic view of the fifth reign as one of momentous change and of Chulalongkorn as a Prometheus-like figure who bestowed on Thai society the gift of modernity. This view owes a great deal to a number of studies, in most cases produced as Cornell University Ph.D. dissertations in the late 1960s to early 1970s, which documented in great detail the creation of administrative, educational, military and ecclesiastic institutions after the Western pattern -- the process that goes under the name of the Chakri Reformation.\textsuperscript{11}

The enduring value of these "classic" studies of reform, which predated similar undertakings by Thai scholars and still represent the standard reference works on the period, lies in their pioneering use of archival materials at a time when the holdings of Thailand's National Archives were not as orderly as they are today. At the same time, as products of the academic milieu of the 1960s, these works were underpinned by the modernization theory championed by social scientists such as Walter Rostow and Shmuel Eisenstadt; so that the creation of a centralized government, state institutions, and infrastructure in late nineteenth-century Siam was per se regarded as a proof of progress and, indeed, of nation-building. According to the leading scholar of the reformation, D. K. Wyatt, who first published these comments in a Thai journal some thirty years ago,

Being firmly committed personally to reform and vitally convinced of its importance to the survival of the nation, he [Chulalongkorn] had to battle and overcome the resistance to change and modernization. This was a slow, painful, and delicate task, to which few men would have been equal. He accomplished it with great skill, consummate patience, supreme determination, and a single-minded dedication to the ultimate good of the nation. 12

The ultimate effect of those institutional histories of the fifth reign was thus to restate an "institutional" version of the Chakri reformation which legitimated, via the authority of Western scholarship, the monarchy-as-national-elite paradigm of the royalist historiography. This was largely the single-handed enterprise of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943), one of Chulalongkorn's half-brothers, a key figure of the reformation as minister of the Interior for more than two decades, and also honoured as "the father of Thai history" due to his activities as author and editor of a large number of chronicles and biographies over some two

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(Ph.D. thesis: Cornell University, 1973); David K. Wyatt, The Politics of Reform in Thailand (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1969). To these works by historians one must add a later one by a political scientist: David B. J. Adams, "Monarchy and Political Change: Thailand under Chulalongkorn (1868-1885)" (Ph. D. thesis: University of Chicago, 1977). Adams' work, while not in the same league as those listed above in the digging of archival sources, presented a partly critical appraisal of the fifth reign. Significantly, Adams ends his analysis at 1885, the year the suggestion for the introduction of constitutional government advanced by some princes and nobles was firmly refused by King Chulalongkorn.

decades. In fact, both Prince Damrong’s chronicles of the fifth reign and his personal memoirs conspicuously covered only the first couple of years of his brother’s reign. In more than a chronological sense, Damrong’s enterprise was brought to completion by Western historians in the 1960s. The fact that their legitimation of the national/royalist historical narrative paralleled the renewed emphasis placed on Thailand’s modernization by authoritarian governments (and with considerable American economic aid) is an intriguing coincidence that, however, cannot be pursued here.

In a trenchant critique of the field of Thai studies which is now twenty years old but still makes for stimulating reading, Benedict Anderson questioned the set of “axioms” tied to the institutional view of the Chakri reformation which, in essence, maintained Siam as a unique case of indigenous modernization in the colonial context of Southeast Asia, cognate to the case of Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912). Through an alternative reading of the data put forward by studies of reform in the spheres of education, the army, and foreign relations, Anderson contended that the most appropriate parallel to Siam in the period 1870-1910 was not Meiji Japan but the indirectly ruled principalities of Southeast Asia, such as Johore or Kelantan: “... a semi-colonial, indirectly-ruled condition wholly incompatible with the ‘national’ -- not to say ‘nationalist’ -- terminology typically applied in most Western scholarship on Siam”. While largely targeting American scholarship, Anderson’s iconoclastic analysis clearly echoed the radical scholarship which had flourished in Thailand in the early 1970s and resurfaced at the end of the decade, when the repressive climate that followed the bloody events of October 1976 began to loosen up.

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14 Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 5 (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2522 [1979]); and Khwamsongcham (Bangkok: Phrae Phitthaya, 2514 [1971]).

15 Anderson, “Thai Studies”, p. 210. It must be said that Anderson’s review includes a substantial amount of counter-insurgency types of works which today are nothing more than an object of bibliographic curiosity.
Exhaustive overviews of Thai radical scholarship in English already exist, so I shall briefly dwell here only on the challenges radical historians have made to the tenets of the royalist historiography concerning the fifth reign. Marxist economic historians who in the late 1970s animated the Political Economy Group initially relied on the idea of the “Asiatic mode of production” to prove the feudal, parasitic nature of social and economic relations under the absolute monarchy and (influenced also by the theories of contemporary Latin American thinkers) denounced the neo-colonialist role of the dynasty as a guarantor of foreign economic interests in Siam. In this light the abolition of bondage, one of the cornerstones of the national myth of Chulalongkorn as civilizer, was shown to have been dictated by the need for increasing manpower for rice cultivation — the single export commodity on which the power structure of Siamese absolutism relied. Others have focused on infrastructure development, the railways in particular, arguing that their construction was undertaken to facilitate territorial control and social coercion particularly in the northeastern region where the implementation of the administrative reforms caused most resistance. More recently, a historian of the generation that came of age in 1976 has attacked another national myth, that of the territorial losses suffered by Siam at the hands of France and Britain in the 1890s. He provocatively contends that, in fact, Siam as a geo-political entity was actually engendered by colonialism as a result of the imposition of national-style borders in mainland Southeast Asia.

While proving the vitality of historical research in Thailand in recent years, these controversial arguments did not have any great impact outside academia.

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18 Chaiyan Rajchagool, The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy (Bangkok and Cheney: White Lotus, 1994).

It would be hypocritical on my part not to mention two factors which I think have significantly contributed to prevent a wider critical debate on these issues thus far: first, the remarkable degree of authority of the monarchy that makes scrutiny of any subject even remotely connected to this institution highly sensitive; second, the pervasive, albeit multi-faceted, Thai cultural nationalism, which nourishes a defensive attitude towards the questioning of national symbols, the monarchy above all, which are seen as embodying a distinctive Thai essence, particularly if coming from foreigners. To this, one can add the apparent obsession of Thai society with figures of founding fathers, from kings to art teachers, that makes any attempt at critical appraisal equivalent to a symbolic parricide.

An indication of the persisting royalist attitude of “mainstream” Thai studies is Apinan’s recent Modern Art in Thailand which, since its appearance, has become the standard reference work on nineteenth and twentieth-century art in Thailand. A synthesis of his exceptionally detailed doctoral dissertation (which has been very valuable for my own project), Apinan’s book differs from most art historical works by Thai scholars in that it approaches the subject with an eye to the socio-political context in which art forms developed. And yet, while hailing Chulalongkorn as “the modern monarch and patron of the arts” who paved the way for Thai modern art by engaging Europeans to work in Siam, the author avoids the issue of the politics of royal patronage in the fifth reign and how this affected subsequent developments. So what emerges is, as far as the role of the monarch is concerned, once again closer to hagiography than critical history.

A somewhat different subject is the redefinition that the collectively-held image of Rama V as father of the nation has undergone since the early 1990s. Although an analysis of contemporary perceptions of Chulalongkorn’s reign lies outside the historical scope of this thesis, some passing observations are in order. On the “irrational” side there is the cult of the king’s spirit, whose followers’ focal point is his equestrian statue -- a phenomenon that seems designed to fuel research

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by social scientists seeking to disentangle the contradictions of Asian modernity. On the "secular" side there is the celebration by Thailand's culture industry of the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the modernizing royalty, from food to housing to leisure travel, as a model for today's affluent urbanite in quest of material sophistication and social distinction. As the first Thai to have lived in a suburban villa, drunk European wine, spent holidays abroad and owned automobiles, Chulalongkorn clearly has a special appeal for the modern Thai consumer. Thus, while on the one hand the historicity of Rama V is replaced by a spiritual entity, on the other his official profile as a civilizer is debased to the extremely mundane as a result of consumerism's de-sacralizing attitude.

Worthy of note in this regard is the widespread interest for non-academic history, in the popular format of cheap, illustrated books (generally costing between 60 and 120 Baht), and for culture in general. In accounting for the grip the fifth reign holds on the Thai collective consciousness it is also important to consider the existence of a great number of old photographs which facilitate a visual memory of this period (Chulalongkorn himself was, like the present king, an enthusiastic hobby photographer). Whether looked at as historical documents or "Chulalongkorniana", these photographs are arguably crucial to the collective imagination of the fifth reign as the cradle of Thai modernity in accordance with the widespread belief whereby "a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images", as Susan Sontag put it.

Falling prey to the seductions of nostalgia is a danger that the historian studying the fifth reign is thus especially likely to face. This is particularly the case

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22 See Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Latthi phiti sadet pho ro 5 [The Rama V's cult] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2536 [1993], 2nd ed.).

23 See Phisanu Chanwithan, "Wai khun to sewey ratchakan thi 5" [Wine on Rama V's table], Sinlapa watthanatham 17,1 (2536 [1993]): 104-15, which is the issue's cover story. For another example of the middle-class celebration of fifth-reign material culture see, Thongthon Chansangsu, Khong suay khong di khrang phaendin phraputtha chaoluang [Splendid and precious objects of King Chulalongkorn's reign] (Bangkok: Akson Samphan, 2531 [1988]).

24 See Anake Nawigamune, Pramwan phap phrapiya maharat/Chulalongkorn the Great (Bangkok: Sangdaet, 2532 [1989]); and Samut phap ratchakan thi 5/A Fictorial Record of the Fifth Reign (Bangkok: River Books, 1992). These two books, both with captions in Thai and English, are the best collections of fifth-reign photographs published so far by Thailand's burgeoning "Rama V industry".

with the "improved version of the past" conjured up by many of Thailand's heritage displays. While visiting the teak palace Chulalongkorn had built in Bangkok, Wimanmek, one is intrigued by its display of Victoriana and up-to-date (for the period) accoutrements celebrating the privilege of turn-of-the-century courtly life. Incidentally, Wimanmek was saved from rotting and lavishly restored for the Chakri bicentenary in 1982, which set in motion a crescendo of monarchical celebrations punctuated by the Year of the Longest Reign in 1988 and culminating in King Bhumibhol's Golden Jubilee in 1996. Although the commodification of history for the consumption of a well-off but culturally displaced middle class is a phenomenon common to many of Asia's industrializing countries, one must be aware that in Thailand it first manifested itself as part of an ideological campaign aimed at reinforcing officially-endorsed definitions of culture and identity at a time of dramatic divisions in society.

In the end, it is clear that an understanding of what is meant by modernity in Thailand today cannot sidestep a (re)appraisal of the historical role of the monarchy as an agent of modernization. As argued above, the problem the works by Wyatt and others present to today's reader is that their assumptions obviously descended from that modernization theory which represented the overarching intellectual doctrine of Western (and markedly American) capitalist democracies in the 1960s. This means that, while of the opposite side, the ideological bias of the "classic" studies of the Chakri reformation was in fact as pronounced as that of the revisionist works by Thai marxist historians. As a result of the sustained critique of the project of modernity which has ousted both modernization theory and Marxism over the past couple of decades as dominant theoretical models in the social sciences, even those who continue to uphold that project -- especially on the left of the political spectrum -- tend to position themselves more cautiously in relation to it. And yet, I think one can subscribe to the following contention:

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26 This nice expression is by Robert Hewison, The Heritage Industry (London: Methuen, 1987).

27 See my work, "National Heritage and Nationalist Narrative" (M.A. thesis: Canberra, Australian National University), Ch. 2.
Modernization becomes a useful notion when extracted from teleological and primarily economic determinations, and when it encompasses not only structural changes in political and economic formations but also the immense reorganization of knowledge, languages, networks of spaces and communications, and subjectivity itself.

This comment moves the discussion away from the specific field of Thailand’s historiography towards the more general historical and theoretical issues to be dealt with in the following sections.

II

I should first consider the other body of studies with which this thesis directly engages, the “invention-of-tradition” historiographic genre, so to speak. Following the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s influential book, interest in the symbolic dimension of power as a key to a better understanding of political history has soared in the past one and a half decades. This recent shift in the research agenda of political historians is worth remarking on, given that not long ago it was said that for many of them “the structure of politics is accepted as axiomatic, and the theatre of power is ignored as irrelevant”. In fact, the centrality of symbols and rituals to the study of political history was originally underscored by German historian P. E. Schramm in the 1950s. For a long time after, however, the main contributions to the subject came from sociologists and

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31 David Cannadine, ”Introduction: Divine Rites of Kings”, in Cannadine and Price (eds), Rituals of Royalty, p. 1.

social anthropologists.  

It was one of the latter, Clifford Geertz, who put forth the notion of "symbolics of power" in his conceptualization of the state as a cultural system. Focusing on nineteenth-century Bali, Geertz also coined the term "theatre state": "It [Bali] was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience". Geertz's case-study might have been singled out as an example of Oriental pomp par excellence, but he made it clear that the concept of the theatre state applied to late twentieth-century Western states no less than to early nineteenth-century Bali. The notion of the theatre state had a remarkable impact among scholars, defining one of those ideas that, as Geertz himself noted elsewhere, provide "the conceptual centre-point around which a comprehensive system of analysis can be built". However, not just the practice but the very notion of the theatre state is much older than Geertz's naming of it. Peter Burke, a cultural historian of early modern Europe, has pointed out that the metaphor of the theatre for the court, with terms like spectacle, play, stage, and backstage, was already familiar -- perhaps not surprisingly -- to Louis XIV and his contemporaries. In Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the age of absolutism, saw an efflorescence of royal ceremonial, which subsequently abated in the age of enlightenment to re-emerge triumphally around 1870 and last for almost half a century until World War I -- the age of nationalism and empire.

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33 For an overview of this scholarship see Cannadine, "Introduction", pp. 2-7, who, however, fails to mention Schramm's seminal contribution.

34 Clifford Geertz, Negara (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 13. Of Geertz see also the essay "Centres, Kings, Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power", in Wilentz (ed.), Rites of Power: 13-38. In it Geertz theorizes (p. 15): "At the political centre of any complexly organized societies ... there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing. ... [Governing elites] justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have either inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented". The reprint of Geertz's essay (originally published in Joseph Ben-David and Terry Nichols Clark [eds], Culture and Its Creators [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977]) at the beginning of Wilentz's volume of essays mostly by historians testifies to the impact of Geertz ideas among them, at least in the American academia.


which is the chronological scope of the essays in *The Invention of Tradition*.

Despite its memorable title, *The Invention of Tradition* recoils (as could be expected by the British brand of Marxist historiography) from the overt theoretic concerns of much recent academic literature. Also, the focus of the essays in the book is limited to Britain and its erstwhile Indian and African colonies. However, in the volume’s opening and closing chapters, Hobsbawm managed to draw some general considerations about the phenomenon. As a response to social change, the invention of traditions, while in theory not specific to any period in particular, has been more common in the past two hundred years, manifesting itself according to a three-fold though occasionally overlapping typology:

a) those [traditions] establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.

Hobsbawm also points out that in monarchical states (the norm in Europe apart from France and Switzerland in the period 1870-1914) the transformation of royal ceremonial, epitomized by the invention of the jubilee in Britain in 1887, aimed at establishing a symbolic relation between monarchs and subjects rather than between monarchs and divinity, as previous court ceremonies did. This shift of emphasis in the rituals of kingship actually began early in the nineteenth century, when the monarchical that regained power at the end of the Napoleonic wars realized the necessity for capturing popular favour to strengthen their authority. From being objects of awe, European sovereigns thus transformed themselves into objects of admiration for their subjects as exemplars of moral virtues and embodiments of national feeling. Significantly, this novel kind of public image was adopted both by liberal monarchies, like the British, and by strongly conservative ones, like the Russian:

Technically there was no significant difference between the political use of monarchy for the purpose of strengthening effective rulers . . . and building the symbolic function of crowned heads in parliamentary states. . . . Both made the ruler the focus of his people’s or peoples’ unity, the symbolic representative of the


38 Ibid., p. 9.
country’s greatness and glory, of its entire past and continuity with a changing present.°

According to Hobsbawm, this common response was dictated by interrelated developments that unfolded in Europe in the four and a half decades leading to World War I: the progress of electoral democracy and the emergence of mass politics which threatened the very legitimacy of monarchical institutions. Hobsbawm’s analysis here is circumscribed to Europe, and contains only a passing reference to a non-Western country: “A ‘modernization’ which maintained the old ordering of social subordination (possibly with some well-judged invention of tradition) was not theoretically inconceivable, but apart from Japan it is difficult to think of an example of practical success”. 

The invention of tradition in Meiji Japan is dealt with in a very recent book whose author positions himself as a follower of both the ethnographic approach to political rituals typified by David Cannadine’s and Maurice Agulhon’s works and what would appear the rather incompatible epistemological stance of Foucauldian post-structuralism with consequent deployment of “theorhetoric”. In any case, what is relevant to the present discussion is Fujitani’s argument that “Japan’s modern political leaders, not less than their counterparts in the liberal nation-states of Europe and the United States, conceived of the entire cultural apparatus of the modern state as a mechanism for enlightening the masses”. Drawing a parallel with the French Revolution, Fujitani sees the Meiji Restoration as an equally revolutionary project in the specific sense that was “propelled by a

39 Ibid., p. 282.
40 Ibid., pp. 267-68.
41 Ibid., p. 266.
42 Takashi Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). I should specify here that I got hold of Fujitani’s book only when rewriting the final draft of this thesis, so the similarities between Fujitani’s and my own work in their approach to the symbolic dimension of modern monarchical authority and in the structuring of the discussion should be regarded as coincidental insofar as both studies rely on current theoretical approaches and deal with contemporary historical periods, the Meiji in Japan (1868-1912) and the fifth reign in Siam (1868-1910). I borrowed the apt neologism “theorhetoric” from a review essay by G. W. Stocking, Jr., “The Camera Eye as I Witness”, Visual Anthropology 6 (1993): 211-18.
43 Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy, pp. 19-20.
faith in the human plasticity and a new civilizing mission for the state”, even if he claims to be personally “critical of the monarchy and the nation-state in Japan”. The fact remains that in Meiji Japan “a change in the praxis of politics”, as Gluck has it, was clearly marked by the promulgation of the constitution in 1889 and especially the general election and the opening of the Diet in 1890.

Whether Meiji Japan represents the ideal -- let alone the sole -- example of a politically conservative modernization accompanied by the invention of traditions, as suggested by Hobsbawm, is thus arguable. Also, it has been shown that the formalization of new traditions and cultural canons occurred as part of the attempt at modernization in the last hundred years of the Ottoman Empire, and especially under Abdulhamid II (1876-1909), “an autocrat with no time for experiments with democracy”. The overthrow of the sultanate by the Young Turks Revolution in 1908 of course renders it impossible to consider it “an example of practical success”. But what about the subject of this study, fifth-reign Siam, whose time span also fits comfortably with the Eurocentric periodization 1870-1914 as the heyday of the invention of tradition? Tambiah says of the fourth and fifth reigns that “never before did the ceremonies surrounding kingship reach such an elaboration in Thailand as in this era; but then never before had the kings exercised so much real and effective power as in this era”. He also argues that “Thailand is a conspicuous example of traditional features -- of historical continuities that modify modernization -- and also of transformations based on tradition”.

In later nineteenth-century Siam changes in the politico-institutional realm, as well as in the symbolics of power, clearly had nothing to do with increasing popular participation in politics. In common with the Meiji Restoration and other

44 Ibid., pp. 20, 27. On the refashioning of the language and practice of politics in the latter half of the Meiji Period see Carol Gluck, Japan’s Modern Myths (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

45 Ibid., p. 49.


47 Tambiah, World Conqueror, p. 198.

48 Ibid., p. 525.
nineteenth-century nation-building and colonial projects, the Chakri Reformation had the objective of establishing control and discipline over society as a condition for the existence of a modern state -- an enterprise which is not addressed in this study. But although the definition of "revolutionary" has often been used by supporters of the dynasty to stress the import of the Chakri reformation, I doubt it can be termed "revolutionary" in the way Fujitani argues the Meiji Restoration was for its faith in the power of the state to enlighten the masses and make them into "knowledgeable and self-disciplined subjects".

Primary goals of the Chakri Reformation were the establishment of the absolute power of the monarchy and its legitimation in the international arena. The considerable overlap of dynasty and government that characterized the latter half of the fifth reign proves the success of the reform in this regard but makes talk of nation-building highly problematic. Whether the reform intended to make "peasants into Siamese", to paraphrase the title of a famous study,49 is in my view debatable; yet it would seem that Chulalongkorn, alert to the changing rhetoric of power of European monarchies, became increasingly keen to be regarded as the king of the Siamese rather than the king of Siam in the latter years of his reign. In his pursuit of this shifting of emphasis, he might have indeed overlooked its hazards. As in Europe, the increased symbolic proximity of the sovereign to the populace entailed a desacralization of the monarch to be balanced, in theory, by popular support. Of course, the contrary case could happen, as Chulalongkorn’s sons and successors, Vajiravudh and Prajadhipok, were to experience in a long crisis of legitimacy that eventually issued in the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932.50

III

Another issue variously addressed in this thesis is that of cultural borrowing. When the theatre of power’s mise en scène in the period 1870-1914 is considered, one can easily distinguish a fin-de-siècle fashion for domed buildings, bronze


monuments, imposing avenues and military parades a common sight across the globe, from Vienna to Rome, Calcutta to Sydney, Tokyo to Bangkok. The large-scale rebuilding of capital cities (and colonial capitals) and the effusion of ceremonial events, which were mostly centred on the mystique of royalty but included also spectacles like international exhibitions, reflected -- as they instigated -- international competition during some four and a half decades of peaceful relations between European countries. Majestic pageants performed on vast open spaces against a backdrop of splendid buildings became, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a potent expression of Western civilization and a model that the ruling elites of countries like Japan and Siam sought to imitate in order to gain acceptance in the then coalescing international community.

If from a domestic perspective these trends accompanied the emergence of nationalism, they were also concomitant with the world-wide penetration of capitalist modes of production and exchange which furnished the fundamental rationale of colonialism. To the global circulation of goods corresponded the increasingly global circulation of people and information and the emergence of an integrated world system in which transnational cultural flows were possible. Carol Breckenridge has written a brilliant essay on cultural flows in the later nineteenth-century global arena, terming it the Victorian ecumene: "This Victorian ecumene encompassed Great Britain, the United States, and India (along with other places) in a discursive space that was global while nurturing nation-states that were culturally highly specific". Breckenridge also points at the "cultural paradoxes of imperialism" which these transnational flows underscored:

The formation of national cultures in the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the development of transnational practices that occurred in the creation of a global class united by their relation to newly invented rituals, newly constructed metropoles, newly naturalized objects. Though all classes and ethnic groups, both in Britain and in India, were implicated... in these constructions,


52 Carol A. Breckenridge, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs", Comparative Studies in Society and History 31, 2 (1989): 195-216. The term ecumene comes from the Greek word oikoumen meaning "the totality of the inhabited world". It is commonly used with reference to the community of believers in the Christian faith and so hints at a sort of transnational "imagined community".
some benefited more than others. The greatest beneficiaries of the newly constructed colonial edifices were those members of the ruling elite of the respective nations who, through their associations, practices, and consumption patterns were also members of a global and increasingly cosmopolitan elite.53

Breckenridge's concept of the Victorian ecumene will be employed as a major analytical tool in this thesis. As I will be arguing in detail below, being acknowledged as members of the global aristocracy of their time represented a major preoccupation for Siam's ruling elite, who clearly were among the greatest beneficiaries of the colonial order imposed on Southeast Asia. From this perspective, the progressive cosmopolitanization of the Bangkok royalty should finally reveal a political valency which has been so far overlooked. In dealing with the borrowing and adaptation of exogenous cultural forms in late nineteenth-century Siam, however, one must pay attention to its specific background.

As already mentioned, some have compared the fifth-reign elite's quest for civilization to the recent rush of the most cosmopolitan sectors of Thai society for globalization. Others have instead tried to exorcise the import of globalization by emphasizing Thailand's long history in successfully reworking foreign imports; on this account, they could see no reason either to worry or bother much about globalization.54 Such an outlook is actually redolent of Prince Damrong, who once opined: "Whatever was regarded by the Thai people to be good and was not against their interests -- though of foreign origins -- they would accept or adapt to their advantage".55 Such an argument has been built into a theory by a pioneer historian of Southeast Asia, O. W. Wolters, who indicates the "localization" -- i.e., the combined process of adoption and adaptation -- of Indic cultural materials as the unifying feature of the cultures of Southeast Asia.56 In correcting Georges Cœdès' notion of Indianization (or hinduisation, as Cœdès actually had it) by

53 Ibid., p. 214.
54 Craig J. Reynolds, "Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand", in Joel S. Kahn (ed.), Beyond Nationalism and Identity (Singapore: ISEAS, in press).
56 "Indic materials tended to be fractured and restated and therefore drained of their original significance in the process which I shall refer to as localization", Oliver W. Wolters, History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (Singapore: ISEAS, 1982), p. 52.
placing emphasis on local agency, Wolters’ “localization” suggests that the attribution of new or additional meaning to Indic materials was a function of the trade networks that encompassed the Indian Ocean -- a regional, if not exactly global arena, which made cultural flows possible well before the emergence of a world system after the mid-nineteenth century. Somewhat similarly, although with reference to a different time and subject, historian Thongchai Winichakul explains the selective appropriation of Western historiographic canons as a function of their compatibility with, adaptability to, and authority upon, historical practice in Thailand.57

In studying the transformation of the idiom of authority of the Siamese monarchy it is thus important to bear in mind that, like the other Indic polities in the region, the theatre of power in pre-modern Siam was not only highly sophisticated but was the product of an attitude to borrowing and reworking foreign cultural imports which was embedded in the culture of the local elite. For this reason it seems reasonable to imagine that in the process of localization, Western imports too acquired new meanings or, at least, new nuances. Sorting out this question is, however, the task of the following chapters.

* * *

This work has a thematic structure, highlighted by the three parts in which the discussion is organized. Part I, “Practices”, examines the consumption habits and the presentational as well as representational modes adopted by the Siamese modernizing elite as the cultural practices constitutive of their modern public and self image. Part II, “Spaces”, focuses on the Dusit district, built in the last decade of the fifth reign initially as the court’s modern residential quarter and later endowed with a honorific place celebrating Chulalongkorn’s reign. Incidentally, Part II also has a kind of joint function, as it both furthers the analysis of the new consumption habits of the elite and delineates the background, in the literal sense of the word, of the following chapter’s subject. The “Spectacles” dealt with in Part III, while different both in genre and intended audience, can be seen as equally fostering the imagination of turn-of-the-century Siam as a country on the path to civilization under the leadership of a progressive monarchy: the pageants that in

57 Thongchai, “Changing Landscape of the Past”, p. 118.
1907-1908 marked the apogee of Chulalongkorn’s long reign; and the Siamese displays put up at international exhibitions in Europe and America over a period of roughly half a century, from 1867 to 1911.

Two kinds of primary sources have been used in this study: archival materials, including ministerial files, newspapers, and photographs, from the National Archives in Bangkok; and printed works by contemporary actors, such as King Chulalongkorn and Prince Damrong, as well as foreign observers who wrote accounts of their visits to Siam. Finally, a note on the transliteration from Thai. That of personal names follows, when this is known, the individual’s preference (e.g., Vajiravudh) and, in the case of names of place, the most common form (e.g., Bang Pa-in). The transliteration of all the other names and common words follows the Royal Institute system.
PART I

Practices
1 Taste and ideology of Siam’s modernizing elite

For the most part, studies of Siamese modernization have been concerned with the institutional and economic dimensions of the process while the transformation of the social and cultural attributes of daily life, even of the privileged aristocratic class, remains largely in the shade. In fact, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century new modes of consumption, that affected practices ranging from dressing to habitation to leisure activities, made their way to the Bangkok court. The royal elite grew accustomed to living in mansions designed and furnished according to Western upper-class taste; travelling to Europe and America for education and pleasure; enjoying themselves with fashionable products of Occidental technology such as cameras, gramophones and automobiles; and being welcomed as peers in the exclusive circle of the European royalty.

In the absence of a specific treatment of this phenomenon, the emergence of the court’s new consumption habits is usually subsumed under either one or another of the two diverging interpretations of the Chakri Reformation. According to the orthodox approach, the change in lifestyle was one facet of the overall process of modernization fostered by the ruling elite with the design of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the West and so retaining sovereignty in the face of imperialist advance. Conversely, according to the viewpoint of radical scholarship, the elite’s adoption of Western socio-cultural models must be seen as the reflection of Siam’s position at the periphery of the global capitalist market of the later nineteenth century.¹ Both perspectives, in any case, subordinate changes in courtly taste and modes of consumption to what are deemed to be the more fundamental transformations that took place in the administrative and economic spheres.

Relying on the reconceptualization advanced by a number of recent studies,² in which consumption is presented as a practice constitutive of both

¹ The point is made but not developed by Chaiyan, Thai Absolute Monarchy, pp. 134-35.

individual as well as social identity, I propose here an alternative thesis: one in which the consumer behaviour of Siam’s modernizing elite is understood as a strategy aimed at the reconfiguration of their group identity as both a “national” ruling class and part of the enduring world aristocracy. While arguably fulfilling the Siamese elite’s desire to identify themselves with European royalty, their novel lifestyle patterns, highlighted by contemporary travelogues by Western guests of the court, mirrored a civilized image of the elite onto the West itself. As Pierre Bourdieu remarks, “the representation that individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality. A class is defined as much by its being-perceived as by its being, by its consumption . . . as much as by its position in the relations of production”.

After sketching a chronological overview of changes in the habits of consumption of the Bangkok court throughout the fourth and fifth reigns, the remaining part of this chapter will be devoted to developing a conceptual framework to account for this evolution in courtly taste and its import in both sociological and historical terms. Threads of the following discussion also continue in the next chapter, which deals with new modes of self-presentation, and Chapter 3, which focuses on the creation of a modern residential quarter for the monarchy at the turn of the century.

I

“Dinner was served in European style, the glass and porcelain, all from Europe, were engraved and painted with the royal arms and King Chulalongkorn’s long name . . . The king and princes all drank European wines. The dessert was the only thing presenting any great novelty to us . . .”. This is the description of a banquet King Chulalongkorn gave in February 1889 for the Duke of Sutherland’s party by one of its number, a cosmopolitan lady with a Victorian bent for matters of fashion and decor. A glimpse of the organization of banquets for foreign guests some fifteen years later comes from Dr Malcom Smith, Queen Saowapha’s physician. According to him these occasions were arranged by the king in

3 Bourdieu, Distinction, p. 483 (orig. emphasis).

consultation with his European-educated sons. "One of them", Smith recounts, "usually remained in the kitchens to see that everything was served in its right order, particularly the wines". However, "The decoration of the tables and the room was supervised by the Queen". Saowapha’s grandson, Chula Chakrabongse, wrote of her in his memoirs: "She was a great enthusiast for European dinner services, glass, and silver, and was always buying them, so many that I do not think it is accurately known how many sets she possessed". Of course, it is possible to assume that on such occasions particular care was placed on pleasing (and impressing) Western guests, and that daily court life was informed by a mode of consumption which did not necessarily involve European dinner sets and wines – not to mention the fact that even when banquets were put on for foreign guests, the women of the court did not normally attend. Still, the court’s observance of Western etiquette recorded by Florence Caddy in 1889 would have been unlikely even only two decades earlier, at the end of King Mongkut’s reign.

In order to appreciate the novelty of the consumption habits of the Siamese court in the fifth reign some historical background is required. But if some forms of prestige consumption by the early Bangkok court (1782-1851) can be taken for granted, the scarcity of available data unfortunately prevents us from gaining a comprehensive picture of the situation. Broadly speaking, between the first and fourth reigns courtly conspicuous expenditure was manifested mainly in the construction of royal and religious edifices and the staging of ceremonies. The linkage between the wealth of the court and the degree of patronage is well illustrated by developments in the third reign, when the expansion of the royal monopoly on trade resulted in the flourishing of new monasteries (wat). Bangkok’s royal temples were described by the French Catholic Bishop J. B.

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7. Smith (The Court of Siam, p. 80) refers that the first time women of the court attended a banquet was in 1908 at Bang Pa-in palace, on the occasion of the visit of the Duke and Duchesse of Mecklenburg. Indeed, in the description of the dinner in Bangkok quoted above, Florence Caddy remarked on the fact that the elderly nobles looked “as if spellbound with astonishment that women should be able to talk intelligently, sit at table, and eat their dinner properly. The Siamese men and women do not take their meals together” (Caddy, To Siam, p. 113-14).
Pallegoix, used to the cathedrals of Paris and Rome, as being "of such a splendour which people in Europe cannot imagine" (d'une magnificence dont on ne se fait pas une idée en Europe). 9

The court and its entourage also indulged in luxury goods from overseas, mostly from India and China. Ingram's opinion, in this regard, is that, prior to 1850, "the goods imported probably represented only a tiny fraction of total consumption, with some exceptions". 10 According to contemporary witnesses, the bulk of imports consisted of cotton, silk, and precious metals -- luxury goods which were transformed into prestige items such as the gold-embroidered apparel and the nielloware sets (kruang thompat) forming part of the regalia. Actually, display of sumptuous textiles and gold plates was an index of status in both princely and wealthy households across the whole of Southeast Asia in the precolonial era. 11

This impressionistic picture would suggest that, notwithstanding Nithi Auesriwongse's contention about Ayutthaya's "aristocratic" civilization giving way to the more "bourgeois" orientations of the early Bangkok court, 12 the latter's pattern of prestige consumption resembled to a large extent Ayutthaya's, at least in its later period (the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries). 13 Not only was the preference for silk, silver and gold as prestige goods unequalled for some two and a half centuries, but luxury commodities manufactured in the West apparently aroused no great interest at court well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such "conservatism" in consumption habits, however, did not depend on isolation or ignorance of the lifestyle of the European nobility. On the contrary, a sizeable community of foreign traders had resided in Ayutthaya and,


12 Nidhi Aeusriwongse, Pakkai lae bairua [Quill and sail] (Bangkok: Amarin, 2527 [1984]), Ch. I.

among the Westerners, the French in particular had enjoyed great favour in the reigns of Prasat Thong (1629-56) and especially Narai (1656-88), when Siamese embassies were received at Versailles by Louis XIV in 1686 and even at the Vatican by Pope Innocent XI two years later.\(^{14}\)

Although after 1688 the Chinese gained a definite advantage over Europeans in the trading sphere, the latter, far from vanishing for one and a half centuries, remained active in the background, as proven by the continuing evangelical work of French missionaries and the advances attempted by British traders based in India.\(^{15}\) It seems likely that Bangkok's Catholic diocese, under Bishop Pallegoix (1828-43) and centred on the Church of Conception, and the increasing number of American Protestant missionaries who had been coming to Bangkok since the 1820s, somehow contributed to displaying the material culture of the West despite their supposedly frugal lifestyles. Yet the commercial treaties signed with Great Britain in 1826 and the United States of America in 1833 produced disappointing results for the two powers, and one reason for this arguably lay in the Bangkok court's continuing indifference towards Western goods. The secular tributary relationship with China, instead, was revived and exploited to its fullest during the early Bangkok era. Thirty-five missions were sent to Beijing over the period 1782-1853 (an average of one mission every two years),\(^{16}\) after which date they were discontinued concurrently with the establishment of regular trade relations with Europe and America.\(^{17}\) At the time luxury goods came predominantly from the Middle Kingdom, courtly taste underwent a deep sinicization, as shown in particular by the architecture and decorative style of the third reign (1824-51).\(^{18}\)

\(^{14}\) On both occasions engravings and commemorative medallions were produced and presumably presented to the Siamese ambassadors as mementos (Apinan, "Modern Art", pp. 29-32).


It is a commonplace to see Chinese influences on courtly taste yielding to Western ones starting from the fourth reign as Britain replaced China as Bangkok’s chief commercial partner and, indeed, as the region’s dominant power. In this regard, the way the “cultural stock” of the ruling elites of the central Thai polities has accommodated, through the centuries, changes in the external environment indicates an almost intrinsic capacity for assimilating the culture of the hegemonic other -- be it Khmer, Chinese, or Euro-American. But while the linkage between the politico-economic and the cultural realms is hardly questionable, one should also note that the assertion of Western influences on the “preferred royal style” during the second half of the nineteenth century was concomitant with a boom in the Chinese population of Bangkok, owing to increasing immigration throughout the fifth reign. Because of this, the cultural Westernization of the Siamese elite can be understood as a means to emphasize social distinction. As a matter of fact, the Bangkok court’s appreciation for things Chinese was manifest also in the fourth and fifth reigns but by then it was independent of the tributary system which presupposed political submission, however nominal, to the Middle Kingdom. Because of this changed dimension, this aspect of courtly taste could have undergone refashioning as a passion for the exotic not unlike that for chinoiserie and the collecting of Chinese artefacts in Europe.

The Bowring Treaty, negotiated by the eponymous British diplomat in 1855, is an established watershed for historians of Thailand, and an evaluation of its import for subsequent socio-economic development is not in order here. With regard to the present study, however, the lack of Siamese expenditure figures up until 1892 makes it problematic to assess the correlation between the Bowring Treaty, and those signed with other Western countries in the following years, and the consumer behavior of the elite. In theory, the rapid monetization that occurred as a result of the treaties in Bangkok and the nearby region should have been conducive to an increase of expenditure on imported commodities. At any rate, courtly habits of consumption appears to have altered slowly during the fourth reign and the regency years leading to Chulalongkorn’s coming-of-age (1868-73). King Mongkut’s belongings, as indexed by the editor of the fourth reign’s
chronicles, included: palaces and other residences; jewelry and precious objects; barges; horses; regalia (weapons, white tiered umbrellas, golden name-plate); white elephants; and slaves. Exotic objects, from portraits of European rulers to a daguerreotype camera and models of a steamer and locomotive train, first reached the court as presents from Queen Victoria and Napoleon III.

Concerning royal taste, it can be noted that some Western-style palaces were built in the fourth reign, such as Saranrom in Bangkok and Nakhon Khiri in Petchaburi (which included an observatory). This was only a relative novelty; already in the seventeenth century Europeans had erected buildings according to their dictates in Ayutthaya and Lopburi. Overall, the dominant feature of Siamese palatial architecture in the 1860s and 1870s was the eclectic mix of Thai, Chinese and European motifs which also characterized major fifth-reign edifices such as Wat Benchama Bophit. More significant as an indicator of change in courtly taste was the trend in interior furnishing, in which things Western started to be used to create a novel domestic space. Taken by Mongkut on a tour of his private apartments, John Bowring noticed pendulums, watches, barometers, thermometers, microscopes -- “all the instruments and appliances which might be found in the study or library of an opulent philosopher in Europe” -- and concluded, perhaps with a degree of parochial bias: “Almost everything seemed English”.

Even more appreciative was Bowring of the residence of the “second king”, Mongkut’s half-brother Prince Chutamani (also known as Phra Pinklao):

His own apartments are conveniently, tastefully fitted up, and, except from [sic] the suspended punkah and the great height of the rooms, the furniture and ornaments would lead you to believe you were in the house of an English gentleman... He has a well-selected library of English books, a considerable museum of mechanical instruments, with models of late improvements in many of the departments of science, excellent sextants and quadrants, miniature screw-steamers, and a variety of modern weapons.

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22 Ibid., p. 324.
Rather than "orientalizing the other", as most agents of colonialism were supposedly doing around this time, Bowring would seem intent (admittedly to suit his own mediator's agenda) at representing the Siamese princes as being as "civilized" and, as it were, "English" as possible. As for Mongkut's and Pinklao's residences, they would appear, like the Western-style military uniforms they liked to wear in front of the camera (see Chapter 2), to proclaim a form of identification with the valued lifestyle of an upper-class European and so fulfil an individual fantasy.

New standards in courtly consumption became fully manifest within a few years of Chulalongkorn's second coronation in 1873, as illustrated by the construction, for the centenary of the dynasty in 1882, of the Chakri Maha Prasat -- Bangkok's grandest palace to date, with a central marble staircase and furniture which was said in a travel book to have been imported from London at a cost of "not less than 80,000 Sterlings". Finally, state expenditure figures are available for the latter half of the fifth reign, which incidentally was the period when the major institutional reforms were implemented. Over the years 1892-1910, as a result of changes in the tax system (i.e., the monopolization of the collection and creation of land and head taxes), annual state revenues increased in Siam from 15 to 63 million Baht; in the same period, royal household expenditures rose from 3.75 to 10.37 million Baht -- even though, when considered as a proportion of total revenues and total expenditures, these actually decreased from 25 to 16.5 per cent, and from 29 to 18 per cent, respectively. Unsurprisingly for an absolutist regime in which the court was also the central organ of administration and consequently managed all revenue, royal household and state finances were not clearly separate, at least until 1890. The establishment in that year of the Privy Purse was aimed at differentiating the crown's from the state's treasury even if, in fact, this

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24 Ingram, *Economic Change*, p. 192. In the same period (1892-1910) the percentage of total expenditure devoted to defence decreased from 26% to 24%, while that of education remained stable at 2%. Only after 1932 was the budget for the royal household drastically reduced to less than 1% of the total expenditure (ibid., p. 177).
separation remained more nominal than real until the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932.\textsuperscript{25}

The most distinctive of the fifth-reign elite’s new consumer habits deserve a mention here. They included the construction, furnishing, and upkeep of a growing number of royal and princely mansions in Bangkok and the provinces, often involving the employment of foreign architects and decorators; the education in European institutions of princes and other male members of the nobility; long and extensive overseas travels by the king, princes, ministers, and high-ranking officials; and the purchase of all kinds of Western-produced commodities, from artworks to the latest technological gadgetry.\textsuperscript{26} Chulalongkorn’s two journeys to Europe, in 1897 and 1907, usually commended for boosting the prestige of Siam abroad and providing inspiration for domestic improvements, were also shopping holidays on a veritable royal scale. So much so that, in reading the king’s diaries and letters from overseas,\textsuperscript{27} one is left with the impression that his acquisition (though purchase and presentation) of paintings in Florence, porcelain sets in Sévres, Tiffany vases in London, Fabergé objects in St Petersburg, jewelry in Berlin, and so on, characterized those experiences as much as fraternizing with European rulers.

Chulalongkorn’s lead in conspicuous consumption, to be dealt with analytically below, made him a taste-maker within the court at the same time as it defined his public persona. For example, announcing his second trip to Europe, Bangkok’s foreign press glossed: “King Chulalongkorn is an enthusiastic motorist, and it is expected that he will make large purchase of cars in France and England”.\textsuperscript{28} Telling in this regard was also the appropriation of government funds for setting up Siamese displays at the international exhibitions held in Europe and

\textsuperscript{25} Chaïyan, Thai Absolute Monarchy, p. 158.

\textsuperscript{26} Dozens of letters personally addressed to King Chulalongkorn by European firms and shops advertising their goods are conserved among in the archival documents (NA, RV, Miscellany 8.3).

\textsuperscript{27} King Chulalongkorn, Phraratchatthalekha ... mua sadet phraratcha damnoen praphat yurop pho.so. 2440 [Royal correspondence ... from the 1897 journey to Europe], 2 vols (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 2505 [1962]); and, Phraratchaniphon kai ban [The king’s writings from overseas, or Far from home], 2 vols (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 2498 [1955]).

\textsuperscript{28} Bangkok Times, 15 February 1907.
America (see Ch. 6), events which themselves represented major moments in the
emergence of a global consumer society. On the contrary, there are indications of
the curtailment of two major sources of traditional conspicuous expenditure: the
performance of royal cremations (although Rama V's own cremation in 1911 still
cost almost 1 million Baht);\(^{29}\) and the construction and support of royal wat, as
proven by the suggestion the king made to their patrons to build shophouses for
letting within the monasteries' precincts, to ensure a stable source of income.\(^{30}\)
Chulalongkorn himself had only two monasteries erected in Bangkok during the
forty-two years of his reign: Wat Ratcha Bophit at the beginning and Wat
Benchama Bophit toward the end. Besides, he had Wat Niwet built in the shape
of a Gothic church near the summer palace at Bang Pa-in, in the late 1870s.

A picture of the Chakri household in the period 1850-1910 may help to
contextualize the elite's new spending habits. Mongkut had had 82 children (39
princes and 43 princesses) by 35 wives; Chulalongkorn had 76 children (32 princes
and 44 princesses) by 36 wives. Dr Smith calculated that at the beginning of the
sixth reign, at the time of maximum expansion of the household, a restricted
gathering of the royal family from the rank of mom chao (the title given to a king's
grandchild) upwards, numbered around 500 people.\(^{31}\) The king's wives and
children all received government emoluments. In the formers' case, annuities in
the fifth reign varied from a minimum of 240 Baht to a maximum of 20,000 Baht
(for those wives who had borne the king progeny).\(^{32}\) In the case of royal children,
emoluments began at birth and were doubled at the time of assuming their titles
of honour. In the early 1910s, the annual allowance for a first-class prince (chaofa)
was around 52,000 Baht (4,000 Pounds),\(^{33}\) to which were added incomes from

\(^{29}\) For comments on the retrenchment of royal cremations in the fifth reign see H. G. Quaritch Wales,
cremation (precisely 968,389 Baht) is in NA, Budget Report by the Financial Adviser, RE 131


\(^{31}\) Smith, Court of Siam, pp. 139, 60.

\(^{32}\) These sums were mentioned in an article published in Ying thai, 18 October 1932. I am grateful
to Scot Barmé for this reference.

\(^{33}\) Chula Chakrabongse, Twain Have Met, p. 64.
rental properties and, usually, a government position -- while the annual salary of a low-grade ministerial clerk was 240 Baht. The social outcome of the elite's economic privilege is acknowledged even by an otherwise staunch admirer of Chulalongkorn's modernization, D. K. Wyatt: "one might hazard the guess that the social distance -- created by education, wealth, lifestyle, exposure to the outside world, even language -- between the urban, educated elite and the peasant mass of Siamese society was never greater than it was at the end of the fifth reign".

II

The first question that arises from the above overview is: why was it only in the latter part of the nineteenth century that the Bangkok court took a strong liking for that "world of goods" whose seemingly infinite expansion had characterized European societies from at least the eighteenth century onward. The shift from China to Britain as Siam's "hegemonic other" has been mentioned above to account for the diminishing appeal of Chinese objects from the fourth reign onwards. But however important, changes in the politico-economic realm alone cannot suffice to explain a phenomenon whose deep motivations pertain to the human sphere of desire and self-fulfilment. An insight into this question comes from Chulalongkorn's own explanation of his compulsion to buy expensive local porcelain in Denmark: "It has become fashionable because Alexander III [Tsar, 1881-94] loved to buy many things made in his wife's country, and now that it is in vogue everybody (khrai khrai) is compelled to follow". Likewise, in need of some rest before setting off on his second tour of Europe, Chulalongkorn took the opportunity to spend a couple of weeks in the Italian seaside resort of Sanremo, on that stretch of Mediterranean coastline -- la Riviera -- which at the turn of the

34 20 Baht was the monthly salary of Wichit Watthakan as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1911. Scot Barmé, Luang Wichit Watthakan and the Creation of a Thai National Identity (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993), p. 42.

35 Wyatt, Thailand, p. 224.

36 King Chulalongkorn, Phraratchathelekha... praphat yurop pho.so. 2440, vol. II, p. 73. The excerpt quoted above was followed by this remark: "Of course, Chinese porcelain is cheaper, even though here it costs the same [as the Danish]".
century was fashionable among elite holiday-goers, particularly the British and Russian nobility.

Accordingly, the thrust behind the habits of consumption of the Siamese modernizing elite could be considered as a particular form of social emulation, the prestige group whose taste and lifestyle were imitated being the European royalty with whom the Bangkok court wanted to identify and be identified. Prevented from establishing blood links with the monarchies of Europe through marriage policy, the only way left to the Chakri to "join the family" of the Windsors, the Habsburgs, the Romanovs, and the rest, was to develop a familiarity with consumption habits which represented a practice of social identification common to the ruling elites of the West. The psychological dimension of this identification is illustrated by the following remark about Queen Saowapha by her British physician: "Her knowledge of the surviving royal houses of Europe was astonishingly complete. She knew their family-trees far better than I did, and spoke of some of the people almost if they were her own relations". 37

The following remark on the cultural Westernization of the Russian monarchy during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would thus appear to suit, in essence, the Siamese as well: "Fireworks displays, engravings, odes, Baroque, Rococo, and neoclassical architecture, regardless of their content, were signs of belonging to the West". 38 On the other hand, a theory which has enjoyed a certain currency has it that Asian modernizing elites conceived of Westernization as a weapon to oppose colonialism itself. But as these elites also foresaw the danger inherent in bringing in foreign values, they "found the key to this dilemma in the separation of 'material culture' from 'moral culture' and adoption of only the former", as Yoneo Ishii puts it. 39 According to one's point of view, the appropriation of Western material culture by the Chakri and, more thoroughly,

37 Smith, The Court of Siam, p. 104-5.
39 Yoneo Ishii, Sangha, State, and Society, trans. by Peter Hawkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 148. Ishii's argument here concerns Siam as much as Japan. It may thus be useful to remember that, in comparison to Siam, Japan was bonded to a much stricter isolationist policy throughout practically all the Tokugawa era (1603-1868) — from the withdrawal from international trade in 1635 to Commodore Perry's "opening" of the country in 1854.
the Meiji elite, might have aimed at preserving either “national” sovereignty or, as Ishii himself argues, their dominant position. But while accounting for the technocratic quality of modernity as observable in parts of Asia today, this perspective also raises some questions.

To begin with, it presents Siamese (and Japanese) modernization as both induced by external circumstances (the colonial threat), and thus implicitly derivative, and accomplished by self-consciously and astutely discriminating between Western technology and Western political and philosophical thought. In this account, while critically appraised as functional to the maintenance of power of politically conservative elites, modernization is deemed to have had virtually no impact on their socio-cultural values. In Siam, however, Western rationalism and empiricism had a definite impact on the elite, seriously undermining their worldview. Members of the court, starting with the king, were keen to embrace Western conceptions of space and time — and consequently of human action and history, which represents past human action.40

Time, space, and human action are fundamental categories which inform both individual and collective worldviews. A reconsideration of these categories in the light of Western ideas points at a transformation in the elite’s conception of reality and the emergence of a new kind of cultural consciousness. From this perspective, the elite’s new habits of consumption are revealing of an internal dynamic of cultural change as much as Mongkut’s interest in Western science, about which historians have long remarked. The anthropologist Daniel Miller argues in conclusion to his study of consumption that objects actively participate “in a process of self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others”.41 Miller’s contention refers to mass consumption as observed in contemporary society, but a similar argument is put forward by sociologist Colin Campbell in accounting for the new consumer

40 Atthachak Sattayanurak, Kanpliangplaeng lokathat khong chonchan phunam thai tangtae raichakan thi 4-poh so. 2475 [Transformation of the Thai elite’s worldview from the fourth reign to 1932] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2538 [1995]), esp. Ch. 2; Thongchai, Siam Mapped, Ch. 2. See also Craig J. Reynolds’ seminal article, “Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History, with Special Reference to Nineteenth-Century Cultural Change”, Journal of Asian Studies 35, 2 (1976): 203-20.

41 Miller, Material Culture, p. 215.
demand that accompanied the Industrial Revolution in late eighteenth-century Britain; and by economic historian Richard Goldthwaite in relation to the earlier rise of a secular demand for luxury goods in Italy between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. According to Goldthwaite, via the consumption of newly-created objects, “Italians discovered new values and pleasures for themselves, reordered their lives with new standards of comportment, communicated something about themselves -- in short, generated culture, and in the process created identities for themselves”.43

In sum, common to these studies is an appreciation of consumption as instrumental to the processes of self-definition and self-maintenance. Following this line of reasoning, it is possible to go beyond the argument of mere emulation in accounting for the Bangkok court’s new habits of consumption and argue that, through the appropriation of Western luxury goods, the elite reconstituted their sense of self -- as individuals as well as a class -- at a time when the cosmology that traditionally defined their role and identity was being replaced by the ideology of modernity. The Westernization of the private space of the court in particular seems to exemplify the thrust for a novel “life space”. Replete with upholstered furniture, draperies, paintings, billiard tables, and a library with “all the leading European and American periodicals and newspapers being regularly taken in”,44 this life space arguably represented the stage on which alternative identities could be acted out or, indeed, the site for the “domestication” of the (material) culture of Europe.

Clearly, this theoretical argument needs to be grounded in the specific social dynamic that underlay the patterns of consumption of the Siamese elite in the fifth reign. Here, reference to Bourdieu’s understanding of consumption, and cultural practice in general, as participating of the overall strategy of social reproduction, seems apposite. Bourdieu assigns to taste a critical function in this

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44 Bock, Temples and Elephants, p. 10.
strategy, contending in a famous passage: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classification, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make . . . in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed”.

Indicative of the taste of the fifth-reign court is the summer palace at Bang Pa-in, an isle on the Chaophraya’s lower course, some sixty kilometres north of Bangkok. There Chulalongkorn had edifices built in various styles in the period 1872 to 1889, including a Chinese mansion partly shipped from China and presented to the king by the precursor of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The court spent time there regularly, and foreign guests too were often taken to the palace, which served as the base for excursions to the nearby ruins of Ayutthaya. One of them, the Belgian Charles Buls (whose uncomplimentary views shall be mentioned again), was rather dismissive of what he saw at Bang Pa-in: “a villa in poor Italian style . . . decorated with mediocre Siamese paintings”; “a small, poor park . . . with rare, suffering trees . . . stuffed with tasteless pavilions without architecture”, the king’s residence in particular, a two-storied wooden chalet, he found “heavy, pretentious, stuffed with massive furniture and objects from a bazaar of Italian, German and English making”. The mansion’s interior prompted a reflection by Buls which is worth quoting in full:

I had often asked myself where do all the horrors which are exposed in the world expositions end up. I imagined that they would furnish the castles of our upstarts. The visit of the summer palaces of the King of Siam and the Sultan of Johore revealed to me that it is to the poor Asian princes that the unscrupulous industrialists sold, doubtless for double or triple their value, the pendulum with a power hammer or in the form of the Eiffel Tower, crystal candelabrum, coloured negroes, chairs in twisted wood, statues in gilded zinc, vases in sculpted alabaster.

45 Bourdieu, Distinction, p. 6.

46 See Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Chotmaihet ratchawang ban pa’in lae wat niwet [Documents on the royal palace of Bang Pa-in and Wat Niwet] (Bangkok: National Archives, 2537 [1994]).

47 Charles Buls, Siamese Sketches (Paris, 1901), trans. and intr. by Walter E. J. Tips (Bangkok and Chenv: White Lotus, 1994), p. 142. Buls was the mayor of Brussels between 1881 and 1899, and so he received Chulalongkorn in visit at the city in September 1897 (the year of an international exhibition held there). Rama V invited Buls to visit Siam, which he did in the early months of 1900.

48 Ibid.
For the sake of completeness, it must be said that another visitor of the summer palace of Bang Pa-in, the Russian Prince Ookhtomsky (a member of the Tsarevich’s suite in Siam in 1890), described the same mansion as being “furnished luxuriously and with refined taste and comfort”. While a disgression on the difference in taste between the bourgeois Buls and the aristocrat Ookhtomsky clearly does not belong here, it is worth noting that both were enticed by the Chinese mansion at Bang Pa-in, the Russian finding it so grand that “the emperor of China himself can scarcely have a palace much finer than this”.50

The point to be made here is that, as Buls’ reference to “our upstarts” suggests, Siam’s modernizing elite were by no means alone in building replicas of Tudor castles and Renaissance palaces; nor in stuffing their interiors with revival furniture, copies of classical statuary, and Oriental bric-à-brac. Their “omnivorous” aesthetic was, in effect, not unlike that of nouveaux riches in both Europe and the Americas, making use of their acquired wealth to pursue consumer habits supporting their social pretensions. Like the European aristocracy, the Siamese elite derived their privileged social position from birth; yet, similar to the nouveaux riches, they displayed a marked attitude to consume “conspicuously”, certainly more so than their European counterparts at that time, whose properties, parcel and symbol of their status, were largely inherited -- properties, in Bourdieu’s words, “which are endowed with the highest distinctive value because they can only be accumulated over time”.51

A similar perspective is gained by a critical look at the role played by Chulalongkorn in fostering appreciation for Western art -- or, more precisely, the academic (or “salon”) genre of painting and sculpture which was the dominant art style of the nineteenth century. Aside from the several portraits of members of the royal family which had been commissioned to European artists since the early 1870s, many artworks were purchased during the two tours of Europe in 1897 and


50 Ibid., pp. 245-46.

51 Bourdieu, Distinction, p. 281.
1907; and the king’s correspondence contains several observations about art and architecture from which transpires his delight in presenting himself back home as being acquainted with Europe’s artists no less than with its crowned heads. In his writings Chulalongkorn nurtured a self-image as a person of taste which, as art historian John Clark points out, is a recognizable trait of contemporaneous political leaders of Southeast Asia as well. At the same time, Clark argues that official art collections from Thailand and Indonesia reveal “the apparent indifference of the patrons to systematic considerations of taste”.

Following the argument above, the possession of a collection of European art can be seen as one of those emulation-driven acts of consumption whereby Chulalongkorn identified with his European counterparts. This is a more nuanced argument than Apinan’s, for whom, “Showing visitors a royal collection of Western art treasures was part of the king’s modernization programme.” In Europe, the collecting of aesthetically pleasing objects (later ennobled as “artworks”) that emerged in the early modern age as a distinct pursuit from the accumulation of valuables in the Middle Ages, was in itself a product of a new consumer mentality. After Italian humanists had rationalized collecting and patronage in the fifteenth century as part of a doctrine of magnificence underpinning the ascendancy of new, urban-based elites such as the Medici in Florence, the relationship between these practices and monarchical power fully unfolded in the next century at the courts of Europe, Vienna and Versailles above all, where extensive royal art collections were formed.

Whereas Siamese kings had traditionally been patrons of poets and painters, forming an art collection was a decidedly novel pursuit because the idea of an objectified “artwork” itself was novel. Yet the absence in Chulalongkorn’s

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54 Apinan, Modern Art, p. 13; idem, “Modern Art”, p. 86.

art collection of a discernible aesthetic judgement, as Clark underlines, makes it difficult even to apply the term “collection” to it because, by definition, “there must be boundaries distinguishing what is and is not appropriate for inclusion in the collection”.\textsuperscript{56} This is not to say that European monarchs in general displayed better taste or a deeper understanding of the arts. In fact, a fundamental role in the establishment of European royal collections was played by advisers who, more often than not, came from outside the ranks of the nobility.\textsuperscript{57} Instead, Chulalongkorn’s purchase of artworks reflected nothing but his personal taste, or, at the most, the taste of those senior princes who travelled with him to Europe (Sapphasat Supakit, Charun Kridakon, Rapi Pattanasak, and Boriphat Sukhumpan).\textsuperscript{58}

Apart from copies of the Renaissance masters bought in workshops in Florence, the artworks purchased abroad by Chulalongkorn were generally by artists who enjoyed “mainstream” approval (and, possibly, well-known patrons) and who exhibited at official art venues such as the Venice Biennale, established in 1895 and visited two years later by Chulalongkorn. And indeed, the king’s diaries reveal his clear understanding of the value of artworks as commodities and status symbols. Writing home in 1907 about his intention to go in search of artworks in Florence and Venice, the king stressed that he must do that, “before the summer arrival of American millionaires eager to buy everything”;\textsuperscript{59} and that the mayor of Florence would purchase on his behalf at a special price two bronze sculptures seen at an exhibition “with many good pieces at affordable prices, many of which, however, were already reserved for the king [of Italy]”.\textsuperscript{60}

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\textsuperscript{58} Apinan, “Modern Art”, pp. 86, 90.

\textsuperscript{59} King Chulalongkorn, letter of 11 May 1907, \textit{Phraratchathalekha ... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat (pan sukum)} [The king’s correspondence to chaophraya Yomarat (Pan Sukhum)] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2529 [1986]), p. 35.

\textsuperscript{60} King Chulalongkorn, \textit{Klai ban}, vol. I, letter of 22 May 1907, Ch. 57, pp. 233-34.
The notion of taste, in Bourdieu’s analysis, is tightly linked to two concepts which are also useful in this discussion, those of symbolic and cultural capital -- the first referring to “degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour”, and the latter to “forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions”. To keep in line with Bourdieu’s economic terminology, we shall posit a picture in which the Siamese elite’s traditional forms of symbolic and cultural capital, which enjoyed “currency” across the whole of Indianized Southeast Asia, were dramatically “depreciated” by the irruption of Western modernity. In this situation, a “re-capitalization” was required, and one must say that the appreciation of this imperative is proof of the Siamese royalty’s farsightedness. This was done, perhaps most significantly, by investing economic capital, at the monarchy’s disposal in a larger amount than ever before from the 1870s thanks to the monopolization of taxation, into the field that above all yields cultural capital: education.

The erratic tutoring of princes by Western teachers and missionaries in the fourth reign was followed, in the next reign, by the enrolment en masse of royal princes in (mostly English) colleges and institutes. The first overseas students were Chulalongkorn’s four elder sons, who reached Britain in 1885. Once back in Bangkok, these princes were given key state offices, particularly in the Ministry of War. Their presence in England, Germany, and Russia, also contributed to promoting the prestige of the House of Chakri vis-à-vis the European monarchies, as in the case of Vajiravudh’s participation at the celebrations for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Overseas travels by the elder members of the elite -- tours that included Asia, Europe, and America -- were at least as important as the education abroad of young princes and noblemen for the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital. Chulalongkorn’s own “kingly” education was furnished by the tours of colonial Asia he made in the early years of his reign (1871-72), which

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historians, following Prince Damrong’s memoirs, have linked to the beginning of his reforms.

In 1884, an extensive tour of the United States of America (Washington D.C., New York, St Francisco, Cincinnati, St Louis, Kansas City, Denver) was made by Prince Naret Worarit (1855-1925), head of the London legation and subsequently minister of Metropolitan Government, Public Works and the Privy Seal (and one of the signatories of the 1885 petition for constitutional reforms). In 1891 Prince Damrong visited a number of European countries (Italy, France, Britain, Germany, Denmark, Russia, as well as Turkey) for the purpose of improving diplomatic relations and visiting the sons of the king who were studying in Britain. At his return, instead of the foreseen position at the head of the Education Ministry, Damrong was appointed minister of Interior, a role he retained until 1915.

Of course, the most significant of these princely grand tours were the two visits to Europe made by Chulalongkorn himself. The king described the main objectives of the first journey (7 April to 16 December 1897) as: “First, to see how is life in Europe. Second, to study how wealth and goods originate. Third, to fathom their strength, were they to attack us. Fourth, to enjoy myself as well.”

The journey was undertaken on board the Maha Chakri, a 2,500 ton vessel built four years earlier in Scotland and captained by a Briton. After disembarking in Venice, Chulalongkorn reached Switzerland, where a reception in his honour was given by the Federal Council in Berne. The king then went back to Italy, visiting

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62 Damrong, Khwamsongcham, Ch. 5; also FAD (comp.), Chotmaihet sadet praphat tang prathet nai ratchakan thi 5 sadet muang singkhapo lae muang betawia khrang ae lae sadet praphat prathet india [Chronicle of the royal journey to the cities of Singapore, Batavia, and to India in the fifth reign] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2509 [1966]). The first royal tour, between March and April 1871, included Singapore, Batavia and Semarang; and the second, from December 1871 to March 1872, Singapore, Malacca, Penang, Moulmein, Rangoon, Calcutta, Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Bombay, and Benares.

63 FAD (comp.), Samnao raignan phra chao boromwongthe khromphraya naretворarit sadet prathet amerika pho.so. 2427 [Itinerary of Prince Naret Worarit’s tour of America in 1884] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2469 [1926]).

64 FAD (comp.), Somdet phra chao boromwongthe khromphraya damrong ratchanuphap sadet tawip yurop pho.so. 2434 [The journey to Europe of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in 1891] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2511 [1968]).

65 Cited in Thongthong, Khong suay, p. 51.
Florence and Rome, where he was received by King Humbert I, joining him in the celebrations for Constitution Day. He was also given an audience, the first for a non-Christian head of state, by the Pope. Chulalongkorn then proceeded to Austria-Hungary (Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw), where he met the Emperor Francis-Joseph; Russia (Peterhof, St Petersburg, Moscow) as the guest of Tsar Nicholas II; Stockholm, where he was given a lavish reception as his visit coincided with King Oscar II’s jubilee; and Copenhagen.

From there the royal yacht took the king to Portsmouth, where he was welcomed by the Duke of York, and reached London. There he spent three weeks, meeting Queen Victoria and also visiting Edinburgh and Newcastle. He then moved to Germany, where he was the guest of the local princes at Dresden and Potsdam and met Bismarck in Berlin. After a short visit to the Netherlands (the Hague) and Belgium (Antwerp, Brussels), Chulalongkorn reached Paris, where he spent one week. There he conferred the Order of the House of Maha Chakri on President Faure, in spite or probably in virtue of the stormy relationship between France and Siam at that time. From Paris the king went back to England, visiting Windsor Castle, Oxford and Eton, and celebrating his forty-fourth birthday, on 20 September, with his sons at Taplow Court. A meeting with the kings of Spain and Portugal completed his numerous encounters with the European royalty, while Florence and Rome were again visited before embarking in Naples, from where the king returned to Bangkok via Alexandria, Cairo, Aden, and Colombo.

Chulalongkorn’s second journey to Europe ten years later, although not undertaken as a state visit, had in any case a public resonance. In 1907, after reaching Singapore with the royal yacht, the king embarked on a German mail steamer, whose entire first class was reserved for the royal suite, direct to Naples via Penang and Colombo. The journey was punctuated by encounters with the Savoys in Turin, the French President Fallières, King Edward and Queen Alexandra at Windsor Castle, the sovereigns of Denmark and Norway, the Kaiser in Berlin, and the kings of Spain and Italy. In 1901, in between the European tours, the king also visited Java for the third time (after the tours in 1871 and 1896). But after visiting Europe, the colonial world of Southeast Asia apparently had lost much of its attraction for Chulalongkorn, who in 1907 wrote to Damrong
from Italy: "I was deeply bored in Singapore. I am considering saving time on the way back and spending something like three hours in Singapore so as to stay longer in Europe. I enjoy myself only when I am here. All the way through is a terrible tedium"; and "If I do not go to Russia and Turkey, I would have extra time to travel to America. I have a great desire to visit it".66

By the latter years of his reign Chulalongkorn had apparently accumulated a discreet degree of symbolic capital, as the following two cases indicate. The first was the proposal made to the king in 1908 by a New York publisher, H. Bancroft, to publish an English version of his “travel diaries” (the letters sent from Europe to his daughter, Princess Nipha, in 1907 and later collected under the title Klai ban). The publisher’s proposal stemmed from the “belief that the volume would be interesting to the world at large”, and it was made just four days after nothing less than the New York Times announced (on 12 April) that Chulalongkorn was considering having his letters published in Bangkok.67 Even more significant was the award to the king of a honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law by Cambridge University, conferred on 25 June 1907 during his stay in England.68 The reason for this was Chulalongkorn’s patronage of the 39-volume edition of the Sacred Books of the Buddhists, translated at Oxford under the direction of the famous Indologist F. Max Muller, and his support to the 1899 Cambridge expedition in northern Malaya, which resulted in the book The Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula.69 At the conferral ceremony, which was attended by the Prince of Nakhon Sawan, the officers of the Siamese legation in London, and the British financial advisor River-Carnac, the Public Orator in his speech in Latin called the Sacred Books of the Buddhists “monuments of royal munificence” (munificentiae regiae monumenta)

66 King Chulalongkorn, Phraratchathalekha phrabat somdet phrachulachomklao chaoyuhua phraratchathan somdet phrachao boromwong the kromphraya damrong ratchanuphap nai wela sadet phraratcha damneen pratet yurop khrang thi song pho, so, 2450 [King Chulalongkorn’s correspondence to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab from his second journey to Europe in 1907] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2491 [1948]), p. 30.

67 NA, RV, Miscellany 8.3/25.

68 Times, 26 June 1907 (cited in the Bangkok Times, 24 July 1907).

and the king “a most generous man in our University” (*virum in Academiam nostram liberalissimus*).\(^{70}\)

Although consistent with the rationalist revival of Buddhism initiated by Mongkut which laid the basis for the institutionalization of the Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*) accomplished in his own reign,\(^{71}\) Chulalongkorn’s support of what has been called “Orientalist empiricism” had a broader significance in the imperial context of the later nineteenth-century.\(^{72}\) Revealing, in this regard, is an episode which saw Rama V opposed to the Sinhalese *sangha* and which deserves analysis here for it is emblematic of the dynamic of legitimation Chulalongkorn exploited to his advantage by supporting the Oxford edition of the Buddhist scriptures.

Religious intercourse between Siam and Ceylon, from which Buddhism historically spread to Southeast Asia, dated back to several centuries and had followed a two-way path in which the Siamese and Sinhalese *sangha* had, in turn, legitimated each other. Two episodes are particularly significant: in the fifteenth century monks from Chiangmai travelled to Ceylon to be reordained and, on their return, founded a Sinhalese sect; two and a half centuries later, a Siamese mission reached Ceylon to hold an ordination ceremony as part of the Buddhist revival which had been initiated on the island during Dutch colonial rule.\(^{73}\) Yet, it took only three days to undermine this long-standing relationship. En route to Europe on his 1897 journey, Chulalongkorn stopped in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from 19 to 21 April. His presence there had a two-fold dimension. For the British authorities the king was a foreign head of state, if a somewhat minor one, while for the local

\(^{70}\) FAD (ed.), *Prawat kanthunklao thawai parinya nitisan dusathibanthit kittimosak* [Report on the conferral of a honorary doctorate in law to the king] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2519 [1976]).


Buddhist populace he stood as the living embodiment of the universal monarch (chakravartin), an ideal which encompasses the worldly and otherworldly realms. Indeed, Chulalongkorn had previously fulfilled his duty of defender of the faith by presenting the Sinhalese sangha with gifts and an offer for the restoration of a Buddhist monument, the Mirisaveti stupa in Anuradhapura.

In Colombo, the day after his arrival, the king was given a lavish reception. The Buddhist community had erected a pavilion which carried the inscription “Welcome to the Protector of our Religion”. However, an uneasy overlap of cultural and linguistic idioms marked the religious ceremonies, with the king wearing full Western dress and conversing hesitantly in Pali with the monks to the point of asking, in English, “Do you understand me?” In fact, to Queen Saowapha the king confessed he couldn’t understand whether the monks were speaking Pali or Sinhalese. The following day, during a visit to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, where a famous relic is enshrined, the king asked to hold the relic only to have his request refused by a priest whose authority was, in theory, subordinate to his. As a result of the refusal, Chulalongkorn left the temple at once and withdrew his offerings while returning to the monks the gifts they had presented to him. The enquiry that was immediately set up to investigate this unfortunate episode conveniently found the interpreter, one poor Mr Panabokke, responsible for the misunderstanding which had caused offence to the king.

In recounting the Kandy episode in writing to the queen, Chulalongkorn stigmatized the lack of manners and disrespectful attitude of the monks and also cast his doubts on the authenticity of the relic. Later he allegedly told his General Adviser, the Belgian Gustave Rolin-Jacquemyns, a different version of the episode which Rolin-Jacquemyns, in turn, passed on to his fellow countryman Émile Jottrand (a legal adviser to the Siamese government for the period 1898 to

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74 Bangkok Times, 5 May 1897 (quoting from the Times of Ceylon).

75 King Chulalongkorn, Phraarattha1ekha praphat yurop pho.so. 2440, vol. I, pp. 52-53.

76 Bangkok Times, 5 and 19 May 1897 (quoting from the Ceylon Observer).

77 King Chulalongkorn, Phraarattha1ekha praphat yurop pho.so. 2440, vol I, p. 55.
Believing the relic to be an alligator’s tooth worshipped in bad faith by the local monks, the king had simulated his feelings of devotion with the objective of exposing the relic as a forgery. But the refusal of permission to handle the relic foiled his plan and the monks’ uncompromising stance to his request further embittered him.

Admittedly, this version of the episode raises some questions. As it is, however, it clearly indicates Chulalongkorn’s intention to present himself as a rationalist as much as the nominal head of all Theravada Buddhists. A few months after the Kandy episode, alleged relics of the Buddha were discovered at his birthplace. The Viceroy of India offered them to Chulalongkorn, as the only remaining Buddhist monarch, provided he would give a share of the relics to the Buddhist communities of Ceylon and Burma. In this triangular dynamic of legitimation, the British stamped the role of the Siamese king as the Buddhists’ representative by placing their colonial subjects under his moral authority. The economic support given by Chulalongkorn to the translation of the Buddhist scriptures undertaken at the intellectual epicentre of the British empire was another aspect of this dynamic of legitimation. The move was a boost to his self and public images by conjugating the patronage of the faith with that of empirical (modern) scholarship.

III

In the final section of this chapter, I intend to further illuminate the significance of the new habits of consumption of the Siamese modernizing elite by drawing some analogy with other historical experiences. Honourable precursor of the modern Thai consumer, Chulalongkorn was also Siam’s first real absolute monarch, absolutism itself being the result of the administrative reforms implemented in the last decade of the nineteenth century. This simultaneity suggests a parallel with the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), taken by German sociologist Norbert Elias as an exemplary case of his thesis of the “civilizing

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79 A new stupa was built within the precinct of Wat Saket, in Bangkok, to house the relics. Prachoom Chomchai, Chulalongkorn the Great (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Studies, 1965), p. 102.
process" -- the elaboration of civility and the cultivation of taste within the environment of the modern European court.

Allowing for the due differences in the dimensions of their respective courts and in the scale of consumption indulged therein, it can be argued that Rama V, like the Sun King, took on the undisputed role of arbiter of taste in a court whose lifestyle was far removed from that of the majority of the populace. Another intriguing analogy is that both kings ruled for considerable periods of time after having experienced, early in their reigns, rebellions by the nobility: the Fronde that broke out in 1648-52 during Cardinal Mazarin’s regency, in France; and the Front Palace Incident of 1874-75, caused by the claim to power of the “second king” in Siam. Both incidents highlighted the fragile basis of kingly power and the necessity for strengthening the royal grip over the nobility.

In The Court Society, Elias proposes that Louis XIV gained control over the fractious French nobility by making his court the centre of competition for prestige and status. By subjecting nobles to the demanding lifestyle of Versailles (noblesse oblige), Louis XIV caused their resources, already strained by sixteenth-century socio-economic changes, to shrink further, thus increasing their dependence on his goodwill. The king perfected this strategy of subjection by manipulating the status of individual nobles at court while awarding remunerative government offices to the top layer of the bourgeoisie, who could satisfy their pretensions to higher status through the purchase of titles of nobility. The gist of Elias’ argument is that courtly conspicuous consumption was instrumental in effecting the long-term shift of power from a feudal nobility to an absolute monarch. At the same time proximity to the king replaced lineage as the foremost mark of status. While reproducing the social order on which absolutism thrived, the court struggle for rank and prestige also shaped taste and etiquette with far-reaching consequences, for the bourgeois-industrial society which replaced the court society after the demise of the ancien régime inherited to a large extent the latter’s taste and mimicked its consumption habits. One significant difference, however, lay in the

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fact that, while bourgeois consumption appears largely as a private practice, the rationale of courtly splendour was in its display with hardly any consideration given to the individual’s satisfaction.82

Of course, I must not concern myself here with the historical accuracy of Elias’ sociological model of Louis XIV’s court as a “cage” for the aristocracy, which has been recently reassessed,83 but with whether this model can be applied to fifth-reign Siam. According to historians Kasem Sirisumpundh and Neon Snidvongs, the key move to curtail the power of the provincial nobility in the fifth reign was the termination of the phrai system (the master-client relationship that gave nobles direct control over manpower) and the introduction in its place of a centralized system of taxation and military draft.84 The factions of the nobility who contested the king’s authority in Bangkok -- the regent’s party (the so-called “Conservative Siam”) and the party of the “second king” (“Old Siam”)85 -- disappeared with the death of their leaders in the early 1880s. The final co-option of Chulalongkorn’s many half-brothers was their inclusion in the government with the creation of the ministerial cabinet in 1892. Therefore, it would appear that courtly consumption had no part in the strengthening of Rama V’s power over the Siamese nobility. So, it is probably in a different direction that we must look to make sense of the habits of consumption of the fifth-reign court in political terms.

In a study which appeared four years after the original edition of Elias’ The Court Society, Die Rolle des Hofes im Absolutismus (The Role of the Court in Absolutism), J. F. von Krüdener, building on Weber’s idea that the court society was based on economically irrational consumption, argued that status expenditure

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82 Rosalind H. Williams, Dream Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp.31-37.

83 Jeroen Duindam, Myths of Power (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1994).


85 These factions, complemented by that of “Young Siam” (the court’s party), were originally identified and named in an article of the Siam Weekly Advertiser, 31 July 1873. Adams, “Monarchy and Political Change”, p. 48.
prevented savings and investment with the result that the rise of capitalism was delayed and the life expectancy of the ancien régime prolonged.\textsuperscript{86} Yet, courtly splendour was required as a means to impressing subjects, nobles and commoners alike, as well as foreign sovereigns. As Krüdener’s argument is summed up by Duindam, “In the battle for prestige among the rulers of Europe, the size and magnificence of courtly households, palaces and gardens contributed to the outcome”.\textsuperscript{87} As such, courtly splendour expressed not just a ruler’s actual power but also his pretense to it in relation to the power of other monarchs. One example of this status competition is Peter the Great (1682-1725), who openly modelled his self-image and cultural policies on Louis XIV’s.\textsuperscript{88} Peter’s emulation of the lifestyle of the French court, following a visit he made to Versailles in 1717, served, however, a rather different purpose from Louis XIV’s. In Wortman’s words, “Having given the Russian state the semblance of a Western administration, Peter set about creating a Western court culture to unite and educate his servitors”\textsuperscript{89}

This seems a rather more apt analogy with fifth-reign Siam than Louis XIV’s court; even more so if consideration is also given to the “symbolic meaning” of Peter’s reform, which effected “governmental institutions that resembled those of the other major powers, a state to befit a European monarch”.\textsuperscript{90} Likewise, the perception of Siam as a modernizing country can be said to have depended on the adoption of a Westernized lifestyle by the court as much as on the reforms which were implemented in the institutional realm. However, one notable difference lay in the fact that, by the time Chulalongkorn came to exercise absolute power (or the semblance of it), in Europe “an affectation of simplicity and equality [had] replaced resplendent majesty as a royal ideal”,\textsuperscript{91} confining the splendour of the courts of Louis XIV and Peter the Great to an already mythic past.

\textsuperscript{85} Duindam, \textit{Myths of Power}, pp. 22-31.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 24.

\textsuperscript{88} Wortman, \textit{Scenarios of Power}, pp. 45, 48, 53.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 52.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p. 247.
By way of conclusion, a comparative appraisal of courtly patterns of consumption in fifth-reign Siam can be drawn against the background of the European courts in the age of absolutism. Despite its limited political sovereignty, the monarchy in the fifth and sixth reigns deserves the qualification of "absolute" in consideration of the enormous amount of resources the royal household was able to appropriate. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, royal household expenditures rose from 3.75 to 10.37 million Baht between 1892 and 1910. And although a considerable amount of this was destined to "traditional" forms of consumption, such as the staging of court rituals, the incidence of consumption habits informed by Westernized tastes stands out as the novelty of this period. These new habits of consumption provided a means of self-identification for the Siamese elite, who both regarded themselves and were regarded by Westerners as the symbolic representatives of their country, unlike before. In this regard, courtly consumption in fifth-reign Siam was "public" to a significant degree, similar to the European absolutist states of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the contemporary "theatre states" of Southeast Asia, because it was intended as a statement about the ruler's status and prestige.

An assessment of the private dimension of courtly consumption is more difficult. As we shall see in more detail in the following chapters dealing with changes in dress and habitation, Western norms did not replace indigenous ones but rather coexisted or mingled with them. Within the walls of the newly-built Chakri Maha Prasat in Bangkok's Grand Palace, and even more so in the villas built at the turn of the century, the king and the court created a life space partaking of two worlds, in which one could sit on an upholstered Thonet chair while wearing a sarong wrapped around one's waist. Thus, while legitimating a number of elements of a modern (that is, Westernized) lifestyle, fin-de-siècle royal taste-makers also gave sanction to selected indigenous practices and artefacts which have come to be regarded as characteristic features of the Thai cultural heritage.
2 Self-presentation as public image

Perhaps the single most innovative feature in the reinvention of the Siamese monarchy’s public image was the visibility of the sovereign, both in person and as effigy. Prior to the fourth reign the portrayal of someone’s likeness was thought of as endangering their life-spirit. In the king’s case, the taboo extended to the very vision of his person: commoners were forbidden to cast their eyes on the king in public ceremonies and he shielded himself, by hiding behind a curtain or appearing in a dim light, when receiving foreign ambassadors.1 Even after death, portraiture of the king was taboo. Instead, following a practice initiated by the kings of Angkor, Buddha images dedicated to individual monarchs were executed posthumously to promote their worship as late as the third Bangkok reign.2 King Mongkut first challenged this taboo by making himself accessible to foreigners and having self-portraits made in painting, sculpture, and photography -- the newest, yet most magical, representational medium of all.3 On the eve of the "graphic revolution",4 which gave heads of state and other public figures a virtually global audience, this change of attitude was to have enormous importance. Portrait engravings of Siamese royalty which drew on the work of the first photographers active in Bangkok started appearing in Western books and magazines as early as the mid-1860s.5


4 The term was coined by Daniel Boorstin, The Image (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961), Ch. 1, with reference to the development and perfectioning of techniques for the reproduction of images such as photography and the steam press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

5 Probably the earliest book to contain such engravings was Henri Mouhout, Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-China (Siam), Cambodia and Laos, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1864). There followed Anna Leonowens, The English Governess at the Siamese Court (London, 1870 [anastatic repr. Singapore: Oxford UP, 1988]); Frank Vincent, The Land of the White Elephant (London, 1873
Their intensifying relations with the colonial society of Southeast Asia in the following years also awakened the Siamese elite to the importance of a "presentation of self" adequate to the status and position they were claiming within the Victorian ecumene. Indeed, long before the celebrated institutional reforms of the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was the elite’s personal appearance that underwent reform. Along with longer hair, hose and shoes became part of the daily outfit of the court and officials despite their dubious convenience in the hot and wet tropical climate. As for the betel-chewing habit, whose effect was repugnant to Western aesthetic norms, a different approach was adopted. A Belgian government recruit, struck upon his arrival in Bangkok in 1898 by the blackened teeth of princes and officials, commented: “We have come to learn that they only clean them when they want to be photographed, and then we see their admirable white teeth!”

This comment points at the self-awareness of the modernizing elite when it came to “making a spectacle of themselves”, revealing that their presentation of self was largely a conscious act even before representational media, photography above all, enhanced it with its more or less explicit artifices (posing, lighting, retouching). It also indicates the appreciation of photographs as purveyor of idealized appearances, which even today is manifest in the display of portraits of Chulalongkorn in a Western-style dress uniform or well-tailored suit as key visual signifiers of Thailand’s self-image as a modern country. In this chapter I shall first discuss changes in the Bangkok elite’s “clothes-body complex”, to use the amusing jargon of cultural studies, to then examine how their new style of self-presentation, and visual representations of it, were put to use in the projection of a modern public image of the monarchy.

[anastatic repr. Singapore: Oxford UP, 1988]). Bowring’s Kingdom of Siam (1857) contained engravings of landscapes and some colour lithographs of non-identified characters (like Crawfurd’s earlier book already did), plus one of King Mongkut wearing a mantel and a cap, which was used as the first volume’s frontispiece.


7 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 2.

As in the other Indianized courts of Southeast Asia, self-presentation -- from language to demeanour -- was a highly refined technique in the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok courts. Similar to Europe, China, and Japan, there also existed in precolonial Southeast Asia sumptuary laws which prescribed, at least in theory, the kind of dress suitable to one's social status and position. But while sumptuary laws were codified in the legal texts of the Malay world, apparently this was not the case in the central Thai courts. Their existence is attested to by foreign observers such as la Loubère (late seventeenth century) and John Bowring (mid-nineteenth century). Bowring, in particular, reported that "there is universal passion for jewelry and ornaments of the precious metals" but that "the law forbids the use of certain garments to any but persons of elevated condition".  

The principal items of dress reserved for the aristocracy in the Ayutthayan and early Bangkok periods were Indian-produced silk and cotton cloths with decorative patterns denoting rank (phalaiyang). Daguerreotype portraits of nobles taken in the mid 1860s show them sporting jackets of Persian or European manufacture over a silk lower garment (phanung), a fashion which had originated at the time of the commercial and urban growth of Southeast Asia of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. They also display the indigenous hairstyle with close-shaved sides and a tuft of hair on top of the head (mahatthai) which was followed by women too, albeit in a slightly less drastic version (phomthat). Engravings and a daguerreotype of the Siamese envoys who were received at the court of Queen Victoria in 1857 show them with hair down to their shoulders. According to Prince Damrong this was the first time the mahatthai was dispensed with in

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12 See sketches of the envoys originally published in the *Illustrated London News* (5 December 1857) and a daguerreotype taken at the British court by an Italian photographer (one Caldesti) in Sakda, Kasattri, pp. 29-30.
favour of European hairstyle. In fact, the choice is puzzling because such a hairstyle had since long been out of fashion. Westerners who came to Ayutthaya in the eighteenth century could have sported it, but certainly not those who had been arriving to Bangkok since the 1820s. At any rate, the gesture was merely ad hoc and the envoys resumed the mahathai on their return home.

The oldest extant daguerreotype from Siam, which is also the first contemporary image of a Siamese king, dates to the mid-1850s. It shows Mongkut, bareheaded and with a dark robe over a white shirt, sitting next to his first queen Thipsirin (Chulalongkorn’s mother), who has a cropped hairstyle and wears an embroidered silk breast wrap (sabai) and a silk phanung. The daguerreotype, conserved at the Smithsonian Institution (Washington D.C.), was included with a missive and presents sent in July 1856 to U.S. President Franklin Pierce in return for gifts presented by the American embassy that negotiated the first treaty between the two countries. Mongkut was well aware that Western heads of state had their portraits circulated as a form of public relations. In 1855 Bowring noted images of the Pope, Queen Victoria, the U.S. president, and the Chinese emperor inside the audience hall (Amarin Winitchai) in the Grand Palace. According to Sakda, the portrait of the royal couple must have been taken either by Bishop Pallegoix or Father J.B. Larnaudie who, following a request by Pallegoix, had brought the first daguerreotype camera to Bangkok in July 1845, six years after its invention and two years after daguerreotype portraiture had become commercially available in Singapore.

In 1856 the British envoy Harry Parks, sent to Bangkok for the ratification of the Bowring Treaty, delivered a number of gifts on behalf of Queen Victoria including a camera. With this more portraits of the royals were taken by luang Wisut Yothamat (Mot Amatyakun), the director of the Mint, who was the first Thai to master the technique of photography. His name was even mentioned in a short

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13 Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Khwamsongcham, pp. 251-52.
14 See below, Ch. 6, about Mongkut’s missive to the U.S. president.
16 Sakda, Kasattri lae klong, p. 24.
report, “Photography in Siam” by one Patterson Dubois, which was published in the September 1865 issue of The Philadelphia Photographer (no. 165, p. 151).\textsuperscript{17} Two daguerreotypes -- one showing Mongkut alone in regal attire, the other him and Queen Thepsirin holding two of their children on their laps -- were presented to Queen Victoria by the Siamese envoys who were received at Windsor Castle on 19 November 1857. Separate portraits of Mongkut and Thepsirin were also delivered by the Siamese embassy received by Pope Pius IX at the Vatican on 21 March 1861 and Napoleon III at Fontainebleau on the following 27 June.\textsuperscript{16}

The Siamese envoys at the British and French courts could not fail to notice that Prince Albert and Napoleon III presented themselves in dress uniforms and not in the robes usually associated with royalty. The observation of this usage at two of Europe’s most powerful courts may explain why King Mongkut, in most of the photographs of him taken in his later years, appears wearing various kinds of dress uniform (with gold leaf embroidery, similar to those of French admirals and generals), a bicorn hat, and the Légion d’Honneur decoration sent to him by the French emperor.\textsuperscript{19} Phra Pinklao, the “second king”, had portraits of himself taken with uniform and bicorn too, albeit without sash.\textsuperscript{20} Westernization, however, seems hardly an apt definition in this case. In Europe, military uniforms were first adopted by armies in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{21} Over the period 1760-1830 splendid uniform became the accepted court dress in practically every European court, mirroring their progressive militarization.\textsuperscript{22} Emphasizing the symbolic aspect of the fashion for uniforms at court, Kantorowicz argued that it pointed at the resurgence of the Roman ideal of ruler as military

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 33, 59-61. Luang Wisut was later bestowed the title of Phraya Krasapana Kicchakot.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 35-37.

\textsuperscript{19} Among the presents for Rama IV entrusted to the Siamese envoys in 1861 there were also busts of Empress Eugenie and Napoleon III (now in the Chakri Throne Hall), the latter in military uniform. Apinan, “Modern Art”, pp. 42-43.

\textsuperscript{20} Photographs in Sakda, Kasattri jaeklong, pp. 42, 78 (Mongkut), and p. 50 (Phra Pinklao).


leader. But neither the historical nor the symbolic explanation of this European fashion seems to apply to fourth-reign Siam. Unrelated to the local situation, Mongkut’s and Pinklao’s self-display in dress uniform should be understood as the fulfilment of individual fantasy: the desire to identify with foreign heads of state whose fame and power were well-known.

Dating to around 1861 are the two earliest extant images of Chulalongkorn as an eight year-old. He appears in both wearing a shirt and phanung, and barefoot with large anklets on both feet. The photographer is unknown. A series of shots taken at the end of 1865 by pioneer Scottish photo-journalist John Thomson (1837-1921), shortly before Chulalongkorn’s tonsure ceremony, show the future king similarly dressed but wearing velvet slippers embroidered with gold thread, a privilege of grown-up nobles (Fig. 2.1). Other portraits of Chulalongkorn as a teenager, and probably those of him in regal attire at his first coronation ceremony in November 1868, were taken by Siam’s first commercial photographer, Chit Chitrakani (1830-92). In 1863 he had established, under his Christian name Francis Chit, a photographic studio on a floating house near the St Cruz church in Thonburi, on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River. Chit’s business was widely advertised in Bangkok’s early papers such as the Bangkok Recorder and the Bangkok Summary. One such advertisement (January 1865) announced: “He has on hand, for sale, a great variety of photographs of palaces, temples, buildings, scenery and public men of Siam”. Chit became the first “appointed photographer to His Majesty the King of Siam”, as the logo of his studio proclaimed, and was granted the title of luang Akhani Narumit for his services to the royal household.

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24 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 35, 38.

25 Ibid, pp. 46-9. Thomson described the session for the taking of King Mongkut’s own portrait in his travelogue, The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China (London: Sampson Low, 1875), pp. 94-95. The photographs of the Bangkok royalty taken by Thomson were rendered into engravings (though without acknowledgement) for Leonowens’ The English Governess. A number of Thomson’s photographs taken in Siam are in Sakda, Kasattri lae klung, pp. 78-87.

26 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 57-60, 77-81.

27 Ibid., pp. 61-69.
Fig. 2.1 “The future modernizer as Oriental prince”: Chulalongkorn photographed by John Thomson in the courtyard of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, c. 1865; Sakda, Kasattri, p. 80. This photograph was rendered into an engraving to illustrate Anna Leonowen’s The English Governess at the Siamese Court.
The contribution of photography to the construction, more than the mere projection, of the monarchy's modern public image deserves emphasis. It has been pointed out that the act of posing in front of the camera for the taking of portraits and the subsequent observation of one's own image enhanced self-awareness of deportment and facial expressions among those who could not afford to have a portrait taken before the invention of photography. The same might have been true for the Siamese elite too because of the previous taboo on portraiture, and the growing poise they showed in front of the camera can be taken as evidence. But before dealing with the deployment of a new mode of self-presentation, I shall examine in some detail in the next section the sartorial characteristics of the new dress adopted by the court and the officials.

II

The one and a half decades between Chulalongkorn's trip to India and his first visit to Europe (i.e., 1872 to 1897) was the period in which the major restyling of the elite look was accomplished. Manifestations of the clothes-body complex that most evidently jarred with Western customs, such as the cropped hairstyle and the partial bodily exposure, were abandoned although Western dress by no means became the sartorial norm. Tellingly dress reform affected men first, as they were most exposed to the Western gaze. Indeed, already at the beginning of the fourth reign a regulation had been introduced, perhaps due to the advice of Mongkut's missionary acquaintances, which required those present at royal audiences to wear shirts. In essence, what distinguished the elite's clothes-body complex in the fifth-reign from earlier usage were longer hair (and for men mustaches as well, following contemporary Western fashion) and more, and partly novel, clothes and accessories, particularly hose and shoes.

The adoption of Western hairstyles and clothes was apparently prompted by the fact that, as Wyatt writes with implicit value judgement of Chulalongkorn's


first tour abroad, "The king and regent had no desire to appear in Singapore and Batavia as barbarians".  Photographs taken during that first visit (March-April 1871) and the subsequent one to Burma and India (December 1871 to March 1872) show the young king and his entourage wearing jackets of various style, including military, and even frock coats over a phanung (folded in such a way to look like knickerbockers), and white hose under it. As a consequence of the king's visit to Calcutta, the proprietor of a local tailoring establishment moved his business to Bangkok, probably in the hope of increasing his profits in a city where services catering to the foreign community had just started developing. The Ramsey Firm on Bamrung Muang Road was thus established, producing both male and female Western-style garments.

An insight into the Bangkok tailoring market in the early 1870s is found in the autobiography of Prince Wachirayan Warorot (1860-1921), one of Chulalongkorn's half-brothers and the future supreme patriarch of the Siamese sangha. Following two and a half months spent as a novice monk, thirteen year-old Prince Wachirayan was given the considerable sum of four hundred Baht by his older brother to purchase clothes and other personal items. He thus started considering the options available to someone of his station:

To have my clothes tailored at a Chinese shop would have been inappropriate for me, as they say. There was plenty of clothing, but I was ashamed to wear it. Tailoring at European stores cost more, so my first inclination was to go there. . . . I was also unhappy about using the Indian shops as they were not as prosperous looking. Furthermore, the Indian shops required cash payment. In the European stores I could make the purchase myself. They granted me credit and I did not have to pay cash . . . I only had to sign my name. When the debt grew large, they would periodically send a bill requesting payment. The goods they sold were well-made and one could display them with pride. One could identify these goods from their beauty, even if the Indian shops had similar goods.

From Prince Wachirayan's recollection we see that it was the prestige of the shop that ultimately determined his choice; and European shops, thanks to both the

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30 Wyatt, Politics of Reform, p. 41.
31 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 89-91.
32 Damrong, Khwamsongcham, p. 269.
quality of their goods and their shopkeepers' gentlemanly manners (no cash payment required), enjoyed the highest prestige. The prince's comparison with the Indian shops selling "similar goods" to the European ones is particularly telling as, until only a couple of decades earlier, the Siamese nobility displayed their status through cloth imported from India and in principle reserved to them alone.

Even if sumptuary regulations were still enforced at the beginning of the fifth reign, the coming into operation of commercial tailors in Bangkok clearly made them obsolete. Now the sole condition for appropriating European clothes, and the civilized aura emanating from them, was wealth, so that style, in dressing as in other consumption practices, no longer reflected status but determined it. The possibility that anybody had, provided he was furnished with money, to dress up in style -- in other words, to demonstrate he was a civilized individual -- was fully appreciated by early urbanites outside the nobility such as Thianwan (1842-1915), a pioneer public intellectual who spent seventeen years in a Siamese jail for the crime of contempt of court. A merchant and a practising attorney at the same time, Thianwan was a fervent advocate of change known for his fashionable clothes who claimed to have been the first man in Siam to sport a European hairstyle, grow a beard, and eschew betel-chewing.34

The adoption of Western fashion as a mark of civilization in the fifth reign's early years deserves a lengthier consideration for it is emblematic of the pattern of appropriation of foreign cultural imports in this period. As mentioned above, the combination of clothes of various provenance had been favoured by elite men for a long time even though coveted garments came from India and the Middle East. The shift towards European-style and European-imported clothes around the 1870s is consistent with the overall change in courtly habits of consumption discussed above. Yet fashionable garments, now coming from Europe, continued to be sported as part of a hybrid ensemble. Even the newly-created male and female semi-formal court dress which shall be described below, blended garments of various provenance. Full Western dress was first adopted in the 1890s but only for travelling abroad, European colonies in Asia included.

The Bangkok elite were by no means the only ones to favour eclectic dress. In the mid-nineteenth century composite styles were very popular in Indian cities, particularly Calcutta. It has been contended that, in this way, “Bengali men invented their own new fashion which retained what they liked of Indian garments while adding what they admired from Europe. This enabled a man to be ‘in fashion’ without having to Westernize his appearance completely”.

But eclectic outfits eventually attracted the criticism of both the conservative Bengalis and the British, and whoever wore them was publicly ridiculed as a “baboo”. Some upper-class Indian men found the solution to this predicament in the adoption of distinct “sartorial identities”, whereby one wore European dress in his city office or when travelling abroad and Indian dress in his own home or village. However, this was not the end to the problem of what to wear. First, the British strengthened “sartorial correctness” in order to escape imitation. Then, early in the twentieth century, this Janus-like sartorial identity was made unviable by the swadeshi (home industry) movement and Gandhi’s advocacy of the khadi (handwoven cloth), which polarized European and Indian cloth(e)s as symbols of foreign domination and the struggle against it.

The endorsement of the Victorian ecumene in this study as an encompassing conceptual framework invites the full exploration of the parallel with the Indian urban elite. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Bangkok was, or at least was becoming, as cosmopolitan a city as Calcutta (think of the Calcutta-based tailor who moved to Bangkok after Chulalongkorn’s visit). Eclectic dressing styles which blended the trappings of modernity with indigenous garments can be seen as an expression of the broader “refashioning” which the social identity of the local elites (in both cases initially the men) was undergoing at that time. In India, however, the need for the elite to manifest their political stance eventually led this most cosmopolitan segment of Indian society to reject eclectic and Western dress. In Bangkok, on the other hand, not only was the court and the elite’s eclectic dress beyond criticism because of the absence of formal colonial rule, but even later, in the first half of the twentieth century, the symbolic association of Western


36 Ibid., pp. 52-53 and Ch. 3.
dress with civilized status continued to hold true as the ruling elite did not have to cast their identity in opposition to the West.

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Sometime after the king's return from his tour of India, semi-formal attire was introduced for men to wear at court, from the king to the princes and officials. It consisted of a white jacket with a high collar and five centre-front buttons called ratcha pattaen ("royal pattern"), which was worn with a silk chongkrabaen, white hose and shoes. This attire, which court officials still wear today on ceremonial occasions, is an instance of invented tradition like many forms of "national" dress that originated around the same time. In fact, no single outfit or uniform was in use in the previous reign. The sartorial uniformity this innovation effected around the person of the king seems to prefigure the administrative unification of the kingdom under a centralized, as well as uniformly clothed, modern officialdom. By having noblemen and court officials dress like himself, the king fostered in-group identification by the elite, whose dress visibly differentiated them from the rest of the population and established their "respectability" in Western eyes.

Changes in the style of military uniforms would appear to have been a more confused affair. The lack of uniforms in the mid-1850s was emphasized by John Bowring, who saw among soldiers at court "costumes as multifarious as the tribes and tongues of their wearers". Almost thirty years later (1883), Norwegian naturalist Carl Bock described the infantry and marines, as well as the newer corp of the royal pages, as wearing European-style uniforms, while the older corp of pages retained coloured jackets and large round hats. Bock commented: "The Chinese and European army tailors are continually hitting new designs and patterns for the clothing of the army in which . . . there must be an endless number of regiments, if the variety of uniforms is to be taken as a guide". Another Westerner writing in 1899 described some of the uniforms as "imitated from the
soldiers of the 1830s, shoulder-belts crossed over their breasts, hats extended upwards".39

Photographic portraits of Chulalongkorn in dress uniform dating to the 1870s and 1880s show that over that period the elongated jackets worn fastened tight at the waist were shortened; the patent leather pumps were replaced by pointed shoes; and a Prussian-style pointed helmet added to the feathered one. Meanwhile the chongkrabaen continued to be used as lower garment. As in civilian dress, the matching of a “foreign” upper garment with the indigenous lower garment produced a distinctive ensemble which, in the case of military dress, emphasized its ceremonial function. It would appear that only in the mid-1890s (in any case before the 1896 trip to Java) was the chongkrabaen replaced by trousers, a change which could be linked to the need to boost the “modernity” of the Siamese military after the humiliation suffered at the hands of France in 1893. Possibly around the same time the king started wearing dress uniform in place of ceremonial dress at public rituals, including the kathin (end of the Buddhist Lent) -- a change that, at least in the eyes of Westerners looking for the exotic, greatly impoverished the aura of the ritual (Fig. 2.2).41

Following changes in the men’s look, the clothes-body complex of female courtiers also underwent a transformation during the same period. Two features stood out above all. First, hair was grown longer than before and combed backward (a hairstyle called dokkrathum or phomsan), while later in the reign some young princesses took to growing very long hair. Second, the body was entirely clothed, perhaps in accordance with Victorian standards of morality and certainly in contrast with traditional fashion, which left the neck, the right shoulder and arm, the lower left arm and the feet bare. The court costume in use from the early 1880s throughout the end of the fifth reign consisted of a high-

39 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 199.

40 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 93, 120, 140.

41 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 226. A photograph of Chulalongkorn, in ceremonial dress and with the conical crown, being carried on a litter for the kathin ceremony probably in 1881 is in Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 133. This photograph was rendered in an engraving for Bock’s Temples and Elephants. In Anake’s book, the latest photograph in which the king appears wearing the ceremonial garb, together with hose and shoes, was taken on the occasion of Vajiravudh’s tonsure ceremony in December 1892 (p. 152).
King Chulalongkorn carried on a palanquin in a procession to Wat Bowon Niwet for the kathin ceremony, late 1890s; Pictorial Record, p. 133. “There was a lot of pomp in all this and especially the umbrellas with their superb harmony of colours... But there is a very limited religious aura the moment the King appears in an European military uniform with a helmet adorned with feathers.” Jottrand, In Siam, p. 226.
necked blouse (sua lukmai) trimmed with lace, with the old breast wrap (sabai) worn over it as a decorative shoulder-shawl (a simple sash later replaced it); chongkrabaen, often made of a cloth of European manufacture; European stockings and high-heeled shoes. For special occasions, such as sitting for a photographic portrait, this costume was enhanced by wearing a brocaded instead of a plain silk cloth for the chongkrabaen; a more elaborately frilled blouse (and, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the model with large puffed sleeves made popular by Queen Alexandra); and jewels of Western design such as rings, bracelets, necklaces, and occasionally, earrings (Fig. 2.3).

Children were not left out in the reclothing of the court. Whereas in the fourth reign young royal princes still wore two basic garments, a shirt and a phanung, Chulalongkorn’s own children were clad, at least for the taking of photographic portraits, in extravagant clothes (from frocks and velvet suits to miniature uniforms) that emphasized, in spirit if not exactly in style, the privileged status they shared with their European “cousins”. At the same time, distinctive ornamentation like bangles and anklets continued to be worn, even if over socks, bringing together indigenous and Westernized symbols of status (Fig. 2.4).

Although this study is concerned with the elite, it might be useful to draw a parallel with the society at large. While the wearing of more clothes than the ordinary populace as a strategy of distinction was by no means unknown in the courts of central Siam, the dress reform of the 1870s and 1880s made the contrast even more evident. Aside from officials and the rare educated, fashion-conscious urbanites such as Thianwan, very few people wore shoes and hose in Bangkok at that time. Most of the urban populace who entered the field of vision of some photographer appear wearing just a baggy shirt — or, if women, a shawl (phahom) — over their phanung. Some might have worn even fewer clothes judging from a decree issued in January 1899, in preparation for the forthcoming visit of Prince Henri of Prussia. The decree, advertised all over Bangkok, established that the phanung worn by men should cover the knee (with the exception of those

— Robyn Maxwell, Textiles of Southeast Asia (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 374. Maxwell points out that blouses decorated with lace became a main element in the costume of well-to-do women in cities across the whole of Southeast Asia in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.
Fig. 2.3  "Showing off for a portrait": Queen Saowapha in special occasion clothes. Photograph taken by Francis Chit & Son, Bangkok (marks in original); Sakda, Kasattri, p. 145.
returning from bathing in the canal); that all women without exception must have their breasts covered in public; and that children could not go around naked except when bathing (for those under fifteen years of age, their parents would be held responsible). There were penalties of one Baht, four Baht for second-time offenders, and twelve for recidivists, although few were actually fined in the first two weeks of the decree's enforcement.43

The Siamese authorities' preoccupation with presenting the forthcoming guest with a sufficiently civilized image of the people living in the royal capital is too evident to need comment, although Prince Henri was not the first member of the European aristocracy to visit Bangkok and one should ascertain whether similar decrees had already been issued for previous state visits and quickly forsaken or if some particular reasons made such a move seem necessary on that occasion. Such as decree stands as a precedent for the cultural mandates (rattaniyom) which were issued by the Phibun government in the early 1940s and were similarly aimed at modernizing the lifestyle of the Siamese by having them stop chewing betel and wearing Western-style clothes, hats, and especially shoes.44

III

Between May and August 1896, Chulalongkorn toured Singapore and Java with a suite of twenty-five persons. Western dress was opted for, and a contemporary source puts the cost of the reclothing of the royal retinue (attendants included) to twenty to thirty thousand Baht, although such a figure could be exaggerated.45 Photographs were taken at various stages of the journey,46 which in this respect could be regarded as an occasion for rehearsing self-presentation on the colonial stage in preparation for the visit to Europe the following year. The king's travel diary noted on 17 May reads: "Today is Sunday. I would have loved to lie lazily in bed but it was not possible. I had to get up earlier than usual because there are

43 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 96.
44 Wyatt, Thailand, p. 255.
45 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 311
46 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 172-184.
Fig 2.4  The children of Queen Sawang (Sawarin) c. 1890; note the anklets worn over their socks; *Pictorial Record*, p.163.
a few days left [in Singapore] and we had to sit for the taking of photographs at Mr Lenz’s [studio]. The heat almost made us dizzy when we arrived at 9 o’clock.47 At Lenz’s studio several portraits were taken of the king alone and with the male members of the suite, showing them dressed in the typical male outfit of the time (trousers, frock coat, waist-coat, bow-tie or necktie, top hat and walking stick) as well as in the most recent three-piece, light coloured suits and the Homburg hat whose vogue had been launched by the Prince of Wales (Fig 2.5).

At his arrival in Bangka on 23 May, Chulalongkorn noted in his diary: “I was surrounded by the crowd, but they retreated as I proceeded. It is an advantage for me to wear European dress because the locals fear Westerners”.48 A group photograph taken on 6 July at the palace of the sultan of Solo, Susuhunan, shows him and Chulalongkorn arm-in-arm. But while the former is wearing a composite costume with embroidered velvet jacket over a kind of sarong, the latter is in full Western-style uniform, including white gloves. As for Queen Saowapha and Chum, a minor consort of the king, who accompanied the king in the trip, they appear in outdoor photographs wearing fashionable Western morning dresses with decorated hats and fans but occasionally also the Bangkok court costume (lace blouse and chongkrabaen).

Self-presentation was of course a major component of the 1897 European tour, and one which won the Siamese considerable favour. Apart from the encounter with Europeans monarchs and heads of state, the tour afforded Chulalongkorn the opportunity for experiencing the “embrace of the crowd” which was not yet a feature of the Siamese theatre of power.49 The visit also represented an event which aroused public curiosity and was given ample coverage by the local presses. Although the public image of Chulalongkorn as a reformer keen to civilize his country had been enjoying currency in Europe before his visit, the appreciation of his manners and personality expressed by the media on that occasion was an important addition to the public image of the monarchy.

47 King Chulalongkorn, Rayathang thiao chawa kwa song duan [Narrative of a journey to Java of over two months] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2468 [1925]), Ch. 9, p. 15.

48 Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 30.

49 See Ch. 5 for developments in this direction.
Fig. 2.5 "Gentlemen of their time": King Chulalongkorn and entourage taken by Robert Lenz in his studio in Singapore on 17 May, 1896. Above, Pictorial Record, p. 174; below, Sakda, Kasattri, p. 90.
difficult to pin down, the influence of the press comments on public opinion in the West cannot be dismissed. Well before the birth of stardom brought about by cinema in the early twentieth century, beauty and elegance had been deeply associated with virtue in the Western worldview. For the ancient Greeks, we must remember, heroes were by nature “handsome and kind” (kalos kai agatós). Such ideas can be seen reverberating in comments like that of the National Geographic Magazine which, in a story on elephant riding at Ayutthaya published in 1907, described Chulalongkorn as “one of the most kindly looking men now gracing a throne”, adducing in its support the fact that foreign diplomats called him “the handsomest man in Asia”.50

Even a cursory review of the comments by the press on Rama V in three of the countries he visited in Europe might suffice to give an idea of the overall tone of the responses to his visit. In Italy, the Venetian newspaper La Gazzetta di Venezia, after noting that everybody in the king’s suite wore Western dress except the two aides-de-camp, went on to describe Chulalongkorn as “an extremely cultured man, also in the European sense, full of intelligence and political skill”. Florence’s paper, La Nazione, remarked on the king’s passionate conversation about art and his “agreeable and sharp observations particularly in front of paintings of women”; and how, on hearing the name of Pauline Borghese being mentioned, “the king, who is very knowledgeable about European history, wittily touched on episodes in Napoleon Bonaparte’s life”. Even the unavoidable dash of Orientalist fantasy by the journalist, a harem housing “800 odalisques”, was accommodated to suit Chulalongkorn’s gentlemanly image: “The king has not stepped in it for years as he is in love with Queen Sawang”.51 A correspondent from Florence for the Swiss paper Journal de Genève captured an important aspect of the visit, the patronizing of artists’ and photographers’ studios: “For the ten days that he [Rama V] has been with us, his chief desire seems to have been to have himself painted, and represented in sculpture, and also photographed . . . and not content with so many portraits and busts, as he is a model husband, he

50 Cited in the Bangkok Times, 10 March 1907.

51 La Gazzetta di Venezia, 15 May 1897; La Nazione, 10 June 1897. Queen Sawang was Saowapha’s older sisters, but it is likely that it was Saowapha whom the piece’s writer actually referred to.
has had portraits painted and busts sculptured of his wife. Here [in Florence] people like him very much, because he is simple, cordial, in a word alla mano as we say.\(^{52}\)

The British readership, for reasons having to do with the empire as much as with their particular fascination with royalty, was probably the most familiar with the Siamese monarchy. An engraving of Chulalongkorn appeared in The Graphic as early as 1872,\(^{53}\) and many of the nineteenth-century travelogues on Siam were originally published in London. In announcing the imminent visit of the king of Siam, Britain’s Press Association announced that he was to take up residence in the neighbourhood of London and his stay was likely “to extend to at least one year”.\(^{54}\) Overcoming the limitation in printing photographic images, the British magazines had engravers depict the various stages of Rama V’s visit, such as his disembarkation at Spithead, his arrival at the London railway station, and the luncheon with Queen Victoria at Osborne House. Particularly apposite to the present discussion is the appraisal of Chulalongkorn’s clothes by Britain’s leading trade journal, The Tailor and Cutter:

It can be seen at a glance that his clothes were made by an English tailor. The King, judged by his dress, looks like a typical English gentleman. Perhaps the silk-facing on the lapel of his neatly-fitting coat is a little too heavy for the real West-End article, and, in one or two small matters of details, criticism might be justifiable; but taking the dress as a whole, it does credit both to His Majesty’s good taste and to the tailor who produced the garment.\(^{55}\)

By the time of his visit to England, Chulalongkorn was well-known as a fervent anglophile. In no other country during the 1897 tour did he spend so long a time as in England, where eleven of his sons were studying together with several noblemen.\(^{56}\) Still, The Tailor and Cutter with its comments did more than endorse

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52 Cited in the Bangkok Times, 21 July 1897. For an account of Rama V’s touring of painters’ studios in Italy see Apinan, “Modern Art”, pp. 73-8.

53 The Graphic, 10 February 1872; in Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 94.

54 Statement cited in the Bangkok Times, 11 September 1897.

55 Quoted in the Bangkok Times, 11 September 1897.

56 This is the number of Chulalongkorn’s sons appearing with their father in a series of photographs taken at Taplow Court (Maidenhead) on the occasion of the king’s visit in 1897. Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 204-8.
the established view of the king of Siam as an educated, well-mannered, and even attractive Oriental sovereign. It granted him the anthropological status of an equal by virtue of his clothes ("a typical English gentleman") while implicitly questioning his aristocratic credentials as a result of the punctilious scrutiny of sartorial details -- a revealing mark of social distinction. But ten years later, the conferral by Cambridge University of a honorary doctorate to Chulalongkorn considerably increased his symbolic capital and enable him to pose for a full-length photo portrait in academic gown (Fig. 2.6).

France was the only country in Europe with which Siam had historical precedents in diplomatic relation: the exchange of embassies in the years 1685-87, during the celebrated reigns of Louis XIV and Narai. Yet, in the tense climate which characterized the relations between the two countries in the 1890s, the French comments were, unsurprisingly, ambivalent. Shortly before his visit, a piece in a magazine described the king as “very intelligent and learned . . . a polyglot equally at ease in speaking French and English”, but concluded on a negative note by contrasting his reforming spirit with the punishment purportedly reserved for an unfaithful woman of his harem, condemned to starve to death.57

Upon his arrival in Paris on 11 September, Chulalongkorn’s self-presentation mirrored these inimical attitudes. Not only did he show up in dress uniform, as in most occasions in the course of the tour; he also responded with the military salute to the crowd’s ovation, a gesture whose significance was not missed by press reports.58

In any case, the presence of such an exceptional visitor excited the attention of the French press. As Chulalongkorn arrived in Paris, the illustrated supplement of Le Petit Journal (which already in 1893, at the time of the Franco-Siamese incident, had on its cover an engraving of him and Queen Sawang) published a portrait of the king in dress uniform with a gold-thread garb on his shoulders.59


58 Bangkok Times, 25 October 1897.

59 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 156, 193-95. It is worth pointing out that since Anake rediscovered these images and used them for the Toshiba 1989 Calendar circulated in Thailand, they have become enormously popular through reproduction in books, magazines, and even New Year greeting cards.
"Dress as cultural capital": King Chulalongkorn after being presented with an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University on 25 June, 1907; photograph taken by W. & D. Downey, court photographers, at their studio on Ebury St., Cambridge; Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 242.
The king’s visits to Napoleon’s tomb and the Eiffel Tower were also rendered in
illustration. In these images, as well in those published by British periodicals,
Chulalongkorn was generally represented as tall as his European hosts, which was
not the actual case. Whether this modification was out of courtesy towards the
king or, rather, representational conventions can be argued; in any case, the fact
that the press did not exploit the height disparity between Rama V and his hosts
as a way of suggesting Siam’s political and military inferiority in the international
arena is worth underlining.

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The visit by the Siamese royal suite to Lenz’s photographic studio in Singapore in
1896 was mentioned above. Following the lead of his German countrymen who
had opened photographic studios in Bangkok in the 1880s and early 1890s catering
to both the foreign and Thai elites (G. R. Lambert, H. Schüren, W. K. Loftus, F.
Schumann), Robert Lenz opened a Bangkok branch early in 1894. Lenz ‘s studio
became the king’s favourite, and almost all portraits of Chulalongkorn and Queen
Saowapha after that date were taken there, including a royal family group that
served as model for the painting The Royal Family by Odoardo Gelli (Fig. 2.7). Scharf writes that by the 1870s reliance on photographs was common even for the
best portrait artists, and in the following decades one session was all that was
needed to perfect a portrait. When a well-known artist was involved, sitting for
several sessions were largely motivated by the patron’s quest for the prestige.
Gelli (1852-1933), one of the “professors” Rama V met in Florence in June 1897,
had spent three years as a court painter in Vienna and, as the king pointed out in
a letter to the queen, had to his credit “fifteen portraits of various kings”. It
transpires from this letter that Gelli was commissioned to paint the family portrait
before the king visited him, as he had already started working on it at that time.

60 Sakda, Kasattri lae klong, pp. 148-77. Following Lenz’s retirement in 1907, his business was taken
over by his associates, E. Groote and C. Pruss.
61 Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 188-89.
63 Chulalongkorn, Phrachatratthalekha . praphat yurop pho.so 2440, vol. I, pp 194-95; Apinan,
“Modern Art”, pp. 80-84. After the completion of the portrait in 1899, Gelli was conferred the brevet
of Grand Officer of the Royal Order of the Crown of Siam (NA, RV, Min. of Privy Seal 16.2/92).
Fig. 2.7 Odoardo Gelli, *The Royal Family*, 1899; oil on canvas, Private Room, Chakri Throne Hall, Bangkok; Apinan, *Modern Art.*
The Royal Family depicts Chulalongkorn, Saowapha and five of their sons: Atsadang, Chuthathut, Prachadhipok (the future Rama VII), Vajiravudh, and Chakrabongse. The king and the queen, seated on gilded armchairs, occupy the centre of the scene. The king wears the dress uniform of Army Field Marshal (white jacket and black trousers) which was chosen for most portraits of the latter half of the reign. He holds the plumed helmet on his right knee and the sword’s hilt in his left hand. The queen’s costume combines a puffed-sleeve blouse and a long skirt of silk brocade, apparently modelled on the Northern-style tubular phanung (phasin). Saowapha is portrayed in the curious pose, looking obliquely away from the viewer, she displays in the photograph taken by Lenz. The three oldest princes stand next to their parents, the crown prince alone between them, while the youngest two sit by the queen’s side. Except for Chakrabongse and Vajiravudh, in dress uniform, the princes wear the sailor suit that was then fashionable in Europe for children of the upper classes.64

Apart from the substitution of the two oldest princes,65 Gelli followed closely (one could say unimaginatively) Lenz’s photograph but for the interior setting. Instead of the studio props and background, the subjects were portrayed in an ambience which is presumably that of the Chakri Maha Prasat in the Grand Palace. From the beholder’s right to left, the décor in the painting features: the statue of a female bather on a large pedestal; a massive doorway framed by columns (exactly depicting those in the palace) with stands holding vases on both sides; drapery concealing the door; parts of a sofa and a framed painting. In the foreground, a lion skin lies at the feet of the royals. (This peculiarly exotic item was drawn from the tiger skin visible in the photograph). The only element in this composition that is not utterly Western is thus Saowapha’s costume, itself a hybrid product of the recent refashioning of court dress. It is telling that Gelli, unhappy

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64 Whereas the sailor suits worn in the photo portrait were clearly navy blue (the colour for daily wear), they were rendered white (the summer wear colour) in the painting.

65 In the photograph taken at Lenz’s studio in Bangkok standing in the place of Vajiravudh and Chakrabongse, who were studying in England at that time, were their brothers Chirapravati and Sommatiwong.
with the way the queen’s garments appeared in the photograph he was relying upon, asked the king to have them sent from Bangkok.66

Art historian Apinan Poshyananda describes The Royal Family rather drily as being fixed “between public and private image, between formality and intimacy . . . a domestic scene of royalty in which the composition, size, and colours are grander and richer than a reproduction from a mere photograph”.67 Apinan’s assessment is better understood by considering that, in painting, “oils are especially good at rendering the high-grade and expensive materials which are part and parcel of our ideas about quality: the furs, silk brocades, and marbles”.68 The luxurious materials depicted in Gelli’s painting do indeed provide a suitably “magnificent” setting for the subjects if entirely Western in taste. For more clues we need first to look at the pictorial genre Gelli’s portrait belongs to. Royal family portraiture is a topos of celebrative art expressing the “domestication of majesty” that had been taking place in Europe since the eighteenth century and especially after the Restoration.69 In shedding the dynastic ethos for the domestic one, the nineteenth-century European monarchies paid tribute to the family values of the bourgeoisie, the class which now provided them with political legitimacy. In fact, as Simon Schama caustically points out, “the nineteenth-century royal families were . . . the very opposite of the image they projected”, carrying on with arranged marriages between absolute strangers for dynastic sake in patent contrast to the modern spirit of individual freedom and romantic love.70

As for Gelli’s portrait, it goes without saying that its familial cliché was at odds with the reality of the dynasty: the king had tens of wives, including his own

66 Chulalongkorn, Phraratchatthalekha ... praphat yurop pho sop, 2410, vol. I, p. 195. A standing portrait of Queen Saowapha wearing the same costume was painted at the same time by another Florentine painter, Edoardo Gordigiani. This painting is reproduced in Pictorial Record, p. 9.


70 Ibid., p. 157-58.
half-sisters, and was father to seventy-six children. Portraits of Chulalongkorn in paternal poses with his small children dated back to the reign’s early years, and even Mongkut had daguerreotypes taken of him with his children. Yet Gelli’s portraits the dynastically relevant nucleus of the royal household, from which would come the heirs to the throne. After the death of Crown Prince Wachirunhit in 1895, one of the sons of Queen Sawang, the line of succession switched to Saowapha’s offspring. Two years later she was nominated, in an unprecedented move, regent by the king for the time of his visit to Europe. During this tour, the image of Saowapha as the queen of Siam was also promoted, perhaps to downplay the king’s polygamy, although Chulalongkorn apparently never considered polygamy to be a problem for the monarchy’s public image.

At any rate, if domestic images of the European royal families were aimed at capturing the favour of their subjects, this would seem not the case with Gelli’s painting. First, there is no indication that the The Royal Family, which has hung in the Chakri Maha Prasat’s Private Room since its delivery, was rendered into engraving for reproduction in prints as often happened with domestic images of European royalty. The painting’s visibility is recent and linked to the ongoing “Rama V craze”. Neither would it make much sense to see it as a hypocritical tribute to the ethos of the local Sino-Thai bourgeoisie. Polygamy in the fifth reign was by no means a royal exclusive and carried no social stigma. If the need for a demotic image of the monarchy to project onto the domestic public is excluded, then another motive is needed for the painting. To have a family portrait painted by an artist who was famous for his royal patrons appears to have been one of those acts of consumption through which the Bangkok court identified with its Western counterparts; while the very fact that Chulalongkorn had a portrait realized by a painter of Gelli’s reknown would have enhanced his prestige in the eyes of European royalty.

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71 Sunantha, Sawang, and Saowapha, the highest in rank, were themselves sisters. Sunantha (1860-1880), the king’s favourite, drowned in a boat accident on the way to Bang Pa-in. Of Sawang (queen with the title Si Sawarin, 1862-1955) and Saowapha (Si Phatcharin, 1864-1919), Smith (The Court of Siam, p. 142) says that “were on excellent terms with one another. They did not, of course, live together”. See also Saengthian Satthathai, Sam ratchani khu banlang ratchakan thi 5 [The three queens of Rama V] (Bangkok: Mahannop, 2539 [1996]).

72 One such image was rendered in engraving in Temples and Elephants, p. 73.
Ten years later another “establishment” artist, the French Charles E. A. Carolus-Duran (1838-1917), was chosen to paint a full-length portrait of the king in dress uniform. Sketched by Duran at a friend’s studio while the king was holidaying in Sanremo in May 1907, the portrait was finished in Paris and exhibited for one week at that year’s Salon with the king’s approval before its shipment to Bangkok.73 Notably, the exhibition of the king’s portrait coincided with the ratification of the Franco-Siamese treaty which settled the Indochinese border dispute, a copy of which was personally collected by Chulalongkorn in Paris.74 Of course it might have been all coincidental. But if so, it was as good a public-relations exploit as any an experienced adviser might have devised.

IV
This description of the self-presentation as well as the photographic and pictorial representation of Chulalongkorn and the court has been largely drawn from the point of view of the international and the exclusive domestic public which included high-ranking officials and Bangkok’s Western community. But what image did ordinary people have of Rama V? Chulalongkorn was the first Thai king ever to have his likeness, or what a scholar calls the sovereign’s “historic image”,75 reproduced on commemorative medals (1871),76 coins (late 1870s-early 1880s),77 and postage stamps, which were first issued in 1883. Indeed, these

74 Bangkok Times, 5 August 1907.
75 Anne-Marie Lecoq, “La symbolique de l’État”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), Les lieux de mémoire, vol. II, La Nation, tome 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 147. Lecoq distinguishes the “historic image” of the sovereign from his “symbolic image” evoked by heraldic compositions, emblems, etc. The last (conical crowns, chakras) were impressed on the first flat coins minted in Siam in the fourth reign.
76 This was a medal struck for the third anniversary of Chulalongkorn’s reign in 1871 and was engraved with his left profile, the mahathai hairstyle still clearly visible. Anake, Chulalongkorn, pp. 87-88.
77 The effigy of Rama V appeared for the first time on the second series of silver coins issued in his reign. Probably minted around the same time was also a gold coin of a similar design. In 1887 the king’s effigy also made its appearance on the copper coins of low value, which were minted in England. In 1908 a new type of baht was introduced for his jubilee, bearing on the obverse a lifelike portrait of the king as he appeared at that time, in uniform and with decorations. Many of these latter coins were coated with platinum for presentation purposes. Reginald Le May, The Coinage of Siam (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1932), pp. 105-19.
effigies showed Chulalongkorn growing older, especially in the case of stamps, of which there were five different issues between 1883 and 1910.78 However, their importance in making the king’s image known should not be overestimated, considering that throughout the fifth reign the Baht hardly circulated outside the Central Plain and without doubt few people in the provinces made use of the postal service.

Starting in the 1890s Chulalongkorn made a number of official visits to the outer provinces, thus giving the local people an opportunity to see him in person. Still, many remained who were not aquainted with the king’s likeness if the incognito character of the visits to the countryside (sadet praphat ton) which he increasingly made during the last decade of the reign is an indication.79 Naturally, the situation was different for the populace of Bangkok. Their chances of having a glimpse of the person of the king at public ceremonies also increased at the turn of the century on occasions such the temple fair of Wat Benchama Bophit, in which the king and other members of the royalty ran stalls, and during his daily outings in landau from the Grand Palace to the construction site of his new residence in

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78 Postage stamps were first issued in Siam on 4 August 1883 concurrently with the establishment of the Post Department (two years later Siam joined the Unione Postale Universelle). Following the pattern of British stamps (the first ever to be issued in 1840), the stamps featured the king’s left profile in an oval frame with the value expressed in Thai numerals only. This first series, designed by the Post Department and printed in London, was intended primarily for domestic use. A second series was issued in April 1887. The stamps (in eight denominations) were designed and printed in London and had a frontal portrait of Rama V in an oval frame and the inscriptions “praisani lae ngenkhamtra sayam” and “Siam value postage revenue”. The third series, in circulation between September 1899 and January 1904 in thirteen denominations, was designed and printed by a Leipzig firm and carried the left-side portrait of the king as he looked then and the value in Thai and Arab numerals. The fourth series, in circulation between December 1905 and January 1908 in fourteen denominations, marked a change toward a more continental design. Designed by Cesare Ferro (an Italian painter working for the Public Works Department) and printed in Liepzig, the stamps had Wat Arun on the background and, on the foreground, two children with top-knots holding up the oval with the king’s left portrait. A high-value fiscal stamp in three denominations was also issued in April 1907, bearing the king’s frontal portrait. A special jubilee stamp with the king’s equestrian monument was issued in November 1908 (see Ch. 5). The stamp was designed by Mario Tamagno, of the Public Works Department, who also designed the sixth and final stamp series of the fifth reign issued in May 1910, shortly before the king’s death. On this stamp was the mythic bird Garuda holding an oval with the king’s left profile; it continued to be used during the first two years of the sixth reign whose first stamp series (again designed by Tamagno) was released only in October 1912. Sakerm Siriwong, Thai Stamps 1983 (Bangkok: Siam Stamp Trading Company, 1983); Centennial of Thai Postage Stamps (Bangkok: The Communication Authority of Thailand, 1983).

79 Prachoom, Chulalongkorn the Great, pp. 155-57.
the Dusit area.\textsuperscript{80} In November 1908, the king attended public ceremonies over one week on the occasion of his fortieth anniversary of reign, including the unveiling of his equestrian statue which made him a perennial presence in the cityscape.

An array of artefacts such as china plates, crystal glasses, silver boxes, even cigar paper rings bearing the likeness of Chulalongkorn were produced in Europe,\textsuperscript{81} which were clearly luxury items for the use of the court. But according to a contemporary witness, a variety of cheap goods manufactured in Germany and bearing the king’s effigy also circulated around the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{82} I am unfortunately unable to clarify when the present custom of displaying portraits of the royals in public premises as well as private houses first appeared, although it seems likely that Chulalongkorn’s portrait was displayed in places such as classrooms and barracks. It is also possible that Bangkok’s commercial photographers had been selling prints of photographs of the royalty by the end of the century, even if there is no evidence with regard to this. What is certain is that picture postcards became available in Bangkok in the last three or four years of the fifth reign.\textsuperscript{83}

A German invention which was initially resisted because its written content was readable by anybody, the postcard became popular first in Europe with the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and subsequently became, particularly in its “golden age” 1898 to 1918, something of a mass craze.\textsuperscript{84} Picture postcards of Siam were produced in Europe in the typical range of themes: landscapes, architecture, ceremonies and other aspects of local culture, human types, local mores and beauties, and even the royalty.\textsuperscript{85} Over a time-span of some sixty years the portrait

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\textsuperscript{80} Jottrand, \textit{In Siam}, pp. 312, 318-20. On the Wat Benchama Bophit fairs see below, Ch. 4.

\textsuperscript{81} See Thongthong, \textit{Khong suay khong di} and Anake Nawigamune, \textit{Singphim khletsik} [Classic prints] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2537 [1994]).

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 236.

\textsuperscript{83} Anake Nawigamune, “Poska khletsik khong sansan phaengsapha” [Sansan Phaengsapha’s “classic” postcards], \textit{Sarakkhadi} (Dec. 2531 [1988]): 145-151.


\textsuperscript{85} Bonnie Davis, \textit{Postcards of Old Siam} (Singapore: Times Press, 1987). Interestingly, although images of the incumbent monarch enjoy a wide circulation in Thailand today, they are not reproduced on ephemera such as postcards.
\end{flushright}
of the king in Siam stopped being a taboo and ended up gracing the most ephemeral of objects, a travelling piece of paper. Yet one must not overlook the importance of postcards as perhaps the most far-reaching of the pre-electric mass-media, the flotsam of the turn-of-the-century global ecumene.

In conclusion, it can be said that the reinvention of the monarchy’s public image started with self-presentation. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, self-presentation was very important in the culture of the Indianized courts of pre-colonial Southeast Asia. The local elites already wore more and exclusive clothes as a mark of distinction, and had since blended indigenous and foreign garments to create a unique court dress. In this regard, the appropriation of selected Western items of dress fell into a well-established pattern. Nevertheless, there were some specifically “modern” elements in the refashioning of the elite’s “clothes-body complex” discussed above which are worth stressing. First, changes were swiftly implemented, dispensing with patterns of self-presentation which, with slight variations, had been in favour for a couple of centuries. Second, innovations revealed a general concern to comply with contemporary Western standards of decorum. Clearly underpinning this concern was the elite’s preoccupation with the judgement Westerners passed on them. A third element was the creation of a uniform, semi-formal court dress, which was worn even by civilian officials outside the court, to foster “in-group” identification among the elite. Overall, variations in elite fashion, albeit generated in response to concerns relating to the global arena, can be seen to have lent themselves to a more effective expression of the Siamese elite’s identity rather than merely conforming to Western fashion and aesthetic norms more generally.

A different but related question that has been addressed in this chapter is the part that Western representational techniques, such as pictorial and especially photographic portraits, had in the configuration and projection of the monarchy’s modern public image. Photographers immortalized the king and the royalty in dignified poses which were clearly intended for contemporary observers as much as posterity, and engravers relied on these images for illustrations which furnished Western books and magazines. Domestically, the appearance of the
king in person in front of his subjects and of his portrait on coins and stamps represented a major departure from the previous taboos concerning the royal body. Because the visibility of the sovereign partook of the overall political project of the Siamese modernizing elite, it seems worth emphasizing that coins, stamps, and postcards -- not to mention Chulalongkorn’s equestrian statue -- were all made in Europe. This fact supports, from a different perspective, Tambiah’s argument that the paradoxical effect of Western economic interests in Siam was to provide Chulalongkorn with the resources he needed to pursue the project of fending off imperial powers and assert his authority.86 The role of Western technology can equally be judged as crucial in establishing his “historical image” as the dominant symbol of the absolutist state.

As the locus of the Siamese monarchy, Bangkok could not but figure prominently in the reinvention of its self and public image. Established as the capital city of power concomitantly with the establishment of the dynasty in April 1782 (1808 of the Buddhist Era), Bangkok has since represented the country’s most influential political centre. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the site of this nucleus was represented by the walled royal palace built by the founder of the dynasty and added to by the following four kings. Aside from being the symbolic base of the monarchy, the royal palace also constituted the daily "King’s Garden" for the pursuit of a more comfortable as well as a more utilitarian lifestyle.

Chulalongkorn had a new residential quarter developed at the southern end of the city in Bangkok’s northern outskirts, in what were then sparsely populated which was given the name of Suan Ermit (literally "Celestial Garden") or Queen’s Park. Linked to the old royal citadel by a newly built tree-lined boulevard, Ratchadamnoen Road was later graced with a representational and ceremonial tableau composed of Rama VI’s equestrian monument—the first example of public statuary in Bangkok—and the marble Attica Samakhon Throne Hall.

The late nineteenth century saw other changes in Bangkok’s cityscape, the most notable of which was the massive expansion of its road network. Bangkok’s growing number of roads were used by rickshaw (imported from Szechuan, in southern China, in the initial years of the 1870s onward), pull-rick carriages and, from 1889, a horse-drawn tram which was electrified in 1904. The replacement of wooden bridges by terra-cotta ones was associated with the monarchy in particular due to a custom, initiated by King Mongkut and carried on by Vajiravudh until 1918, whereby the king donated money on his birthday for the construction of a bridge. These developments would appear consonant with the embellishment and monumentalization of urban space which was carried out by

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Michael Nissen, "Rama VII Bridges" (Bangkok: The Thai Society, 1977).
As the locus of the Siamese monarchy, Bangkok could not but figure prominently in the reinvention of its self and public images. Founded as the Chakri seat of power concomitantly with the establishment of the dynasty in April 1782 (2325 of the Buddhist Era), Bangkok has since represented the country’s unchallenged political centre.\(^1\) Until the end of the nineteenth century, the core of this centre was represented by the walled royal palace built by the founder of the dynasty and added to by the following four kings. Aside from being the symbolic locus of the monarchy, the royal palace also constituted the daily “life space” of the court. In the pursuit of a more comfortable as well as a more distinctive lifestyle, Chulalongkorn had a new residential quarter developed at the turn of the century in Bangkok’s northern outskirts, in what were then paddy fields, which was given the name of Suan Dusit (literally “Celestial Garden”) or Dusit Park. Linked to the old royal citadel by a newly built tree-lined boulevard, Ratcha Damnoen, Dusit was later graced with a representational and ceremonial tableau composed of Rama V’s equestrian monument -- the first example of public statuary in Bangkok -- and the marble Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall.

The late nineteenth century saw other changes in Bangkok’s cityscape, the most notable of which was the massive extension of its road network. Bangkok’s growing number of roads were used by rickshaws (imported from Swatow, in southern China, in the initial years of the fifth reign), private carriages and, from 1888, a horse-drawn tram which was electrified in 1894. The replacement of wooden bridges by ferro-concrete ones was associated with the monarchy in particular due to a custom, initiated in 1894 by Chulalongkorn and carried on by Vajiravudh until 1916, whereby the king donated money on his birthday for the construction of a bridge.\(^2\) These developments would appear consonant with the embellishment and monumentalization of urban space which was carried out on

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1 Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma”, p. 15.

2 Sirichai Narumit, Bangkok Old Bridges (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1977).
an unprecedented scale in the second half of the nineteenth century in both metropoles and peripheral capital cities around the world.

Typified by Prefect Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris, the late nineteenth-century craze for grand urban spaces as vehicles of civic pride and political didacticism also struck Vienna, Berlin, and Rome; and, outside Europe, in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro; in Tokyo and Istanbul; in Calcutta and Saigon. The monuments and civic spaces that became so characteristic a feature of the urban fabric in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were largely designed to provide a suitable mise en scène for rituals of recent coinage celebrating (in most cases) the unity of monarchy and nation in an inflated fashion. As Carol Breckenridge acutely points out, newly invented rituals and newly constructed metropoles furnished, with newly naturalized objects of exotic provenance (both Eastern and Western), the means for the self-identification of a global and increasingly cosmopolitan elite.4

This and the following chapter examine the change in the domestic and representational architecture of the Siamese monarchy as one central tessera in the making of its modern public image. The two chapters have, however, different foci. The present chapter opens with a brief review of the planning and building of Bangkok’s royal settlement throughout the fourth reign; it then presents the government agencies that carried out royal projects in the fifth reign and discusses their modus operandi; and finally, it concentrates on the royal and princely mansions built in Dusit as an expression of the taste and ideology of the Siamese modernizing elite. The main emphasis in this chapter is thus on private space,

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pursuing further the analysis of the changing habits of consumption of the royalty sketched in Chapter 1. The next chapter will then focus on Dusit’s monumental space as emblematic of the appropriation of a Westernized idiom of authority and the emergence of a novel form of historical consciousness.

I

The contrast between the concentric plan of Bangkok’s early settlement in the loop of the Chao Phraya River and the street grid framing the Dusit district north of it (Fig. 3.1), reveals two distinct phases not just in the development of the city but also in the way urban layout helped to establish a relationship between the royal centre and the outside world. In the originary city plan, an inner city ring containing the walled royal palace and the city pillar -- Rattanakosin Island -- was separated by a moat (later filled up) from an outer ring which enclosed, within the city walls and a canal (Khlong Ongang), a total area of little more than 4 square-kilometres (2,589 rai). A century after the foundation of Bangkok in 1782, three other areas had emerged west and south-west of the royal citadel on Rattanakosin Island: the commercial hub housing the ethnic segment of the populace (mainly of Chinese origin, but also Indians and Malays); the port area on the lower course of the Chao Phraya; and the downtown district with the foreign consulates and residences of Westerners, which started developing in the 1850s.

The genesis and early history of Bangkok, from “village of the wild plums” to “Venice of the East”, has been told many times and does not need to be repeated here. Instead, I shall briefly examine some commonplaces in the narrative of the “city of the gods” (krung thep), which is Bangkok’s official name, in order to clarify in what sense indigenous ideas of spatial organization and monumental


7 Also, “city of the god”. In both cases, the main god in question is Indra, inhabiting with his thirty-two lesser gods the mythical Mount Meru. For an overview of the Indic cosmological notions which informed the planning of royal cities in pre-colonial Southeast Asia see James S. Duncan, The City as Text (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), Ch. 4.
Fig. 3.1 Plan of Bangkok towards the end of the Fifth Reign: in the river’s loop is Rattanakosin Island. The bold line departing from Rattanakosin Island is Ratcha Damnoen Avenue, with Dusit Park at its northern end; Kamthorn and Songsan, “Wiwatthanakan”, p. 235.
architecture can be said to have yielded to Western ones in the second half of the nineteenth century. To start with, one must be aware that the principal accounts of the foundation of Bangkok, those on which Wenk relied, were both written considerably later than the events they narrate and, predictably, by members of the court elite. Chaophraya Thipakorawong’s chronicles of the first reign were composed in 1869 and first published in 1902 in a version edited by Prince Damrong, and Damrong’s own “A history of old palaces” was first published in 1922. The earliest accounts of Bangkok by foreigners, on the other hand, date to the early 1820s. Therefore the first four decades of Bangkok’s history, while contemporary to events such as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, are enveloped in a largely legendary aura.

Practical and strategic considerations apparently determined the decision by the founder of the dynasty, General Chakri, to move the site of the royal citadel from Thonburi, which King Taksin (1767-82) had made his headquarters after the fall of Ayutthaya, to the opposite bank, Bangkok. But besides practical and


12 Besides Crawford’s Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochín-China, see also George Finlayson, The Mission to Siam and Hué the Capital of Cochín-China in the Years 1821-1822 (London, 1826 [repr. Singapore: Oxford UP, 1988]). Finlayson was a doctor and naturalist who participated in the Crawford mission, the objective of which was to negotiate a commercial treaty with Bangkok.

13 Thonburi, being on the concave side of the Chaophraya’s bend, was less suited than the opposite side for defence and supply provision in the case of siege; also, the Bangkok side could be easily encircled by canals so as to further improve its security. Another minus for Thonburi was that the palace built there by King Taksin was in between two temples and did not allow for expansion, while it was not difficult to relocate the Chinese settlement on the Bangkok side to make available a large area for the construction of the royal palace. Nengnoi Saksi, M. R. (with Naphit Krittiakun and Daruni Kaomuang), Phraratchawang lae wang nai krungthep pho so, 2325-2525 [Royal and
strategic reasons, it is said that another motivation for choosing Bangkok as the seat of the dynasty lay in the fact that the eastern bank’s morphology facilitated the imitation of Ayutthaya’s layout, which in turn was modelled on the cosmic order with Mount Meru as its pivot. The idea that the plans of the royal cities of Southeast Asia were a microcosmic enactment of the universe was popularized by Heine-Geldern in a now classic study. Following in his path, later scholars have established it as a paradigm informing the overlapping realms of polity and religion in the Indic cultures of Southeast Asia. In the specific case of Thailand, Riggs took up the cosmological model to sketch a historical model of the Thai bureaucracy, and Tambiah relied on both Heine-Geldern’s and Riggs’ formulations to outline his own model of Ayutthaya as a “galactic polity”.

The conception of the locus of monarchy as a mirror of the cosmos and a symbolic expression of the sovereign’s mastery over it might have been, however, not an exclusive prerogative of the Indic states of Southeast Asia. Some historians have recently opined that even Louis XIV’s Versailles, incidentally visited by a Siamese embassy in 1686, represented an “exemplary centre” in which monarchical power was actualized in the form of spectacle, “... a city arranged as a theatre hall facing the stage on which the king performed the representation of royalty”. From a sceptical perspective, such a view could appear to be the result of the increasing receptivity of historians to the approach of cultural anthropology. But from a “symbolic” perspective, the replication of the universe princely palaces in Bangkok, 1782-1932] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn UP, 2525 [1982]), pp. 11-12.

15 Geertz, Negara; Paul Wheatley, The Pivot of the Four Quarters (Chicago: Aldine, 1971); idem, Negara and Commandery (Chicago: University of Chicago, Dept. of Geography, Research Papers no. 207-208, 1983). A recent example of this cosmological concern combined with post-structuralist geography is Duncan, The City as Text.
16 Fred W. Riggs, Thailand, pp. 70-77.
17 Tambiah, World Conqueror, Chs 7, 8.
in the layout of royal cities could be regarded as a common trait of ideologies of divine kingship in both Europe and Asia. Before postulating such an analogy, however, further examination is required of how consistently the actual plans of Southeast Asian royal cities were informed by the Indic cosmological ideal.

Because of the sophisticated symbolism of the royal complex at Angkor, Heine-Geldern naturally took the ideal cosmological layout to have been more thoroughly implemented in mainland than in island Southeast Asia. Yet Sternstein pointed out a gross inconsistency in the plan of Ayutthaya, a Theravada polity even if its court followed Brahmanic ceremonial. In fact, even if in Indic urban plans the centre was always occupied by the royal palace/temple complex, the emphasis was different according to whether the ruler adhered to the Theravada (the palace) or the Mahayana (the temple) school of Buddhism. In Ayutthaya, owing to subsequent resettlement, the central location of the royal palace came to be occupied, from the mid-fifteenth century onward, by a temple. In the plan of Bangkok the discrepancy with cosmological principles was even more marked as the Palace of the Rear, so called because of its position in relation to the royal palace, was actually located in Thonburi, on the opposite bank of the Chao Phraya River.

If by positioning his palace at the centre of the city’s microcosm the king partook of the superior cosmic order, the apparent lack of regard for the correct implementation of this supposedly influential urban layout suggests that the Indic idiom of authority informing statecraft and kingship in Ayutthaya had lost part of its meaning by the beginning of the Bangkok era. Further support for this hypothesis can be seen in the ritual domain. Although crowned according to the

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19 Heine-Geldern, State and Kingship, p. 2.


22 Richard O’Connor’s claim (“Place, Power, and Discourse in the Thai Image of Bangkok”, The Journal of the Siam Society 78, 2 [1990], p. 70) that “only a leap of faith can make them [Ayutthaya and Bangkok] into cosmological cities anywhere near as perfect as their [Khmer] neighbours built” is tautologically explained by saying that “Thai were never rigorously cosmological anyway”.

Brahmanic ceremonial, Rama I issued, early in his reign, a series of prescriptions to rectify Indic rites which he regarded as unorthodox.\textsuperscript{23} That a refashioning of the symbolic idiom of authority of the Siamese monarchy was underway early in the nineteenth century is also suggested by the progressive assertion of Chinese cultural influences at court. These influences became preponderant during the second and third reigns, when architectural and decorative styles were imported from China together with masons and building materials.\textsuperscript{24}

Like the adoption of an urban cosmological layout ensued from politico-religious beliefs spread by Indian traders, cultural Sinification in the first half of the nineteenth century coincided with the revival of commercial relations with the Middle Kingdom and the promotion of a qualified Chinese immigration to provide Bangkok’s entreprenuerial monarchy with skilled customs officials and tax farmers. In turn, the decline of Chinese and the rise of European architecture as the preferred royal style since the fourth reign appears to be an immediate reflection of the shift in economic and cultural hegemony felt in Siam after 1855.\textsuperscript{25} Between the first and second half of the nineteenth century, most European cities underwent a reshaping intended to create harmonious and efficient urban spaces as aesthetic, moral, and hygienic concerns coalesced in an age equally marked by urban plagues and urban revolts.\textsuperscript{26} The concerns peculiar to mid-nineteenth century metropoles increasingly governed also the spatial organization and architectural form of the Western quarters of colonial towns. Typical features of these quarters were the distinction between the place of work and the place of residence and the presence of institutions such as the church, the club, the race course, the theatre, the library, and occasionally, the museum.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{24} Apinan, “Modern Art”, pp. 13-22.

\textsuperscript{25} See above, Ch. 1.

\textsuperscript{26} Boyer, \textit{City of Collective Memory}, pp. 33-34.

It is thus not surprising that Bangkok’s first thoroughfare, Thanon Charoen Krung ("the road that enriches the city" but immediately renamed New Road by Westerners), was built in the early 1860s following the demand by the Western community for a road suitable for carriages connecting the consular district to the royal citadel. The chronicles of the fourth reign report that the completion of a number of new roads and bridges in 1864 was celebrated with a festival. Two years later Reverend D. B. Bradley, an American Presbyterian missionary, was still pontificating from the pages of his own publication, the Bangkok Recorder, that the construction of better roads was needed if Bangkok was to join the ranks of the cities of the civilized countries. The appearance of streets at right angles to each other and blocks of two-storey brick houses in the fourth reign created a novel cityscape which was promptly recorded by temple mural painters.

Even with regard to royal architecture, the reign of Mongkut anticipated the main trends of the following reign. Several new brick edifices (tuk) were erected within the Grand Palace. These included a throne hall, Ananta Samakhom (later torn down), built in a hybrid style, partly Western, partly Chinese, and Western-style living quarters. Of Mongkut’s two new palaces in Bangkok, one, Saranrom, was a concrete building situated just outside the Grand Palace and allegedly built for the time following his abdication in favour of his heir; while the other lay in the suburban Pathumwan area, east of Rattanakosin Island. Mongkut also built conspicuously in the outer provinces. In Phetchaburi, stronghold of his political sponsors, the Bunnak family, he had a retreat, Nakhon Khiri, built on top of a hill which was furnished with an observatory. In Nakhon Pathom he had dwellings erected following the restoration of the local Buddhist shrine; in Ayutthaya he

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29 Cited by Charnvit, “Siam/Civilization”. The article (in Thai) was published in December 1866.

30 The novel cityscape of Bangkok in the early 1870s is described by Vincent, Land of the White Elephant, pp. 130-32.

31 Damrong, "Tamnan wang kao", pp. 144-49. Saranrom Palace was completed only in the fifth reign. It was, for a brief period, the residence of Vajiravudh following his return from Europe in January 1902, and was later transformed during his reign into the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nengnoi, Pharatrachawang, Lae Wang, pp. 299-309.
reconstructed the old Palace of the Front, Chantakasem, and rediscovered the site of an old palace at Bang Pa-in; and in Lopburi the king started the construction of yet another palace, later interrupted because of his dislike of the region's climate.32

The description of the interior of Mongkut's and Prince Chutamani's apartments by the British envoy John Bowring was quoted above in support of the argument that things Western started to be employed in the fourth reign to create a novel life space. Located within the cosmologically-oriented space of Bangkok's royal and princely palaces, these Westernized residences represented a transitional space between sacral and modern thought, between the theatre state and the reenactment of the imagined lifestyle of a European aristocrat. The construction of so many royal residences far from the Grand Palace's "exemplary centre" could also be taken as an indication of the waning importance of Indic notions of symmetry between cosmos, realm, and court in the practice, if not in the theory, of statecraft. King Mongkut increasingly journeyed in and outside Bangkok to "cast his regal look" (thot phranet) upon places other than the palace as the "city of gods" progressively entered the orbit of an expanding universe brought about by steamers, telegraph lines (first set up in 1861), and gas lighting (1866).33

II

On 9 May 1876 Chulalongkorn laid the foundation stone of the first palace of his reign, the Chakri Maha Prasat in the Grand Palace, which includes a throne hall, reception halls, and living quarters. Completed four years later, the throne hall was designed by John Cluny, a British architect based in Singapore, in that blend of neoclassical and Italianate styles typical of British colonial buildings of the mid-Victorian age. Intended as the architectural façade of Chulalongkorn's push for modernization, the building was eventually capped by a spired roof (prasat). Although stylistically awkward, the Chakri Maha Prasat's Western-cum-Thai look proved visually successful, and reproductions of it soon appeared in Western


33 Anake Nawigamune, Raek mi nai sayam [First in Siam], vol. I (Bangkok: Saengdaet, 2532 [1989]), pp. 100-2; 127-29.
magazines and books on Siam. Its expensive furniture imported from Britain was also remarked upon by foreign visitors (see Ch. 1).

More than the palace itself, however, it is the legend about its spired roof which is worth a gloss here. According to a widely circulated but unsubstantiated account, the roof was imposed against the king’s wishes by the powerful chaophraya Si Suriyawong, head of the Bunnak family and regent during the five years of the king’s minority (1868-73), who had also been the supervisor of royal constructions since the previous reign. An interference in Chulalongkorn’s thrust for innovation, the imposition of the prasat could be seen as an instance of the internal power struggle between “New Siam” and the older generation (hua boran) in the 1870s-80s, which is a central tenet of the mainstream studies of the reform. In fact, buildings in hybrid style had been in vogue in Bangkok since the fourth reign. Such a vogue could be even related to nineteenth-century Western architectural eclecticism, which boldly mixed structural and decorative elements of various periods and traditions.

An analogy in reverse to the Chakri Maha Prasat is offered by the building that was to have housed the Imperial Diet in Tokyo. In that case, the plan submitted in the late 1880s by the German architect H. Ende for a neo-Baroque edifice with a temple-like roof was rejected by the Japanese government apparently on the grounds that such a hybrid edifice would compromise its symbolic import, namely, the Westernization of the Japanese political system through the promulgation of the constitution (1889) and the creation of the Diet (1890). The paradoxical nature of cultural flows in the later nineteenth century

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34 E.g., the sketch of the palace which appeared in The Graphic in the issue of 7 May 1881, not even one year after its completion (reproduced in Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 111).

35 It is said that chaophraya Si Suriyawong imposed the spired roof on the Chakri Maha Prasat on the basis of two arguments. First, in Ayutthaya there used to be three prasat (spire-roofed buildings) but in Bangkok there were only two; so, analogy between the two capitals required the construction of another one. Second, because each monarch since the establishment of the Chakri dynasty had built a prasat, Chulalongkorn should follow the custom too. Nengnoi Saksi, Satthapatayakan phraborom maharat chawang [The architecture of the Grand Palace] (Bangkok: His Majesty’s Private Secretariat, 2531[1988]), p. 100-101. This is in any case inaccurate because if each of Chulalongkorn’s predecessors had built a prasat, there should have been four such edifices and not only two (unless the other two had been destroyed).

36 Dallas Finn, Meiji Revisited, p. 98.
is demonstrated by the fact that, while eclectic architecture was thriving in Western metropoles and peripheral centres alike, the quest for “national” styles by the designers of the ephemeral cityscapes of international exhibitions established, in the Western mind, the spired roof as a visual signifier of “Thainess” par excellence (see Ch. 6).

To return to Bangkok, attention should be drawn to the fact that building maintenance was generally poor even in the Grand Palace, so it was common for older structures to be torn down to make room for new ones. This attitude, while jarring with the present official concern for heritage preservation, stemmed in fact from the religious belief that it was the activity of building but not restoring palaces and monasteries that added to the king’s and the elite’s merit. This also explains why, in the first reign, the ruined edifices of Ayutthaya were practically razed to the ground in order to retrieve building materials. Beginning with the fourth reign, Siamese and Western-style buildings had been placed higgledy-piggledy next to each other. During the 1880s more Western-style edifices were erected within the Grand Palace’s compound, including those housing the Bureau of the Royal Household, the ministries of the Treasury, Interior, and Foreign Affairs; and, in the area around the palace, the seats of the ministries of Justice and War, the Cadet School, and the Wachirayan Library. Visiting Bangkok in 1900, the Belgian Charles Buls, spirited mayor of Brussels for two decades (1881-99) and author of a treatise on urbanism, commented unfavourably: “All these buildings, constructed by German and Italian companies, are in poor European style, heavy and uniform. They show their bricks and their cement. The joints are traced into the cement and then badly imitate large stones under their yellow whitewash”.

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37 On the occasion of a visit to the palace of Nakhon Khiri some twenty years after its construction, Carl Bock (Temples and Elephants, p. 82) wrote: “it is a curious fact that the Siamese, though ever building, seem seldom, if ever, to take steps to keep their edifices, sacred or secular, in repair. And more often than not what they do build they leave uncompleted. It is quite an exception to see any building which has been completed ‘out of hand’, and still more exceptional to find repairs going on”.


These comments bring into focus the question of the execution of public works and royal projects in the fifth reign. Unlike Japan, where a Ministry of Public Works was established in 1870 at the very outset of the Meiji era, a similar service, the Public Works Department (krom yothathikan), was created in Siam only at the end of 1889 under the direction of Prince Naritsara Nuwattiwong (known as Prince Narit, 1863-1947). With the launching of the ministerial cabinet on 1 April 1892, the service was upgraded into the Ministry of Public Works (krasuang yothathikan) which initially included five departments: General Affairs, Controller, Post and Telegraph, Railways, and Public Works. Prince Narit remained the minister until March 1893, followed by krommun Sanphasitthi, kromkhun Phithayaphap, and phraya Thewerong. In September 1899, after having been minister of the Treasury, War, and Justice, Narit went back to Public Works, this time for a period of almost six years. When in 1905 Prince Narit moved to the Bureau of the Royal Household, the office was temporarily entrusted to phraya Suriya who, in July 1906, was replaced by phraya Sukhum.

Pan Sukhum (1862-1938), a key state notable throughout the fifth and sixth reigns, was first acting-minister and then minister of Public Works until late in 1907, when he and Prince Naret Worarit, minister of Municipal Government since 1892, had their respective positions exchanged. The Ministry of Municipal Government (krasuang nakhonban) was the body that administered the whole Krung Thep province (i.e., Bangkok and nearby districts). After the appointment of Pan Sukhum as minister in 1907, the ministry was also given control of the Sanitary Department (krom sukhaphiban), created around 1894-95 as an agency of the Ministry of Agriculture. Under this new arrangement the Sanitary Department carried out the construction of roads and bridges in Bangkok while the realization of royal and government buildings remained, along with public works in the provinces, the task of the Public Works Department. However

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40 Suchrit Thawansuk, Nangsuk prakuat ruang phra prawat lae nangsilpa khong somdet phrachao boromwongthe chaofa kromphraya naritsara nuwattiwong [The life and work of Prince Naritsara Nuwattiwong] (Bangkok: Thai watthana phanit, 2509 [1966]), p. 68.

41 Ibid., p. 110.

42 Prachum kotmai [Collected acts], vol. XXI, pt 1 (ro.so. 125 [1906/7]), (Bangkok: 2478 [1935]), pp. 30, 115.
Sukhum, who in 1908 was granted the title of chaophraya Yomarat, also supervised the construction of the new Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, begun late in 1908. He ended his brilliant bureaucratic career, which had started in teaching at the Suan Kulap court school, as minister of the Interior for the period August 1922 to January 1926. In the meantime, the Ministry of Public Works was transformed into the Ministry of Communication (krasuang khommakon) with a restructuring of departments and personnel.

As in other sectors of the government, the Public Works Department employed a large number of foreigners, in this case mostly Italians. It is difficult to say whether this situation was due to a precise design or was largely the outcome of the initial employment of Carlo Allegri (1862-1938). A young engineer from Varese, in northern Italy, Allegri arrived in Bangkok in 1889 to work for a firm of contractors, the Grassi Brothers. The following year Allegri joined the just-established Public Works Department as an assistant of the engineer-in-chief, the Briton E. F. W. Wilkinson, whom he replaced in 1892 when the department became part of the new Ministry of Public Works. In his position as engineer-in-chief, Allegri was involved in the realization of the most important projects of the latter half of the fifth reign: the mansions of the king and princes built in Bangkok and the provinces; several ministerial buildings; the original railway station at Hua Lamphong; Ratcha Damnoen Avenue; Wat Benchama Bophit; and the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall. With the transformation of the Ministry of Public Works into the Ministry of Communication in 1912, Allegri had his position reduced to that of adviser until 1916 when, with the completion of the Ananta Samakhom, he was pensioned and returned to Italy. Under Allegri’s directorship, several other Italians were employed in the Public Works Department, numbering about twenty.

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43 Prince Damrong wrote a detailed biography of Pan Sukhum as the introduction to the collection of letters addressed to him by Chulalongkorn, Phraratchathalekha... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat; see also the entry on chaophraya Yomarat in Prayut Sitthipan, Chomna prawattisat khton khunnang sayam [Biographies of Siamese nobles] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Sayam, 2530 [1987]), pp. 303-13.


45 Siam Directory (Bangkok: 1892; 1893).

46 NA, Records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 35.7/39.
at the end of the fifth reign. Among the longest-serving employees there were E. G. Gollo, who joined the department in 1899 as head of the Engineering Section and became Allegri’s deputy (he retired in 1923); and Mario Tamagno, head of the Architectural Section from 1901 to 1925.47

A recent book with a professedly celebrative intent has brought to attention these long-forgotten figures of Italian expatriates in turn-of-the-century Bangkok.48 The view that Chulalongkorn hired Italians out of admiration for their genius while they, in turn, had been enticed by the idea of transplanting their culture to an exotic kingdom, obviously fans parochial pride on both sides. However, it is to be qualified in relation to the overall political project of which the appropriation of Western-style architecture, for both residential and representational purpose, was part. In the first place, it is worth remembering that, because of the lasting impact of the Renaissance and the perpetuation in Italy of high standards of workmanship (termed by Burke “the bureaucratization of the figure of the court artist”), it was not uncommon for Italian artists and architects to be sought-after abroad. For instance, Italians were given the job of beautifying Moscow and St Petersburg in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and teaching the basics of Western art in Meiji Japan half a century later.50

Fifth-reign Siam appears to be just another case in which a modernizing elite with an urgent need for a Westernized public image relied on Italians due to


48 Leopoldo Ferri de Lazara and Paolo Piazzardi, Italians at the Court of Siam (Bangkok: Amarind Press, 1996). This coffee-table book (published for King Bhumbibol’s jubilee when this thesis was well underway) focuses on individual figures and contains valuable biographical information. However, it has little to say on their activities as employees of the Siamese government, nor do the authors include any Thai archival material.


their reputation for being skilled professionals. For Chulalongkorn, their artistic legacy could have represented a kind of pledge for his investment in symbolic capital with the bonus that their activity came free of colonialist "subtext" because Italy was not a colonial power. This latter point can, in any case, be argued only in hypothetical terms as there are no indications of the king's appreciation of such a circumstance. Allegri's position as the department's engineer-in-chief may also have been critical in ensuring that, as job opportunities grew with the big projects launched in the last decade of the fifth reign, more employees were drawn from Italy to work in Bangkok. The fact that many came from Turin's art school, the Accademia Albertina, suggest Allegri's reliance on a network of young graduates.

Archival documents show, alas, a certain disappointment with the activity of the Public Works Department. In a report written during his short period as acting minister (1905-6), phraya Suriya indicated the following faults within the department: disparity between the plans of buildings drawn up by the foreign draughtsmen and their realization by local workers; the foreigners' lack of experience in practical matters and their reliance on Chinese masons; widespread corruption and meagre productivity; finally, Allegri's inadequacy as engineer-in-chief when it came to finish and decoration, said to be far below European standards. Similar complaints were tabled in a report by the following minister, phraya Sukhum (chaophraya Yomarat). On the other hand, while grievances of an economic nature by Allegri and other employees are also documented, it

51 "Foreign employees consider that their task is only to draw plans; once this is done, they sent the plan to the Thais to have it built. If these built it wrongly, even in spite of the complaints of the Engineering Section, nobody cares. I have also heard many complaints about people cheating on the materials, overcharging the costs in the budgets. The employees are many but their efficiency low. ...The Westerners who are building the Amorph Sathan [mansion] look like students, as they came to work here soon after graduation without experience. They know the theory [of construction] but not the practice of working with cement and wood, and they have to learn from the Chinese masons here. Even the staircase of the Amorph Sathan was built wrongly. Allegri, who is the supervisor, is an engineer and cannot check on the work of architects. Those in the Engineering Section seem to have never paid attention to the finishing touches in the good European houses. [Complaints on provincial public works follow:] The Engineering Section must be reorganized to avoid corruption going on between the government officials and the suppliers. The task of the Westerners should be to design plans and follow their realization, conduct inspection on the construction sites, and assure that budgets are respected." NA, RV, Ministry of Public Works 1/32, pp. 3-8, 9-10.

52 NA, RV, Ministry of Public Works 1/36.

53 In a letter dated 21 March 1906, Allegri complained that during the first ten years of service (1890-1900) he had received a monthly salary of 550 Baht against the 1200 Baht earned by the engineer-in-
would appear that their role was that of mere executants, creative at best, of the king's ideas and desires. The bureaucratic facade of ministries and departments should not overshadow the fact that every aspect of the administration was highly centralized in Siam and that all decisive power rested, in accordance with the autocratic nature of his rule, in the person of the king.

The second question to consider in relation to the activity of the Italians in the Siamese Ministry of Public Works is that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while culture was being thought of and represented as a "national" attribute, cultural flows were occurring within imperial global systems. The apposite notion of "Victorian ecumene" was mentioned above but, in the field of architecture and the arts, it was France that asserted its global leadership in the period 1850s to 1920s thanks to an academic system (which included the École des Beaux-Arts, the Grand Prix competition, and Salon exhibitions) whereby the subsequent regimes in power created a state-sanctioned art intended to monopolize public taste. Subsequently, this hegemonic project came to encompass colonial cities and other peripheral city capitals, which offered French architects and town planners a convenient field for experiments.54

Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires have been taken as emblematic of the global influence exerted by French ideas of city planning and architecture at the turn of the century. The building of residential districts in these cities according to Beaux-Arts principles by French and French-trained architects has been said to have produced the illusion of a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle for the local Europhile elites.55 In fact, by the turn of the century, Beaux-Arts architecture and space composition, characterized by symmetrical axes oriented by monuments and public buildings commanding long central vistas, had become a globalized idiom that could be replicated in slightly varying architectural styles. For instance, in Tokyo, which was rebuilt in the 1880s as the imperial capital, it was German

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54 Wright, Politics of Design, esp. Ch. 2.

55 Needell, "Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires".
planners and architects who designed a plan with broad avenues and monumental buildings (even though this was later modified by Japanese architects).  

In Bangkok, it was the Italians, for the reasons we have seen above, who realized the edifices, avenues, and concrete bridges which were to demonstrate the modernity of the monarchy. Their specific style can be recognized in matters of detail, such as the galley prows of Roman memory used to decorate a bridge on Ratcha Damnoen (Makhawan Rangsan) but, overall, Dusit reflected the then dominant trends in urban planning and architecture. In this sense it can be said that, similar to the way the cosmological plan of the royal citadel expressed the place of the Siamese court within a regional sphere in which the Indic cultural idiom was dominant, the Beaux-Arts layout of Dusit identified the modernizing monarchy as one member in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries global system dominated by European powers and culture.

III

What aroused in Chulalongkorn the desire for a suburban residence was apparently his sojourn in Europe in 1897. As a guest in the chateaux and country residences of the European royalty, he must have appreciated a lifestyle in which courtly splendour was paired with relaxation in natural surroundings. The dominant medical theories that postulated a causal connection between aerial proximity and bacterial infection might have also played a role in Chulalongkorn’s growing disaffection with the Grand Palace as a living space. The disposal of refuse and sewage was conducted manually and, considering that in the women’s quarter alone (known as “The Inside” [fainai]) lived some three thousand people, hygiene was certainly a major concern. Besides improved living standards, consideration was allegedly given also to the fact that a modern residential district would allow the accommodation of foreign guests in the manner to which they

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56 Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy, pp. 75-82.

57 Bangkok’s Royal Plaza was used in Oliver Stone’s film Heaven and Earth as the backdrop for a mass scene fictionally set in Saigon.

58 Smith, Court of Siam, p. 57.
were accustomed. These motivations clearly show that the Dusit district was originally conceived of in terms of private rather than public space. Even today, walls and fences mark off and conceal much of this area and its dwellings. This private space was at the court’s disposal as a stage on which their modern selves could be acted out in day-long performances recorded with the aid of cameras.

The clearance of the area destined to be the new royal district began in February 1899. Exactly one year later, King Chulalongkorn began spending his evenings there, riding in his landau from the Grand Palace. Shelter was temporarily provided by pavilions, while a wooden mansion which had originally erected on Sichang Island, in the Gulf of Siam, was being dismantled and relocated there. The rebuilding and enlargement of the mansion according to the traditional building method using only wooden pegs was accomplished by the chief court carpenter, Kon Hongsakun, under the supervision of Prince Narit. The mansion, which was renamed Wimanmek, was also the first in Bangkok to be provided with electricity. At its official opening, on 27 March 1902, the king moved there with his wives and children, returning to the Grand Palace only for ceremonial activities. This was the first step in the development of the new royal quarter, as the subsequent changes in its denomination illustrate. Dusit Park was first given the qualification of wang (any princely palace); then phraratchawang (royal palace); and finally, with the completion of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall in the sixth reign, the word suan in front of dusit was dropped and the area’s official denomination became phraratchawang dusit.

To connect the Dusit Park to the Grand Palace, construction was undertaken of a thoroughfare which was aptly named Ratcha Damnoen (royal progress). The announcement of the construction of the boulevard’s outer section, from the city

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59 Nengnoi, Phraratchawang, pp. 368-89.
60 For a photographic selection of places and people at Dusit Park see Pictorial Record, pp. 154-59.
61 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 312.
62 Nengnoi, Phraratchawang, pp. 369-73; Nanthiya Sawangwuthitham, “Bothnam” [Introduction], Chotmaihel kankosang lae somaem prathinang wimanmek, pho so. 2443-2518 [Documents on the construction and restoration of Wimanmek Palace] (Bangkok: Bureau of the Royal Household, 2533 [1990]): 1-21. The words wang is a collective noun for the buildings within a palatial compound, each edifice being indicated by the word phrathinang preceding its individual name (e.g., Phrathinang Amphon Sathan).
walls to Dusit Park, was given on 15 August 1899, six months after the clearance of the area for the purpose of building had begun. In June 1901, the construction of its inner section, within the old city walls, was announced. It was also decided that the two sections be called, respectively, Ratcha Damnoen Nok (outer) and Ratcha Damnoen Klang (central). The building of the boulevard was followed closely by Chulalongkorn, to the point of discussing with the minister of Local Government the unit price of asphalting the road according to different methods.

Where Ratcha Damnoen crosses the Lot, Bang Lamphu, and Phadung Krung Kasem canals, three concrete bridges with wrought iron railings were also built (called, respectively, Phanphi Phoplila, Phanphi Lilat, and Makhawan Rangsan) between 1903 and 1907.

In December 1902, a few months after the king had moved to Wimanmek, the foundation stone of a three-storied, brick mansion was laid. Planned by the German architect C. Sandreczki of the Public Works Department, the mansion, Amphon Sathan, was finally inaugurated with religious rites and entertainments in February 1907, a few weeks before the king's departure for Europe, henceforth becoming his residence until his death in October 1910. Externally decorated with Art Nouveau motifs, Amphon Sathan was almost certainly the first edifice with a lift in Siam. A Turinese painter, Cesare Ferro, was employed for three years (1904 to 1906) to realize the interior decoration in the mansion. Besides vegetal and animal motifs, in the large panels Ferro depicted scenes of Bacchanalia and the Siamese myth of kinnari (the half-human, half-bird female creature) which were dominated by a strong eroticism, consistent with continental fin-de-siècle fashion, in which interior decoration was intended to arouse the senses and

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63 Prachum kotma [Collected acts], vol. XVII, pt 1 (ro.so. 118 [1899/90]), pp. 71-77; and vol. XVIII, pt 1 (ro.so. 120 [1901/2]), pp. 138-44 (Bangkok: 2478 [1935]).

64 NA, Provisional collection of loose documents of the fifth and sixth reigns, vol. 2/8, p. 1552.

65 Bangkok Times, 18 February 1907. One of the feature of the festivities for the inauguration of Amphon Sathan was the staging of Chulalongkorn's play Ngo pa.

66 Anek, Raek mi nai sayam, vol. I, p. 212, referring to a passage from Phraratcatch lekha phrabat somdet phrabat somdet phrachulachomkla chaoyuhua lae ruang khong set athibodi fainai (Bangkok, 2453 [1910], p. 34) in which the expression occurs "to go by lift" [pay khun lif].

67 Apinan, "Modern Art", pp. 113-16.
stimulate "nervous vibration". What degree of personal initiative Ferro was allowed is not known, but Apinan is right in pointing out that his decoration was "designed to demonstrate the patron's rich, assured taste for Western art". Chulalongkorn himself purchased in Florence, during his 1907 trip, a number of female nudes by Odoardo Gelli, the painter of The Royal Family, expressly for his newly built mansion.

While the construction of Amphon Sathan was underway, a brick and wood edifice in the gingerbread style of Anglo-Indian architecture, Aphisek Dusit, was built to house cabinet meetings and receptions, east of Wimanmek. Also, the palace area was landscaped with bushes, paths, canals, and bridges creating, as in the customary spatial arrangement within royal palaces, an inner court (fainai) where the women's quarters lay. Thus, while Dusit Park, surrounded by greenery, had none of the claustrophobic closeness of the walled Grand Palace, it was still arranged according to the hierarchy of interior space in which the private life of the Siamese sovereign unfolded. Emblematic of the ambivalence of Dusit Park, at once show case of the monarchy's Westernized taste and secluded retreat of the king, is the indigenous-style wooden house built in 1904 across the pond from Wimanmek, Ruanton. Popular myth has it that Chulalongkorn received there the acquaintances he made in his trips to the countryside (phuan ton).

That the "staged authenticity" of this corner of Dusit Park enabled Chulalongkorn to realize his daydream of the good country life is demonstrated by a photograph taken by one of his younger wives, Erb. This shows the king sitting on the porch of Ruanton, although on an imported upholstered chair, busy cooking a meal in a Chinese wok and only wearing a phamung around his waist. He appears so relaxed that it is hard to say whether he actually posed or the


70 Pictorial Record, p. 156.


72 Sakda, Kasattri lae klong, pp. 142-43.
photographer “immortalized” him while he was really intent at cooking. But even if originally conceived of as a private image, this photograph is in fact the most truly “modern” of Chulalongkorn many portraits, a demotic image which no by chance is among those enjoying wider circulation in the present “Rama V craze”.

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Not far from Dusit Park, Chulalongkorn had another property developed, Phaya Thai, spread over a 40 acre area (100 rai) along Sanghi (today Ratcha Withi) Road. The plot of land was bought by the Privy Purse to serve as an experimental farm for vegetable growing, rice cultivation, and poultry breeding. According to Prince Chula Chakrabongse, the king intended to pursue the life of a farmer after his planned abdication at the age of sixty (in fact, he died at fifty-seven). Phaya Thai, officially designated as a dwelling (tamnals), was inaugurated in May 1910 after the construction of some wooden buildings. Although Chulalongkorn enjoyed it only for a short time (he died the following October), Phaya Thai was the favourite residence of Queen Saowapha as she became the queen mother and moved out of Dusit Park (customarily, queens had to leave the palace they had inhabited with the king after his death). Therefore, new edifices were built including a Japanese-style pavilion. After Saowapha’s death in October 1919, King Vajiravudh effected a major restyling of the complex adding several structures among which were a gingerbread-style domed pavilion and a “Roman garden” with columns and statues. Above all, Vajiravudh transformed his father’s experimental farm into his own social laboratory by placing in a corner of Phaya Thai a miniature city of which he was “the chief planner and chief architect”.

The miniature city, called Dusit Thani (“Celestial City”), had originally been built in Dusit Park and was relocated at Phaya Thai at the end of 1919. Spread over almost one acre of land, Dusit Thani had models (in a 1:12 scale) of both Bangkok’s architecture (the Grand Palace with the royal temple, ministries and barracks) and modern and exotic edifices such as a factory, a hospital,

74 Chula Chakrabongse, Twain Have Met, p. 64.
cinema, a mosque, a walled castle, a clock tower, and a town hall. There were also shops, restaurants, a hotel, and a lighthouse at the mouth of the river running through the city, which was electrically lit at night. In his study of Vajiravudh’s reign, Vella restated, if with some caution, the untenable argument that Dusit Thani served as the testing ground for the trial of constitutional government, and called it “one of the world’s most unusual expressions of political thought” though also proposing that “certainly much of the miniature city was for fun.” Vella’s unwillingness to dismiss Dusit Thani as child’s play might be excused on the grounds that Vajiravudh pushed his municipal fantasy to the point of having two newspapers and one weekly printed for the “populace” with articles he himself wrote, while presiding over such comical acts as the election of a mayor, the granting (and even the amendment!) of a constitution, and the creation of two “political parties” (the Blue Ribbon and the Red Ribbon).

In fact, Dusit Thani apparently reflected the passion for miniature -- and conversely, gigantic -- objects which spread in the nineteenth century, particularly in Britain, where Vajiravudh had studied for several years. In her study of the mania for miniature and gigantic objects, Susan Stewart points at the dollhouse as a “homemade universe” which allows the child the manipulation of time, space, and activity. This perspective seems particularly apposite for Vajiravudh, who arguably suffered from the Peter Pan syndrome and for whom the administration of the “homemade universe” of Dusit Thani must have been both easier and more rewarding than the actual exercise of his absolute power in years of growing public disaffection with the monarchy. Dusit Thani was entirely lost at some point in the subsequent developments that affected Phaya Thai after Vajiravudh’s death. In the late 1920s, in dire times for the state finances, the property was converted into a hotel under the management of the Royal Railways Department; then, after

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76 Pin Malakun, M.L., Dusit thani muang prachathipatoi phra mongkutklao chaoyuhua [Dusit Thani, the democratic city of Rama VI] (Bangkok: National Library, 2513 [1970]).

77 Vella, Chaixol, pp. 75-76.

1932, transformed into a military hospital, a function it maintains up to the present. 79

In the final years of the fifth reign princely mansions mushroomed, especially along the new thoroughfares enframing Dusit Park. Chulalongkorn had nineteen mansions built for his sons and several others for his daughters. Many of these mansions were transformed into government offices after 1932 and still today can be found hidden within their compounds. Also, opposite Dusit Park Vajiravudh had his own royal palace completed in 1913, Chitralada, which today is the residence of the incumbent monarch. Prince Damrong states that, unlike previous reigns, the construction of palaces for the king’s progeny was concentrated in the reign’s later years because the king waited for them to return from their studies in Europe so that they could decide the style of their houses. 80 These mansions were built in the most disparate styles -- a further evidence of the Siamese modernizing elite’s omnivorous appetite for exotic artefacts -- but they largely share the characteristics of the villa, or country house. Among them, two in particular deserve a mention: Bang Khumphrom Palace, on Samsen Road (the thoroughfare that runs parallel to the Chao Phraya River and Ratcha Damnoen Avenue); and Parusakawan Palace, facing Dusit Park.

Bang Khumphrom (now the seat of the National Bank of Thailand) is a grand mansion in the German idiom of neo-baroque originally built for the Prince of Nakhon Sawan, Boriphat, who had studied in Germany. It was designed by the German architect Karl S. Dohring (1879-1941), who also designed for the king Banpun Palace in Phetchaburi (completed in the sixth reign), Woradit Palace for Prince Damrong, and Chulalongkorn University’s original edifice (later the Arts Faculty) in “Thai revival” style. 81 The Parusakawan compound contains two detached houses: a smaller one (used at present as the Police Museum), intended for Prince Vajiravudh while his own mansion was under construction; and a larger


one (now the seat of the Intelligence Department) for Prince Chakrabongse, who eventually was given both houses after his brother moved as Rama VI to Amphon Sathan while the construction of his own palace, Chitralada, was underway.  

A description of Parusakawan Palace in the early 1910s is found in the autobiography of Prince Chakrabongse’s son, Chula Chakrabongse. In the mansion’s ground floor were located a blue drawing-room; a sitting-room in pale pink for Chakrabongse’s Russian wife “to have small tea parties”; a dining-room decorated in the English style with wood panelling; and a billiard parlour. To the two original floors a third one was later added, in which a room was devoted to a collection of Buddha images, such as those owned by “most Thai families of well-to-do status”. There were two kitchens, both located outside the mansion. That for the preparation of European food was housed “in a Swiss chalet-like building” and run by Russian chefs with Chinese assistants; the second kitchen, “a long way off”, was run, instead, by “a big team of women to prepare Thai food”. The other house in the compound (originally built for Vajiravudh) was kept open for guests, but it also had a “white and gold ballroom with hyacinth blue silk panels of Louis XV style” and a banquet room for large dinner parties. Part of the large garden, with ponds, hillocks, and waterfalls, was arranged as Lady Chakrabongse’s “private zoo”: monkeys, gibbons, deer and gazelle, tiger cubs and a baby elephant lived there. Finally, there were the servants’ quarters, “a little town within a town”, which housed hundreds. There the stables with “some eight horses” were also located, and a garage where Prince Chakrabongse “kept several cars of different types for appropriate uses”.

IV
What should be made of the fact that the royalty’s quest for status through the pursuit of a suitably conspicuous lifestyle took the architectural form of the villa? Lewis Mumford contended that the villa institution “is concerned not with the

82 Nengnoi, Phraratchawang, pp. 439-59, 470-73; Kitti, Wangchao, pp. 119-150.

83 Chula Chakrabongse, Twain Have Met, pp. 69-73.
happiness of the whole community but with the felicity of the governors.\textsuperscript{84} More recently, art historian J. S. Ackerman has argued that the villa represents

. . . a paradigm not only of architecture but of ideology . . . a myth or fantasy through which over the course of millenia persons whose position of privilege is rooted in urban commerce and industry have been able to expropriate rural land, often requiring for the realization of the myth the care of a laboring class or of slaves.\textsuperscript{85}

Although the villa was already popular at the time of ancient Rome, it has been argued that its modern characterization first emerged in sixteenth-century northern Italy, where the urban rich built patrician villas in the pursuit of a “dream of the countryside”. By investing heavily in landed estates in order to transform the family patrimony into a dynastic possession, and taking up an aestheticist form of country living, these urban-based landowners created for themselves a public image which uplifted their status by concealing the fact that their wealth originated in economic activities carried on in the city.\textsuperscript{86} Subsequently, the villa ideal -- and ideology -- was appropriated by the plutocracy of bankers and industrialists (and, eventually, by the middle bourgeoisie), whose move out of old city centres to newly acquired country houses similarly depended upon their concern for both comfort and social distinction.

In Southeast Asia the historical trajectory of the villa goes from being the residence of early colonial settlers and, later on, overseas Chinese tycoons (a few examples are still standing in Penang), to present-day suburban housing projects targeting the nouveau riche of the congested and polluted Southeast Asian capital cities. But when the process of suburbanization on a large scale began in Bangkok at the beginning of this century, it was carried out by the royalty, an urban-based elite whose fortunes largely depended, before the creation of a modern tax system in the last decades of the nineteenth century, on profits from trade accumulated over almost a century. Even Chulalongkorn’s alleged intention to devote himself


to farming once he had set aside his kingly duties at the age of sixty reveals that same nostalgia for rural life that provided the ideological justification for the settlement of northern Italian urban elites in the countryside.

The cost the whole community had to pay for the satisfaction of the king's rural nostalgia was stigmatized by Émile Jottrand, a legal adviser to the Siamese Ministry of Justice, who blamed the increase in Bangkok's living costs over the one-year period April 1899 to April 1900 on the construction of Dusit Park. Jottrand's ruminations are worth a full quote for they provide a contemporary and highly controversial view of the modernization of Bangkok:

The fixed rate for a day of work for a coolie at the railways, at public works, and elsewhere is two salungs . . . The king, eager to see rapid progress on his residence, has decreed that wages for a day of work in the Dusit Park would be one tical [=baht=10 salungs]. Thousands of coolies work on the royal park; there are never too many, they are never refused work, and it has become impossible to make progress at the railways and at other important projects. Moreover, it goes without saying that the increase in wages has caused an unavoidable increase in the price of commodities, salaries and all other expenses. On the other hand, the necessary materials for the construction of Dusit are stocked for a period of six months or more, and in many cases suppliers of the court are forbidden to deliver elsewhere. There is a short supply of bricks and cement for the buildings that are being constructed in the city. I do not exaggerate when I say that the Dusit Park monopolizes a great deal of Bangkok's resources, to the detriment of all those who suffer as a result of this artificial and short-lived activity . . . as enlightened and Europeanized as he [Chulalongkorn] may be, he is anxious to retain the privileges of Louis XIV: that the good pleasure of the king is the law!87

Also, on the occasion of the opening, in November 1901, of one of the "birthday bridges" by the king, Jottrand points out that, for one bridge in the city, three bridges were inaugurated in the compound of Dusit Park, and the king's right of pre-emption applied to the bridges as well:

The bridge of Pratu Pi has been in a scandalous state for many years and after a long time they got a bridge from Europe to replace it. But the king thought it had come

87 Jottrand, In Siam, p. 284.
just in time for one of the canals in the park, where he had it erected. The dimension
did not correspond but they did what they could anyway. 88

Jottrand’s eloquence hardly needs any gloss but, to summarize this
chapter, it might be stressed that what was accomplished under the umbrella of
municipal improvement schemes in turn-of-the-century Bangkok was essentially
the creation of a more functional and pleasurable domestic space for the royalty.
The construction of their mansions might have been paid for by the king’s Privy
Purse; still, considerable resources were deployed to clear the area and build the
infrastructure -- water and electricity supply systems and especially the
thoroughfares linking the suburbs to the city core -- necessary for residential
purposes. Besides, if Jottrand’s testimony is to be believed, the repercussions of
this large concentration of resources and manpower were not just a matter of
shifting priorities in municipal works, but affected the daily life of the Bangkok
populace because of the inflation created by artificially high wages.

At the same time, as originally planned, Dusit had no public places or
facilities for the congregation and enjoyment of the populace. To the common
Bangkok inhabitant who happened to venture as far as Dusit Park, the scene must
have appeared remarkably similar to the one Clunas envisions for the urban space
of late-Ming China (sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries): "The
commoner outside was conscious only of walls, of a denial of access, and of
privatization of space". 89 Of course, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge
that, in any time and place, urban space has been shaped by the dominant classes’
conception of the balance between private and public, and that the latter has often
been flaunted in the West as a camouflage for spaces -- from museums to opera
houses to shopping malls -- the access to which relies on the individual’s
possession of some form of capital (economic, cultural, or both). Nor should it be
overlooked that the royalty’s novel domestic space was “public” in the sense that
one of the reasons for its construction was to impress foreigners with the display
of the court’s wealth and Westernized taste. Above all for Chulalongkorn, who

88 Ibid., p. 418.

like many of his European "colleagues" at that time considered himself a working monarch, Dusit was just the resting place needed after a hard day.

With Dusit Park and the other public parks built in the surrounding hills, the king was able to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and enjoy a more comfortable and serene setting. As a "model for the world," the Grand Palace and its immediate surroundings became the "exemplary center" of the rest of the city. This was not just a leisure spot for the royal family, but also a space for the "exemplary" life of the city. It was an ideal space for the "exemplary" life of the city, and its surroundings became the "exemplary" life of the city.

To Queen Saowapha, the king wrote from Europe: "I am a person who has been working since I was a child." King Chulalongkorn, Phraratchatthalekha... prapat yurop pho. so. 2440, vol. II, p. 27.
4 Field of memory

With Dusit Park and the other princely mansions built in the surroundings since the turn of the century, the royalty had acquired a domestic space at once more comfortable and more fitting their self-image as civilized individuals. Dusit being purely a residential district, the Grand Palace retained its symbolic pre-eminence as the "exemplary centre" of the realm while Bangkok's space continued to be lacking in what Cannadine calls "sites of consensual pageantry". In the Indic theatre of power of Siam, royal ceremonies were performed in or around the sacral spaces of the Grand Palace and the temples and, characteristically, on and along the river (e.g. the celebration of the end of the Buddhist lent [kathin] or the bathing of the king's sons [long_thai]). An important reason for the fact that the most splendid pageants of the Siamese monarchy had a riverine setting stems from the predominantly aquatic configuration of Ayutthaya and early Bangkok. In an environment in which the majority of the population dwelt along the canals and river banks, royal processions by water were likely to attract the largest possible number of spectators. At the same time, the riverine setting of the Siamese royal pageants was "unpopulist", as Geertz argues of Indic pageantry in general, because it magnified the distance between the sovereign and his subjects, who lay far in the background as uninfluential observers of the epiphany of regal power.

While it could be argued that differences between the Indic idiom of royal pageantry and that of the European absolute monarchies were largely a matter of emphasis, the post-Napoleonic rhetoric of monarchical power was characterized by what Eric Hobsbawm has termed "a supplementary 'national' foundation". Ideal proximity between monarch and subjects was emphasized and, as Fujitani points out in relation to the Westernization of royal ritual in Meiji Japan, that crowds be visible to the emperor and to themselves became a critical feature of


2 Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma", p. 20.

pageants in the age of nationalism. The following chapter is entirely devoted to the Westernized ceremonial events which were staged for King Chulalongkorn’s jubilee, and I shall expand further on this subject there. Yet these celebrations need to be borne in mind also in the present discussion, because their planning and execution had a direct linkage to the addition of a monumental and ceremonial centrepiece in Dusit, the Phra Lan (known in English as the Royal Plaza), formed by the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall and the king’s equestrian statue placed at the end of Ratcha Damnoen Avenue. The unfolding of the Phra Lan in synchrony with the fortieth anniversary of the king’s reign in 1908 indicates it was conceived of as a “memory site”, to translate Pierre Nora’s felicitous expression (lieu de mémoire): a site imbued with rhetorical meanings which nurtures the collective memory of people and events. Appropriately, the Phra Lan became the locus and focus of the national holiday created by Vajiravudh in 1912 that celebrates, on 23 October (the date of Chulalongkorn’s decease), the memory of the “Great King”.

True to his fame as enfant terrible, historian Nidhi Auesriwongse has dwelt on Dusit’s monumental space in an essay on the relation between monuments and Thai official historical discourse. According to Nidhi, the fact that the imitation of Western models of urban layout, architecture, and statuary was meant to prove that Siam was as civilized as Western countries indicates that the symbolic function of Dusit’s monumental tableau was specific to Chulalongkorn’s own political project: the assertion of the Thai new absolutist state (rat thai mai), which Nidhi distinguishes from the post-1932 Thai nation-state (rat chat thai). While it will be qualified in the course of this discussion, Nidhi’s argument is a useful starting point. But before detailing how the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall and the king’s equestrian statue were conceived and realized, this chapter first takes

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4 Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy, p. 81.

5 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire”, Representations 26 (1989):7-25. This article is the translation of Nora’s introduction to the first volume of the still-in-progress cultural history of modern France he has been editing, Les lieux de mémoire.

into consideration another piece of representational architecture which was central to the characterization of Dusit as the royalty’s modern district.

I

Contemporaneous with the beginning of the construction of Dusit Park was the planning of a major religious edifice, which was consistent with the custom since the times of Ayutthaya to have a temple adjoining the royal palace. Apart from this custom, a monastery which stood in the area since the third reign, Wat Laem, had had to be removed in order to build a road for the Dusit district, so the new edifice was also intended as a replacement. Wat Benchama Bophit (“Wat of the fifth king”) was the second monastery established by Chulalongkorn in Bangkok some thirty years after Wat Ratcha Bophit -- and, incidentally, the last built by a king in the capital. The foundation stone of the monastery was laid on 1 March 1900, followed by a series of ceremonies from the twelfth to the seventeenth of March which marked its dedication to the sangha with the enshrinement of a relic. As part of the ceremonies, a pageant took place on the fourteenth in which floats were paraded with tableaux made of canvas and paper depicting government activities. The pageant was recorded by Charles Buls, whose sharp observations of Siam have already been mentioned:

There is the history of the Army... officers armed with graphometres, surveyor’s rods, levels, sextants, survey-chains, surveyor’s staff... Agriculture is symbolized by cows... Fishing is represented by fishermen carrying nets... In the centre of the display, a colossal medallion with the profile of the king is mounted... Means of transportation have not been forgotten...8

Almost one and a half years later, on 22 August 1901, the foundation stone of the new ordination hall (ubosot) was laid with a ceremony.9 The ubosot was designed by Prince Narit during his second term as minister of Public Works, and is celebrated as a masterpiece of Thai modern architecture, “break[ing] away from

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8 Buls, Siamese Sketches, pp. 106-7.

the traditional construction of a Siamese temple". However, the blending of Sino-Thai (the layered roof covered with glazed tiles and the guardian lions at the entrance) and Western architectural and decorative motifs (a portico with marble columns and stained glass windows) is reminiscent of the eclectic style of palatial architecture which was in vogue in Bangkok in the 1860s and 1870s. Also, archival documents show that the ubosot’s most distinctive feature, its coating in white marble (the name of Marble Temple was given to the wat apparently after its completion), was an idea of the Public Works Department’s engineer-in-chief, Carlo Allegri.

After a period spent in Europe following various projects on behalf of the department, Allegri wrote a report upon his return to Bangkok in September 1901 in which he suggested covering the temple’s basement and outside walls with marble, with the possibility of three options: white; red or another colour for the basement and white for the walls; or slabs of different colours for the walls as well. There are no indications as to whether the final decision was taken by Prince Narit, the building’s designer, or by Kon Hongsakun, the director of construction; but Allegri’s memorandum indicates that the white marble coating was the cheapest. The stained glass windows were then chosen by Chulalongkorn himself with Allegri during his visit to Milan in May 1907. Wat Benchama Bophit even furnished the occasion for the employment of a Japanese artisan, as the king wanted someone from that country for the gilding of the seated Buddha image placed inside the ubosot, a copy of the venerated Buddha Chinarat image in Phitsanulok. Upon an enquiry by the Siamese chargé d’affaires in Tokyo, the principal of the local School of Fine Arts recommended the service of Kenzaburo Tsuruharu. Included in his contract was the provision that the Japanese decorator

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11 NA, RV, Ministry of Public Works 1/26. Allegri’s estimates were 48,200 Baht for common white marble, and 61,346 Baht for pure polished marble.

12 King Chulalongkorn, letter of 23 May 1907, Phraratchatthalekha ... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat, p. 38.
would also teach his technique to local artisans,\textsuperscript{13} which would seem an indication of the lower standards of Thai artisans at that time.

* * *

From the early stages of its construction, an annual fair was held in December in the grounds of Wat Benchama Bophit in order to raise funds for its completion (accomplished only in the sixth reign). In 1900, possibly its second occurrence, the fair lasted for some ten days. Yet this was no ordinary temple fête. Among the attractions there were a platform for the royalty, a theatre, an exhibition of Buddha images and one of porcelain belonging to the royal family, a maze, a European restaurant, and some four hundred stalls, all made of canvas and paper fixed on wooden frames. Besides entertainments such as fireworks displays and lakhon representations, the royal family turned themselves into an attraction. Princesses baked cakes for sale in one stall, and the king himself ran a stall where he auctioned his belongings as a way to raise donations for the temple. According to Jottrand's testimony, the fair was accessible to anybody, and security was maintained by two hundred sailors who, at the most, "push the crowd back by about two metres when the passage of the king or one of the queens is announced".\textsuperscript{14}

In the 1904 version of the fair, the king set up a studio for the taking of photographic portraits; the following year he organized a photographic contest remembered as the first of its kind, in which 140 contestants (73 Siamese and 67 Westerners) took part. Five gold medals, thirty silver medals, and sixty-eight bronze medals were awarded, the top prizes going to the king, a prince, and three foreigners.\textsuperscript{15} In 1907, Prince Damrong's edited version of the first three letters sent by the king to his daughter from Europe were put on sale at the fair.\textsuperscript{16} After the attempts at popularizing photography, in 1908 some of the artworks the king had purchased in Europe the previous year were exhibited at the fair. The fair thus

\textsuperscript{13} The contract was signed on 13 January 1910, and provided for two-month's employment at 8 Yen per day, extendable at the lower rate of 6 Yen. NA, RV, Miscellany 9/65.

\textsuperscript{14} Jottrand, \textit{In Siam}, pp. 318-20.

\textsuperscript{15} Sakda, \textit{Kasattri lae klong}, pp. 96-102.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Bangkok Times}, 14 December 1907.
became the locus for the "cosmopolitanization" of the elite, an arena for the king to mediate cultural practices and artefacts of Western provenance through which the Siamese elite asserted their modern identity.

II

Just around the time of embarking on his second journey to Europe, Chulalongkorn started pushing for the most ambitious building project of his reign: a new throne hall to be built in Dusit, ideally to replace the Ananta Samakhom ("Infinite Assembly") located in the eastern side of the Grand Palace compound. This was a two-storey Western-style edifice with a Chinese canopy that King Mongkut had built between 1854-1859 for the reception of foreign ambassadors and other celebrations.17 An extant photograph of its interior shows a rectangular hall with two rows of columns creating a central nave at the end of which stood the throne on a platform; crystal chandeliers hung from the caisson ceiling.18 In the royal edict that announced the construction of the new Ananta Samakhom, issued on 1 March 1908, the old throne hall was said to be in an advanced state of decay that justified its demolition and replacement by a new edifice with the same name to be erected next to the residence of Dusit Park.19

The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall turned out to be the most expensive construction of the fifth reign, and probably in the whole history of the absolute monarchy. It would seem, however, that the cost of the edifice has been grossly overestimated. The cost calculated on the only figures found in the records, those of the Financial Adviser's Budget Reports, amount to 5,492,940 Baht (around 420,000 Pounds sterling of the time).20 However, all secondary works boast of a


20 This is the grand total of sums which were apportioned through the financial years as following: 1909/10 to 1912/13: 500,000 Baht per year; 1913/14: 1,162,569 Baht; 1914/15: 842,030 Baht; 1915/16: 1,137,547 Baht; 1916/17: 349,762 Baht; 1917/18: 1,032 Baht. NA, Office of the Financial Adviser,
cost of 15 million Baht of the time (between 150 and 200 million Baht of today), although no source for this figure is ever mentioned. Given the accessibility of the Budget Reports, one wonders why nobody ever thought to consult them before. Is it because the costlier the building, the greater its patron’s glory?

In fact, although an imposing throne hall for the performance of royal rituals represented the wish of a king at the apogee of an exceptionally long reign, such an extravagant building met with early criticism. Some lamented that, because of the lack of local builders capable of undertaking sizable constructions, the building ended up being designed by the Italian draughtsmen of the Public Works Department. The result was a Western-style edifice contrary to the king’s desire for a building in the Siamese style – a desire which, however, is only alleged as no documentary evidence or even rumours have been adduced in support. Most recently this criticism was voiced in a book by art historian Piriya Krairiksh, but it was already brought out long ago in a pungent poem by chaophraya Thammasak Montri, among the first Siamese public intellectuals, whose title read “King Chulalongkorn’s grief at imagining future blame of the excess of Western-style buildings erected in his reign”.

Siam transforms its image making people astonished.
The old field has suddenly changed.
I heard what the King said about the Ananta Palace,
Aware, as he was, of criticism that will be common in the future:
“King Chulalongkorn really has a weakness for Western buildings.
It is true, we are in want of Siamese draughtsmen,

Budget Report. Year RE 127 (1909/10) to Year BE 2462 (1919/20). From 1913/14 (BE 2456), i.e., since these are given in the Reports, actual expenditures rather than the sum apportioned in the budget for the coming financial year, have been used for calculation.

21 E.g., FAD (comp.), Chelim phrathinang ananta samakhom [A celebration of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2422 [1979]), p. 97; Tongthong Chansangsu, Phrathinang ananta samakhom (Bangkok: Akson samphan, 2530 [1987]), p. 83; Apinan, “Modern Art”, p. 128. The only exception was the figure of 8 million Baht mentioned by Major Erik Seidenfaden, Guide to Bangkok (3rd. ed. Bangkok: The Royal State Railways of Siam, 1932), p. 252. Two hypothesis can account for the figure in Seidenfaden. The first is that he adjusted the original cost on the basis of the inflation rate over the past decade; the second, rather less likely, is that he misread a document (Ministry of Finance to chaophraya Yomarat, 5 May 1915, NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 7.7/14) in which the sum of 5,192,000 Baht was indicated as the building’s cost up to that date, and 3,192,030 Baht as the extra cost on the original budget (i.e., 2,000,000 Baht). Also, the cost of 5,192,030 Baht up to 5 May 1915 accords with the final cost of 5,492,940 Baht, given that works were completed at the latest in the early months of 1916.

but did phraya Ratcha Songkhram need a dozen of them from overseas? Heavenly engineers had to be employed to realize his plan.”

“The Palace should be finished in time for the celebrations. This cannot be done by one architect alone.” Yet the king passed away without seeing his wish accomplished.23

Although the manifest target of Thammasak’s caustic poem were the “heavenly engineers”, with their alien and megalomaniac style, it is not difficult to read it as an oblique criticism of the king himself. Indeed, Chulalongkorn’s correspondence to chaophraya Yomarat shows that the king was aware of the silent opposition to the construction of a new throne hall by some in the administration but pursued the project anyway. That the real matter of concern was not so much the style of the building as the cost involved in its realization transpires from a letter that the king wrote just two days before his departure for Europe in March 1907, at a time when the idea of the new throne hall was probably still under consideration. Chulalongkorn lamented what he felt to be the prejudicial attitude of foreign as well as Thai officials, whose arguments he summarized in four points: the new building would be a waste of money, having an estimated cost of one million Baht (in fact, it cost more than five times as much); it was superfluous, because the Aphisek Dusit Throne Hall in Dusit Park could be easily enlarged; unprofitable, being a property that could be neither rented nor lived in, but used only for ceremonies, a waste in themselves; and much too grand, to the point of being possibly regarded as a misuse of money and labour. On this account, the king concluded the letter by asking chaophraya Yomarat (who, as minister of Public Works and later of Municipal Government, was going to supervise the project) to take a stance on the matter:

Now, even though nobody openly voices these four arguments, I know that is what they have in mind, and I feel discouraged. If you think that there are only personal benefits, that I don’t need [to initiate] a palace to celebrate the reign’s anniversary, that ceremonies can be performed here, and that therefore it would be better to

23 Thammasak Montri, “Phraong song saedong phuraratchathommat mak thung kae rapsang wa topai khangna khao khong phakan tichan wa samai phrackhalachomklaod ni chang prottuk farang sia chring”, in Songsan and Phrani, “Khrongkan burana”, p. 3. An aristocrat, Thammasak was educated overseas in the years 1896-98, and later became Minister of Education (1916-26). He was a versatile author and journalist among the first to write, under the pseudonym of Khru Thep, about economics in Siam. Phraya Ratcha Songkhram, who is mentioned in the poem, was the honorific title granted to Kon Hongsakun, the draughtsman of Wimanmek Palace and other royal buildings.
abandon this project, I will not be enraged, but I couldn’t help regretting such a decision.\textsuperscript{24}

At any rate, with the reign’s fortieth anniversary approaching in a year and a half, the idea of a new throne hall was not to be abandoned. The project for the building was entrusted to architect Annibale Rigotti (1870-1968), of Turin’s Accademia Albertina,\textsuperscript{25} who was joined by Mario Tamagno, head of the Public Works Department’s Architectural Section.

Following the dictates of late nineteenth-century architectural eclecticism, Tamagno and Rigotti designed a domed building in the guise of a basilica with a Latin cross plan. The edifice measures approximately 49.5 metres wide, 112.5 metres long, and 49.5 metres high, and features seven spherical surfaces: the central dome; the oval dome of the staircase; the small domes of the two side cylindrical stairways; and three half domes (that of the apse and the two at the ends of the short arm). It has been suggested that these seven domes represent the seven planets of Buddhist cosmology.\textsuperscript{26} But except for this rather obscure symbolism, the design of the throne hall conformed to the ornate style of \textit{fin-de-siècle} European public buildings and civic shrines. The white marble coating, already used for the nearby Wat Benchama Bophit, was a favourite in such edifices, from Rome’s monument to King Victor Emmanuel II (built 1885-1911) to Calcutta’s Victoria Memorial (built 1906-21).\textsuperscript{27} The Ananta Samakkhom’s dome, covered externally with copper, relies on a high tambour with a colonnade in the style of High Renaissance basilicas (e.g., St Peter’s in Rome and St Paul’s in London). The interior of the throne hall imitates, instead, that of a Baroque church, with similar bombastic ornamentation: vaulted ceiling supported by columns of the Corinthian order on tall marble pedestals; a profusion of sculptural

\textsuperscript{24} King Chulalongkorn, letter of 25 March 1907, \textit{Phraratchathalekha ... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat}, pp. 28-29.

\textsuperscript{25} Ministry of Public Works, memo of 24 June 1909, NA, RV, Miscellany 9/64. Rigotti was employed for this project under a temporary contract initially running from November 1907 to September 1909 with a monthly salary of 1200 Baht, and later extended but at a lower pay.


\textsuperscript{27} In relation to the celebrations of Chulalongkorn’s jubilee in 1908, Prince Chula Chakrabongse wrote in \textit{Lords of Life} (New York: Taplinger Publisher, 1960; p. 266): “It is said they wanted a vast and grandiose marble memorial like the one in Rome for King Victor Emmanuel II.”
and painted decorations dominated by gold; and five large figurative frescoes with historical subjects, to be considered in more detail below.

Before starting the construction of the edifice, the Public Works Department had to solve the problem of sinking the foundations for such a large building in the alluvial land of Dusit. For that it was necessary to resort to a technological novelty, a special drill called Compressol which was made available by a French firm, whereby hundreds of holes, 8 to 10 metres in depth, were made in the ground and then filled in with concrete. An iron grid covered with concrete was then laid down to provide a stable base for the building. Eventually, the laying of the foundation stone took place on the early morning of 11 November 1908, the opening day of the week-long celebrations of Chulalongkorn’s jubilee. Apart for the erection of its bare structure and the interior decoration, the throne hall resulted as the assemblage of foreign-produced parts: cut-to-size marble and granite stones from factories in Genoa, Turin, Milan, and Carrara; bronze and copper casts from Stuttgart; ceramics from Vienna; and curtains, tapestries and carpets from England.

Glimpses of the early stage of construction of the throne hall are found in the king’s correspondence to chaophraya Yomarat, the building director (a role the king referred to by the Chinese word kongsi, which proves the influence Chinese masons had had in Bangkok). In a letter written in April 1909, the king praised the Italian team: “The foreigners deserve admiration, so different from our master builders who are bossy and do not give any help. They work hard till late at night as they do in Italy. I am very satisfied. I congratulated Allegri on this”. The following October, watching the throne hall rising from the garden of the Amphon Sathan mansion, the king trusted that its structure, dome apart, would be completed within seven months. This time his praises were all for Yomarat (“All my life I have never seen such a capable kongsi”) and his ability to keep under control both the “malaise” (rok) of the local workers -- a hint about their

30 King Chulalongkorn, letter of 24 April 1909, Pharatchatthalekha...phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat, p. 134.
laziness or the petty corruption going on -- and, surprisingly given previous statements, the tardiness of the foreign employees:

The foreigners were made to agree [by chaophraya Yomarat] on the materials and the work schedule until they could take it no more. The fact is, they do not consider in advance what they will need to use; so, when materials are not there, they use the excuse of waiting for the delivery to take holidays. If not closely controlled, they would stop working altogether.

The day after this letter of praise, Chulalongkorn wrote again to chaophraya Yomarat in a tone both cryptic and facetious: “The construction of the Ananta Samakhom is not an ordinary work. In the event that ... it is finished in ten years, I shall relinquish my position as a king and be one who makes bunches of grass for the elephants” (ellipsis in original).\(^{31}\)

A question which was being tackled around October 1909 was the employment of an interior decorator for the throne hall. Archival documents show that the initial choice for this job was Cesare Ferro, who had already decorated the interior of the Amphon Sathan mansion and had since returned to Italy. Allegri presented chaophraya Yomarat with Ferro’s demands (six months for the preparation of the sketches in Italy at 120 Pounds per month and a three-year contract for working in Siam at the same salary, plus 160 Pounds for a return passage to Bangkok) together with his proposals. Ferro suggested depicting some major historical events in the history of Siam or the Chakri dynasty; for this he asked “to be provided with an exact history of such events. Out of those I could then select the motives for four grand frescoes”. For the decoration of the vaults forming the continuous ceiling, Ferro thought instead of “European allegorical paintings representing moral qualities, uses, customs, wealths, commerce, agriculture, etc. etc., of Siam”, in the conviction that “panels of living character will not prejudice in any way the classical style of the whole building ... simply serv[ing] with its vivid colors and its moving lines to give life to the severe magnitude of the Hall”.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., letters of 24 and 25 October 1909, pp. 166-7, 168.

\(^{32}\) Carlo Allegri, letter to chaophraya Yomarat of 19 October 1909, with enclosed “Proposals made by Mr Ferro in regard to the painting of the Phrathinang Ananta Samakhorn” (in English), NA, RV, Miscellany 9/64.
Informed of the ongoing negotiation, the king warned chaophraya Yomarat to “keep very vigilant with Ferro, an idler by nature and made worse by his long training in the Public Works Department”. Eventually, after being presented with a minutely detailed contract, Ferro turned down the offer, becoming, instead, associate professor at Turin’s Accademia Albertina. Allegri then turned over the proposal to Galileo Chini (1873-1956), a Florentine artist who had become known thanks to his participation at international exhibitions and salons. He had exhibited a major work at the Venice Biennale of 1907, visited twice by Chulalongkorn during his stay there. Yet, unlike what others have written, the reason that brought Chini to Bangkok was not so much Chulalongkorn’s enthusiasm for his work as Ferro’s refusal to take up the work he was originally offered. In 1910, Allegri spent a period in Italy following the realization of some parts for the throne hall. It was without doubt on that occasion that he approached Chini, who agreed on the offer of a lump sum of 100,000 Francs (53,000 Baht) along with his guarantee of completing the work in thirty months.

The king expressed his agreement with the choice of Chini but warned chaophraya Yomarat that the terms of the contract should be strict in case Chini’s working pace was like Ferro’s -- for, if so, “he will never finish in time”. The

33 King Chulalongkorn, letter of 25 October 1909. Phraratchatthalekha... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat, p. 168. Apinan (“Modern Art”, p. 121 ff; Modern Art, p. 18) erroneously contends that Ferro actually worked on the decoration of the Ananta Samakhom. Ferro did go back to Bangkok but only in 1923 to decorate Norasing Villa, built by Rigotti for one of King Vajiravudh’s favourites, chaophraya Ramrakop.


36 Bangkok Times, 22 June 1907.


38 NA, RV, Miscellany 5/124.


40 King Chulalongkorn, letter of 28 July 1910. Phraratchatthalekha... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat, p. 235. It is worth noting that the date on the king’s letter is the same of Gollo’s memorandum quoted in the footnote above. This means that on the very same day chaophraya Yomarat was informed by Gollo of Chini’s availability to take up the job, he communicated the news
covenant between Chini and Allegri on behalf of the Siamese government was finalized in Florence on 17 October 1910, only six days before Chulalongkorn’s sudden death.\footnote{Vianello, \textit{Galileo Chini}, p. 36.} Chini left Italy the following March (1911) and reached Bangkok at the end of June. Apparently his arrival was not much noticed, since he begged three months later for an audience with the king or any other high official -- an episode that reveals Vajiravudh’s scant interest in the Ananta Samakhom.\footnote{Department of Public Works, memorandum of 26 September 1911. NA, RVI, Miscellany 5/15.} Later on, Allegri asked the minister of Municipal Government to provide Chini with an entry permit to temples and the museum’s and library’s collections for the purpose of studying Siamese paintings and architecture.\footnote{Carlo Allegri, letter to chaophraya Yomarat of 22 November 1911. NA, RVI, Minister of Municipal Government 39.1/6.}

Within the thirty months deadline, Chini painted five frescoes illustrating the deeds of the Chakri dynasty with the help of his two aides, G. Sguanci and Carlo Rigoli (the latter active in Bangkok throughout the sixth reign as executor of Prince Narit’s sketches). Viewed according to the chronological order of their realization,\footnote{Chronology established by Anna Imponente, “Liberty e orientalismo nelle collezioni di corte in Siam”, \textit{Aspetti del collezionismo in Italia} (Trapani: Quaderni Museo Regionale Pepoli, 1993): 185-203.} the frescoes depict: Vajiravudh’s ceremony of enthronement (lunette on top of the main hall’s entrance); Rama I’s triumphal procession after the defeat of Cambodia, and Chulalongkorn freeing the slaves with the activity of the port and the Ananta Samakhom underway in the background (half-domes of the apses at the ends of the short arm); King Mongkut receiving the homage of the priests of different religions (half-dome of the apsis at one end of the long arm); Rama II and Rama III inspecting, respectively, Wat Arun, and the Grand Palace’s Maha Prasat Ratcha Montian and southwestern fortification, restored during their reigns (oval dome over the main staircase). On the remaining surface, Art Nouveau figurative and floral motifs predominate except on the vaults, which are to the king and obtained from him an answer on the subject. Mindful of Ferro’s slow working pace, the king wrote that he preferred to have Chini being paid 1,500 Baht monthly with a final sum of 8,000 Baht to be paid at the work’s completion rather than for the duration of the work.
emblazoned with the initials of Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh encircled by golden halos somewhat reminiscent of a mandala.\textsuperscript{45}

Given the proposal by Ferro mentioned above, it is clear that Chini took up his idea of realizing a cycle depicting the deeds of the Chakri dynasty, a most fitting subject for a representational building which was destined to house court ceremonies. Stylistically, Chini blended the prospectival and figurative approach of Renaissance painting with Art Nouveau’s Orientalism, particularly in his use of gold, which is also a reminder of the local decorative style. With regard to their subject, it can be noted that the frescoes represent not so much historic events but rather a synthetic view of the accomplishments of each reign: the subjugation of Cambodia in the first reign; the consolidation and the cultural restoration of the second and third reigns; the humanistic impulse characteristic of the fourth reign; the abolition of bondage and economic and urban development in the fifth reign. The fresco depicting Vajiravudh’s coronation was an addition to the four scenes originally envisaged and, since his reign had just begun, it was the most suitable event to represent.

Despite the didacticism of the scenes, some of Chini’s artistic choices were in fact discordant with the self-image of the modernizing elite. Prince Narit, for example, found it indecorous that King Chulalongkorn was surrounded with half-naked male and female slaves,\textsuperscript{46} whom he had not only freed but had also tried to clothe in his pursuit of civilization. At any rate, this visual narrative of the dynasty was not to be seen by anybody but high-ranking officials and foreign representatives participating at royal functions. As in other matters of taste, the subscription to a Westernized style by the Siamese ruling elite might have not entirely captivated them but it was functional to the expression of their cultural advancement and, implicitly, the distance between them and their subjects.

Aside from the interior decoration, the construction of the Ananta Samakhom slowed down during the initial years of the sixth reign, particularly after the outbreak of World War I which delayed the shipping of prefabricated

\textsuperscript{45} Excellent reproductions of Chini’s frescoes in the Ananta Samakhom can be seen in Apinan, Western-style Paintings in the Thai Royal Court.

\textsuperscript{46} Apinan, “Modern Art”, p. 154.
materials from overseas. When Vajiravudh demanded the completion of the building by March 1916 (end of the Buddhist Year 2458) it was suggested that it be done by utilizing locally produced components; but Tamagno promised the delivery of all orders from Europe by July 1915, and the conclusion of the works by the date set by the king. Finally, the inauguration of the Ananta Samakhom took place as part of the celebrations for Vajiravudh’s thirty-sixth birthday in January 1917. Honours were bestowed on all those who had taken part in the works: chaophraya Yomarat as the project director; phraya Prachakon as his assistant; Allegri, Gollo, Spigno, Guasco, and Levi, of the Engineering Section; Tamagno, Rigotti, Salvatore, Rigazzi, Tavella, Moreschi, and Tamaglia, of the Architectural Section; Rigoli and Sguanci for the interior decoration (Chini had been presented with the Order of the White Elephant before returning home in 1914); Tonarelli, Novi, and Innocenti for the sculptures. In the course of the celebrations, canvases by Chini, Ferro, and Rigoli were also exhibited at the annual December fair of Wat Benchama Bophit.

At its completion, the Ananta Samakhom joined the ranks of the city’s landmarks, as is shown by contemporary picture postcards. But although the eight years which were required for its construction compare favourably with other such monumental buildings (the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta took four years to plan and fifteen to build), by 1917 the grandeur of the throne hall was somewhat out of place for a king who was increasingly the target of public criticism. Besides, Vajiravudh was anything but fond of the edifice so strongly desired by his father as he was aware that Europeans, used to much grander architecture, would not

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47 King Vajiravudh, letter to chaophraya Yomarat of 30 April 1915; Minister of Finance, letter to chaophraya Yomarat of 5 May 1915; Mario Tamagno, letter to chaophraya Yomarat of 4 May 1915. NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 7.7/14.

48 NA, RVI, Min. Royal Household 17/32.

49 Ratchakitchanu bekkasa [Royal Government Gazette], vol. XXXIII (14 January 1917), pp. 2808-15; Bangkok Times, 8 and 13 January 1917.

50 Davis, Postcards of Old Siam, pp. 16, 19, 20, shows postcards featuring the Ananta Samakhom dating around 1917-1920.

find it particularly impressive.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, in the defensive phrasing of a 1920s Bangkok guidebook written by a Danish foreign adviser, the Ananta Samakhom was “generally considered to be the finest piece of this style east of Suez”.\textsuperscript{53}

Another aspect to be considered is that a Western-style throne hall epitomized that “cult of imitation” which Vajiravudh increasingly targeted from 1915 onwards. Although openly aiming at the Westernized taste and manners of an increasing proportion of Bangkok’s populace, Vajiravudh’s deep-seated concern was the possible threat to the monarchical institution that too extensive a secularization of Siamese society could represent. A kind of nemesis could be detected here because, after the disregard for the throne hall that followed its completion, on 10 December 1932 the building hosted the ceremony for the promulgation of Siam’s first constitution which was drawn by the promoters of the June coup. This event is commemorated by the design of the back of the 50 Baht note in use today, which shows King Prajadipok (the event’s reluctant protagonist), the constitution lying on the offering bowl, and the front section of the Ananta Samakhom.

Between 1932 and 1974, when a new parliament house was completed, the Ananta Samakhom served as the seat of the National Assembly, and King Bhumibol began the custom of presiding there over the solemn opening of parliament. As a result of the change in its function, the Ananta Samakhom/ National Assembly hall has undergone a symbolic resignification at the hands of some myth-makers and tends now to be cast as a prescient enterprise of Chulalongkorn, eager to provide a forum for the time when an elected assembly would be a political institution suitable for Siam.\textsuperscript{54} Congenial to this resignification is the design of the throne hall, similar to many nineteenth-century domed buildings in white marble that extolled democratic government, the prototype of which is the Capitol in Washington D.C. It is therefore useful to quote an excerpt

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Vella, \textit{Chaiyo!}, p. 234, quoting a Thai source.
\item[53] Seidenfaden, \textit{Guide to Bangkok}, p. 252.
\item[54] Tongthong, \textit{Phrathinang ananta samakhom}, pp. 73, 83-89.
\end{footnotes}
of the written reply Chulalongkorn gave to those in the elite who were pressing him for substantial reforms in the government:

In fact, it would be impossible for the king to govern the country following a European system because it is hard to find able persons to be members of parliament. Besides, the people would never be pleased with Western institutions. They have more faith in the king that in any members of parliament, because they believe that the king practices justice and loves the people more than anybody else.55

This was written in 1888, but there are no indications that the king changed his mind later in his reign. In truth, the Ananta Samakhom was to be the ceremonial locus of a modernizing yet convincedly autocratic monarch -- though, eventually, a locus manqué. In the end, it has served better as the mere scenic background for the Royal Plaza's centrepiece, the king's equestrian statue.

III

When the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn was unveiled, on 11 November 1908, the surprise must have been great for the majority of those present. Although the king's effigy had graced commemorative medals, coins, and stamps since early in the reign, a three-dimensional, larger than life-sized reproduction of his figure did not have precedents in Siamese statuary. Moreover, the statue was presented as a token of gratitude from "the people" to the king on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of his reign, adding a particular symbolic dimension to it. It is thus extremely unfortunate that Siam's most prolific historian and a close peer of the king, Prince Damrong, wrote only a short account of how the project of the equestrian statue evolved, even more so because Damrong's account constitutes the source, even when unacknowledged, for all the accounts that can be found in the Thai secondary literature. For this reason, to present here a full translation of Damrong's piece, published in a miscellaneous volume since long out of print, seems a good idea.56

55 King Chulalongkorn, Phraratchadamrat nai phrabat somdet phrachulachomklao chaoyuhua song thalaeng phraborom ratchatthibai kaekhai kanpokkhrong phaendin [King Chulalongkorn's speech explaining the reform of the government] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2470 [1927]), pp. 62-63.

56 Prince Damrong, "Ruang sang phraborom rup songma" [The king's equestrian statue], in his Prachum phramiphon betthalet [Miscellaneous writings] (Bangkok: Kurusapha, 2504 [1961]): 59-62.
The king's equestrian statue was occasioned by two circumstances. First, by the time of the king's second trip to Europe in 1907, the Ananta Samakhom project was underway, and because of this, the area around the building site was cemented and joined with Ratcha Damnoen. Second, there was at that time more than one year ahead to the reign's fortieth anniversary, and the king had given a mandate to the crown prince to consult with the ministerial council to organize the celebrations. Celebrations had already been held for the Bangkok centenary and the king's return from his first European tour in 1897, but now it was felt that, given the special occasion, something really special had to be done. The king had pursued the development of the country and the welfare of the people; for this, the Siamese of all races and languages donated money in grateful reciprocation to the king, who could use it according to his wishes. The Ministry of Municipal Government had the task of promoting the initiative among the people of Bangkok and the Ministry of Interior among those in the provinces, following two principles: donations, even of few satangs only, should be voluntary; and everybody must be informed of the initiative and given the opportunity to make merit. From the council of ministries came the proposal of erecting something as a memorial to the king's fame, but it was agreed to wait until the amount of money collected was known before taking any decision.

While contributions were being solicited came the news from Europe that during his visit to Versailles, in France, Rama V was very impressed by the equestrian statue of Louis XIV in front of the palace, and commented that an equestrian statue of himself in the open space where Ratcha Damnoen joins the grounds of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall would look majestic, as much as those found in many European countries. The cost for such a statue was about 200,000 Baht. At the same time, it became clear that people were happy to contribute and a large sum was being collected. The council passed a resolution, and the crown prince informed the king that the equestrian statue would be presented to him as a token of gratitude by the Siamese people on the occasion of the celebrations for the reign's anniversary. Rama V gave his approval, and that is how the equestrian statue originated. Besides, after the statue was paid, there was more than one million Baht left, so the crown prince informed the king who said that the money should be used for a building of public utility; however, no decision was taken before Rama V's death. After Vajiravudh became king, he decided to use that money to build Chulalongkorn University. The ceremony, the address of dedication of the statue, and the king's reply to the address, were recorded in the Royal Gazette.

This account apparently contains more than one inconsistency. To start with, the idea of having an equestrian statue of himself cast in bronze must have been in Chulalongkorn's mind well before his 1907 visit to Europe. In fact, as soon as he arrived in Paris in June that year, he sat for the sculptor who modelled the statue. As Apinan points out, Chulalongkorn had seen several equestrian statues already during his 1897 European tour, and probably even before that in photographs or book illustrations. All the Italian cities the king visited at the very

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57 King Chulalongkorn, Klai ban, Chs 85 (19 June 1907), 146 (19 August), 149 (22 August).
beginning of the 1987 tour (Venice, Turin, Rome, and Florence) have several equestrian monuments. The sight, in Rome, of those of Marcus Aurelius (the oldest extant specimen of the genre, dating back to the second century A.D.) and Giuseppe Garibaldi (unveiled in 1895) was even recorded by a member of the royal suite.\(^59\)

Damrong's emphasis on the impact made on Chulalongkorn by the statue of Louis XIV at Versailles seems thus to reveal an attempt at indicating a suitable source of inspiration. This attempt makes even more sense when the equestrian statue of King Norodom of Cambodia (r. 1860-90) is considered. The statue, which was quite likely known to Damrong, lies in the precinct of the royal palace built in Phnom Penh in the early 1860s with French assistance when the town was transformed into the new seat of the Cambodian monarchy (previously this had been in Udong). Ironically, while Norodom's new palace was closely modelled on the Grand Palace in Bangkok, the establishment of Phnom Penh as Norodom's capital marked the shift in submission from Siam to France, whose protectorate was established in 1863.\(^60\)

In his account Damrong also avoided mentioning a minor subject he must have been aware of. Writing to chaophraya Yomarat in March 1907 while on his way to Europe, the king says that the money collected among state officials for the jubilee occasion was to be used for erecting a monumental gate (or arch) to the palace in Dusit, sketches of which had been drawn by Damrong, Prince Narit and phraya Suriya when the latter was minister of Public Works (1905-6). Suriya had also proposed to place an equestrian statue on top of the gate but the project was temporarily shelved. "Now seems to be the right time for it", the king wrote to

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59 Phraya Si Sahathep, Sadet prapat yurop ro.so. 116 [The royal tour of Europe in 1897], 5 vols (Bangkok: Kurasapha, 2515 [1971]), vol. II, pp. 94, 98.

60 I thank Craig Reynolds for bringing to my attention the existence of this statue, which today stands encased in a concrete pavilion capped by a prasat-like roof. The statue itself is rather peculiar, as only Norodom's figure is cast in bronze while the horse is made of plaster, perhaps for economizing on the cost. The base carries the inscription "A Norodom premier roi du Cambodge ses mandarins et son peuple reconnaissants 1860" [To Norodom, first king of Cambodia from his grateful officials and subjects], although the statue was probably erected after 1860, the first year of Norodom's reign. On the establishment of Phnom Penh as the capital of Cambodia see the essay by Pierre-Lucien Lamant, "La creation d'une capitale par le pouvoir colonial: Phnom Penh", in P. B. Lafont (ed.), Etudes Urbaines, Peninsula Indochnoise (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991): 59-102, in which, however, the statue is not mentioned.
chaophraya Yomarat, “so send me some suggestions about an artist and the cost of realization”. The gate was given an ephemeral form as part of the decorations on the occasion of the king’s return from Europe in November 1907 (see Ch. 5), while the project of a permanent structure continued to be voiced even after the unveiling of Rama V’s equestrian statue, one year later.

As for the fundraising, archival documents suggest that it was a much more systematic operation than Damrong’s account, with its emphasis on voluntary contributions and popular response, would suggest. In fact, the account is a perfect example of what a historian of revolutionary Russia calls “the myth of spontaneity”. Among the records of the fifth reign, there can be found twenty-four files, filling three boxes, in which the provenance and amount of thousands of donations is recorded: individuals, officials of each ministry, diplomatic personnel and overseas students, foreign firms and banks, even the Apostolic Secretariat contributed. In return, souvenirs were distributed in proportion to the sum disbursed. Bronze, silver, and gold medals went to the donors of sums between 10 and 99, 100 and 999, and 1000 Baht or more, respectively. Donors of less than 10 Baht received an image of the king in one of the following three sizes: 4cm by 6cm (25 to 99 Satang); 9cm by 12cm (1 to 4.99 Baht); 13cm by 18cm (for 5 up to 9 Baht). The dates on the documents also show that the recording of contributions and the consequent distribution of souvenirs probably was more laborious a process than the fundraising itself, going on for years well into the sixth reign.

What Damrong’s account does reveal fully is Chulalongkorn’s longing for a grand urban tableau emblematic of his reign, “as majestic as those found in many European countries”, and of which equestrian statues are often a typical feature. By the time the king left for Europe on 27 March 1907, the project of the

61 King Chulalongkorn, letter of 15 April 1907, Phraratchat lekha... praratchathan chaophraya yomarat, pp. 30-32. Phraya Suriya was acting minister of Public Works in the period 1905-6; before that, he had been the Siamese ambassador to Berlin, and it is quite clear that his extravagant proposal was inspired by the city’s Brandenburg Gate (built 1788-91).

62 Bangkok Times, 18 November 1907 and 27 October 1908.


64 NA, RV, Minister of Municipal Government 7.10/1-2�.
new throne hall was being finalized. When he arrived in Paris in mid-June, the
king headed straight to the workshop chosen for casting the statue, that of the
Seusse brothers at 13-15, boulevard de la Madeleine. The sculptors were Georges
E. Saulo and, for the horse, Clovis E. Masson, who had both won prizes at the
Paris Salon. The king’s likeness, initially sketched with the aid of photographs,
was perfected by Saulo in sessions in Paris, and also Munich and Hamburg during
the king’s visit to Germany. “I must say”, he wrote to his daughter flaunting the
authority of a connoisseur, “that the French sculptors are quicker and more
realistic than the Italians”. The casting and shipping of the statue took one year,
an accomplishment the Parisian foundry of the Seusse brothers emphasized when
they tried, unsuccessfully, to sell the king a couple of bronze fountains.

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The equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn, for which the term phraborom rup
songma was coined, was the first, and for more than twenty years, the only piece
of public statuary in Bangkok. In this regard, Bangkok represented a notable
exception to the nineteenth-century trend termed by French historian Maurice
Agulhon “statumania”: the mushrooming of statues of national heroes which was
a distinctive feature of the embellishment of public space and affected European
cities as well as other emerging capital cities such as Buenos Aires and Tokyo.
Only in 1932 was a second statue, again that of a king (Rama I), unveiled in
Thonburi at the base of the first bridge that connected the two banks of the Chao
Phraya River and was built to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary
of the dynasty, just a couple of months before the overthrow of the absolute
monarchy. And it was really only with the premierships of Phibun Songkhram

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65 King Chulalongorn, Klai ban, Ch. 85 (19 June 1907), pp. 351-53.
66 F. Bénézit, Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs, 5 vols (n.p.: Libraire
67 King Chulalongkorn, Klai ban, Ch. 149 (22 August 1907), pp. 328-29.
68 NA, RV, Miscellany 8.3/17. The shipment of the statue was done by a Hamburg firm, Brasch &
Vogel, “Urban Rituals and Symbols in Buenos Aires”, in Nas (ed.), Urban Symbolism, pp. 95-96; and
Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy, pp. 124-25.
(1939-1944 and 1948-1957) that public statuary and monuments were employed for the first time on a large scale as vehicles of political propaganda via the sculptures of the Italian artist Corrado Feroci (1883-1962).\(^70\)

The fact that, at the height of the global "statumania" fever, only the statue of Chulalongkorn was erected in Bangkok is of the utmost significance. As Agulhon says of France, "... a political power expresses itself with the historical characters it chooses to honour. The old French monarchy erected statues of kings and saints almost exclusively. The idea of bestowing this honour on other 'great men' -- on servants of the state or on national heroes -- came only with the Enlightenment".\(^71\) Closer to fifth-reign Siam, Meiji Tokyo saw the erection of several bronze statues which mostly celebrated national military heroes such as Omura Masujiro, an architect of the modern military system, whose statue was the first to grace the Japanese capital.\(^72\) The uniqueness of Chulalongkorn's statue in Bangkok's cityscape for a quarter of a century asserted the king's supremacy in the exercise as well as in the representation of power, similar to the way power was conceived of and represented in Europe's absolute monarchies.

A related question is that of the statue's intelligibility as a political statement to the population at large. The king's satisfaction with its realism, expressed in the letter to his daughter, suggests that he intended the statue to be regarded as a monument -- that is, a site for fostering the collective memory of his reign and thus

\(^70\) Feroci arrived in Bangkok in 1923, perhaps the last of the Italian wave of architects and decorators. A native of Florence, he was instrumental in the establishment of the Academy of Fine Arts, Silpakorn. Under Feroci's direction, the academy began producing the monuments and statuary commissioned by Phibun for Bangkok and the provinces. In the early 1950s Feroci (who was also the author of the statue of Rama I) realized Bangkok's only other equestrian statue, that of King Taksin. This statue was an attempt by Phibun to appropriate the figure of the Thonburi king as a potential anti-Chakri symbol (Taksin was deposed and executed by the founder of the Bangkok dynasty). Notably, Taksin is represented with a fierce expression while brandishing his sword skyward. Feroci, who in the 1940s had acquired the Thai name of Silpa Bhirasri along with Thai citizenship, is one among the many figures of Thailand's "founding fathers" -- in his case, "the father of Thai modern art". This fact has considerably hindered a critical approach of Feroci's role as the regime's artist in Thailand for more than forty years. Mildly appreciative of this role is Apinan, Modern Art, Ch. 2; for a more critical account, containing however some factual inaccuracies, see Helen Michaelsen, "State Building and Thai Painting and Sculpture in the 1930s and 1940s", in John Clark (ed.), Modernity in Asian Art (Sydney: Wild Peony Press, 1993): 60-74.


\(^72\) Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy, p. 124.
as a means of perpetuating the dynasty.\textsuperscript{73} Considering that, throughout the millenia, equestrian monuments have suited Roman emperors, Christian kings, and civic and national heroes alike, there is no reason why such a representational cliché should prove unsuitable for a benevolent Oriental despot like Chulalongkorn -- even though he was less acquainted than many of his bronze counterparts with riding horses for marshalling troops on the battlefield or even as a mere means of transport. Yet the fact that the statue has become of late the focus of the urban cult of Rama V, which was mentioned in the Introduction, makes one wonder whether a clear-cut definition of the statue as a secular monument or, instead, a religious icon, makes any sense in the Thai context. The still posture of the king’s and horse’s figures, rather uncommon for equestrian statues, is itself redolent of iconic fixity (although I am not suggesting this is the reason why the statue has become the focus of the Rama V’s cult).

In any case, even a sacred, as opposed to a secular, appreciation of Chulalongkorn’s statue would not be void of political valency. Eric Hobsbawm refers to icons as a “crucial component” of proto-nationalism, particularly those icons associated with “a divine or divinely imbued king or emperor whose realm happens to coincide with a future nation”.\textsuperscript{74} The very idea of nation as emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century apparently germinated from that of the king’s immortal “body politic” (opposed, in Kantorowicz’s formulation, to his mortal “body natural”), an idea on which the pre-Enlightenment conception of the state as the collectivity of the subject to monarchical authority relied as well.\textsuperscript{75} In Siam, then, as in other Buddhist polities, the political and religious realms were intrinsically overlapping. Even the novel concept of “nation” (chat) which was predicated by Rama V and his successor, assumed the ideal of Buddhist benevolent kingship and understood “nation” not as a separate entity but as an attribute of monarchy and dynasty, said to be turned by the people’s devotion into a “national” institution.


\textsuperscript{74} Hobsbawm, Nation and Nationalism, p. 72.

The Chakri’s distinctive political project shall be considered more in detail in the next chapter precisely by focusing on the speeches uttered at the unveiling of the king’s statue. A final comment is in order here on the Phra Lan’s monumental space as a “field of memory” presenting today’s beholder with a celebrative image of the fifth reign. At the beginning of this chapter, mention was made of an article by Nidhi Aeusrivongse. In it Nidhi correctly argues that, had Chulalongkorn lived longer, the new royal quarter in Dusit would have replaced the Grand Palace in its function as “exemplary centre”. The use of the Phra Lan as the focus of celebrations for the king’s coronation anniversary in November 1909, the last he celebrated, confirms this thesis and stands as the precedent for the creation of Chulalongkorn’s Memorial Day in 1912 as an occasion for merit-making as well as for rejoicing, which continues to be observed to this day. In this way the Phra Lan has become, to use M. Christine Boyer’s felicitous expression, “the official memory book” not only of the 1908 jubilee but of the whole fifth reign. The role of pageantry, along with monuments, in the project of having the reign inscribed onto the collective memory is addressed in the next chapter.

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77 NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 17.5/3.

78 Boyer, City of Collective Memory, p. 343.
In what would be the final years of the fifth reign, impresario and showman jointly took control of the mega show and participated in marking the stage of an emperor's ambition and the collective memory of it. In November 1907 a grandiose and unprecedented show took place in Kathmandu to celebrate the return of King Chulalongkorn's public coronation in March 1911 by proposing the king's celebration tableau. This chapter engages in the "dramatic character" of these pageants while arguing to avoid the pitfalls of "ceremonial discourse". Any claim is to understand these as symbolic devices in the production of a new style of authority, and that mundane stories and remarks are cast in this performance.

The political events considered here seem clearly a different facet from the daily lives of the Sumeru Theatre state that Chulalongkorn had already established for his "Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months" and Queen Victoria was still able to record in the late 1920s. Their rationality lay not in the cyclical time-frame of Jodhpur ritual but in the modern rhetoric of modernity that bound the sovereign's sovereignties and even his passing away, in the state he personified.

So that, if one agrees that the original aim of ritual is to stage the divine and mortal world, it could be said of the celebrations of 1907-1908 that they prepared to make history visible for a man whose worldview had been shaped by the notion of linear development dependent upon the agency of a historic leader which was part and parcel of the cultural Westernization of Sumeru's court.

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The current of 'linear development' high reverence to which many seem to adhere was proposed by Clifford Geertz. "Trad Demise: Towering on Insuperable Theoretical Hurdles". The theme of "Fifteenth Centennial" - the approach to historical scholarship is endorsed by David Cohen in "Introduction" to his book.


Refashioning the theatre of power

In what would be the final years of the fifth reign, imposing public spectacles were staged with the apparent aim of marking the apogee of an epoch while sealing the collective memory of it. In November 1907 a pageant of unprecedented scale took place in Bangkok to celebrate the return of King Chulalongkorn from his second visit to Europe. Two weeks later, the attainment of his fortieth year on the throne was celebrated in Ayutthaya amidst ruins and a purpose-built wooden palace. The zenith was reached in November 1908 with the week-long festivities for the longest reign ever in the history of the Siamese monarchy. And, albeit in a different note, Chulalongkorn’s public cremation in March 1911 represented his reign’s celebrative tailpiece. This chapter engages in the “thick description” of these pageants while trying to avoid the pitfall of “ceremonial antiquarianism”.1 My aim is to understand them as symbolic devices in the production of a novel style of authority, and these introductory remarks are cast in that direction.

The ceremonial events considered here were clearly a different thing from the daily liturgy of the Siamese theatre state that Chulalongkorn himself described in his “Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months” and Quaritch Wales was still able to record in the late 1920s.2 Their rationale lay not in the cyclical time-frame of Indic court ritual but in the modern rhetoric of monarchical rule that bound the sovereign’s achievements, and even his passing away, to the state he personified. So that, if one agrees that the overall aim of ritual is to make the ultramundane sensible, it could be said of the celebrations of 1907-1908 that they aimed to make history visible for a mass whose worldview hardly encompassed the notion of linear development dependent upon the agency of a human monarch which was part and parcel of the cultural Westernization of Siam’s ruling elite.3

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1 The concept of “thick description” with reference to ethnographic research was proposed by Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture”. The danger of “ceremonial antiquarianism” when engaging in historical ethnography is underlined by David Cannadine in “Introduction”, p. 4.

2 King Chulalongkorn, Phra rat chaphit sipsong duan (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 2528 [1985]); Horace G. Quaritch Wales, Siamese State Ceremonies (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931).

3 Atthachak, Kanpliangplaeng lokathat khong chonchan phunam, pp. 28-45.
In this sense, the celebrations considered in this chapter fit the pattern of what Hobsbawm has termed “great new rituals of self-congratulation”, as they were staged to captivate the growing numbers of state officials and pupils as much as to impress the Western powers with the display of Siam’s wealth and progress, its modern army, and the loyalty of the subjects to the sovereign. The epoch-making design of the ceremonies transpires also from the speeches that Chulalongkorn delivered on these occasions and that can be taken as his “spiritual” will. In these speeches the king, separating his historical roles of actor and witness, proffered an appraisal of his reign and, what is more, of his epoch, candidly exposing his faith in the inherent progressivism of modernity. A survey of these pageants also reveals the active participation of Vajiravudh in the monarchy’s propaganda machine since the final years of his father’s reign, lending credit to the contention that the catchwords earlier scholars saw as peculiar to sixth-reign official nationalism were, in fact, fully articulated by the end of the fifth reign. Finally, it is in this context that the creation of Dusit’s ceremonial space, examined in the previous chapter, can be appreciated as an element of the overall celebrative project of which it was part.

On 17 November 1907 the people of Bangkok welcomed Chulalongkorn back from his second European tour after an absence of almost eight months. Welcoming celebrations had also been held on the day of the king’s return from his first visit to Europe, ten years earlier (16 December 1897), but they were excelled by far by those of 1907. The core event was the royal progress along Ratcha Damnoen Avenue decorated with nine triumphal arches standing for as many ministries (Fig. 5.1). Among the other attractions there were the renovation and decoration of several buildings, the extensive use of electric lighting (some 30,000 lamps were set up by the Siam Electricity Company around Bangkok), and an elaborate fireworks display which was eventually ruined by inclement weather. In order to

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Fig. 5.1 King Chulalongkorn's progress, 17 November 1907.
record the event, arrangements were made to have photographs taken at each stage of the king’s approach to Bangkok and his progress throughout the city. An album containing some 150 photos, including some taken at Ayutthaya during the festivities in December, was presented to the king the following April (1908). These photographs remain today, with a written account by Prince Damrong and newspaper reports, to illustrate the event.7

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The king was given an early welcome by two of his daughters, Chumphonkhet and Wuthichai, and Prince Damrong, who met him in Penang and accompanied him back to Bangkok. On the way to the Gulf of Siam the royal party stopped in Trat, Chang Island, and Chantaburi, where brief ceremonies took place.8 On the afternoon of 16 November the royal yacht, the Maha Chakri, reached the mouth of the Chao Phraya River where it was met by several private launches and fishing boats that, following an invitation by the Harbour Department, were moored on both sides of the river. Queen Saowapha was taken on board the Maha Chakri, which spent the night at anchor and resumed its course the following day.

In the early hours of the seventeenth, a flotilla of launches, steamers, and canoes welcomed the royal yacht at Paknam, at the mouth of the Chao Phraya. To assist Bangkok people witnessing the event, a special train was set up to reach Paknam at 6.15 a.m. and return to the capital at 8 a.m., in time for the king’s arrival.9 After an address by the town commissioner and a reply by the king,10 the Maha Chakri, preceded by four gunboats and a launch of the Harbour Department

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6 Bangkok Times Weekly Mail. April 23 and 24, 1908, reproduced in Sakda, Kasattri lae klong, p. 117. Photographers included Damrong at Paknam, the Bangkok-based professional Mr. de la Roca at Chantaburi and Paknam, and several others in locations such as the royal landing, the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Keo, and at each of the triumphal arches.

7 Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Chotmaihef prakop ruang klai ban [Documentation relating to the narrative of “Klai ban”] (Bangkok: Cremation volume, 2505 [1962]), Ch. 4. A chronicle of the progress with the English translation of the welcoming speeches is in the Bangkok Times, 18 November 1907 (the issue referred to in the text above unless another date is given). I re-translated from Damrong’s chronicle the excerpts of the speeches above to made them as close as possible to his version and avoid the peculiar flavour of early twentieth-century English prose.

8 Damrong, Prakop ruang klai ban, pp. 53-68.

9 The provision of this service was announced in the Bangkok Times of 11 November 1907.

10 Damrong, Prakop ruang klai ban, pp. 72-75.
and followed by a flotilla of private boats, continued its way up to the landing stage next to the Grand Palace. Along the way it was greeted by the chanting of monks assembled in the monasteries along the river banks, the band and some five hundred pupils of the Assumption College performing the royal hymn on the bishop’s landing, the officers of the Custom House and the postmen of the Grand Post Office lined on the river bank. Even the bells of the Rosary Church were rung in salutation although, for a Sunday morning, the gesture was by no means out of the ordinary.

Around 10.30 a.m. the royal yacht approached the landing stage where, inside a pavilion decorated with cloth of gold and the flags of various nations, the crown prince waited for the king with the princes of the royal house, monks, high officials, and the members of the diplomatic corps. An extension sheltered several other officials while a number of their wives were accommodated on a nearby lawn. Amidst the firing of a salute by the gunboats, the whistling of the flotilla of launches, and the royal hymn played by the Navy Band on the landing stage, the king and his suite stepped on shore at the auspicious time of 10.48 a.m. Chulalongkorn was received at the entrance of the pavilion by the crown prince, who read an address of welcome on behalf of princes, officials, and foreign representatives. In the first part of his address, Vajiravudh posited a direct linkage between Chulalongkorn’s health and the welfare of his subjects, thus proclaiming the oneness of the king’s mortal body and the “body politic”:

> Among the many benefits of this travel that can be enumerated the most important are the recovery of Your Majesty’s health and the relaxation from the great worries of royal duty. In Siam every government activity is accomplished by the sovereign alone; for this reason, his well-being is strictly related to the welfare of the populace. . . . Besides, the knowledge and experience acquired from the keen examination of foreign matters will be conducive to the advancement of Siam itself. . . . Therefore, We may humbly conclude that this travel has benefited not only Your Majesty but the country as a whole.

Having said that, Vajiravudh engaged in self-promotion by focussing on his role as regent during the king’s long absence and underlining the approval he had received by his father. In his reply, the king expressed his appreciation for the

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11 A royal anthem was first composed in 1871, after the king’s return from his visit to Java. Another anthem was composed around 1891-1892 by the Russian composer Schurowski.

12 Damrong, Prakop ruang klai ban, pp. 78-80.
welcome and for the way state affairs had been managed during his absence. But he began his speech with a sentimental consideration of universal value which few in the audience were able to really appreciate: the joy felt by a traveller in finding himself again in his own country and among his own people.¹³

From the pavilion on the royal landing the king was borne into the Grand Palace on a palanquin surrounded by emblems of royalty and preceded by a band playing ancient Siamese instruments. “To the foreigner at least”, the reporter of the Bangkok Times noted, “this procession, a real bit of old Siam, was not the least interesting spectacle of the day”. Inside the Chakri Maha Prasat and Wat Phra Keo Chulalongkorn attended religious rites and received the address of the monkhood.¹⁴ Finally, the king and the crown prince left the Grand Palace in a state carriage preceded by a cavalry escort and followed by the carriages of other princes, and proceeded directly to Sanam Luang, the large open space facing the royal palace. There the king was presented the longest and most significant of that day’s addresses by the minister of Municipal Government, Prince Naret Worarit, speaking on behalf of the people of Bangkok.

In his speech, Prince Naret reviewed in detail what forty years of reign had achieved for the people at large, so making explicit the nature of the welcome as a first instalment towards the 1908 anniversary celebrations. The reign’s greatest accomplishments for the populace, the minister said, were individual freedom (khwampenthai duei ton heng), contentment (khwamyuyen pensuk), the spread of education (khwammi pricha samart), and increasing prosperity (khwamboribun doy thot sombat), which resulted in a peaceful climate (khwamkesam samran). As the hallmarks of the reign, Prince Narit specifically mentioned: the patronage of various faiths; the abolition of bondage; administrative, judiciary, and military reforms; the establishment of schools; the development of agricultural and commercial infrastructures, of communications, and health services; the care for the people in the provinces; and the ascent of Siam’s status in the international arena. The warm welcome the people were offering to the king expressed their gratitude for those blessings, the minister concluded, praising also the crown

¹³ Ibid., pp. 81-2.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 84-91.
prince’s regency. In his reply, the king placed Siam’s development in the global context of that period although he unmistakably took pride in what had been achieved under his rule:

The time elapsed since Our enthronement has been a memorable epoch in the history of mankind, an epoch characterized by rapid progress in many fields. Our effort has been directed to give Siam a place in the movement towards progress which is the distinctive trend of our age. One generation represents a very short time-span in the history of a country; still, there are many differences between the Siam of today and that of one generation ago.

Once the king had completed his reply, the actual progress started. At the beginning of Ratcha Damnoen Avenue stood the first of the nine triumphal arches, the Army Department’s, “perhaps the most successful of all in the opinion of the majority”, according to the Bangkok Times. The arch was formed by a pair of facing elephants, each bearing a palanquin with human figures, with the trunks raised in auspicious position and balancing on their tusks a giant Siamese crown (Fig. 5.2). The road section between this arch and the Phanphi Phoplila bridge, crossing the Lot Canal, was decorated with masts surmounted by royal umbrellas and ropes of coloured flowers hung across the road. Just after the corner of Ratcha Damnoen with Ratchani Road stood the second arch, that of the Ministry of War. It featured two dragons leaning on the sticks of two red and gold, seven-tiered umbrellas, supporting the Buddhist Wheel emblem of the dynasty (chakra) and a huge crown (Fig. 5.3). The arch’s lintel carried the inscription “sawatdi maharat” (Welcome Great King).

Beyond this arch stood the pavilions of the Foreign Office and the Western banking and mercantile community. The latter had actually been a forerunner in conceiving the welcome ceremony. Once there, the royal coach halted and the king was presented with the homage of the Western entrepreneurs, a carved silver

\[15\] Ibid., pp. 92-97.

\[16\] Ibid., pp. 98-99. Here and elsewhere the usage of the pluralis maiestatis in the translation of the king’s speeches is consistent with the Thai texts.

\[17\] A meeting of European banks and firms had been held to consider ways for celebrating Chulalongkorn’s return on 16 August at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank; a committee was appointed to consider proposals (Bangkok Times 17 August 1907). A similar move was made by the Chinese entrepreneurs on the following 1 September (Bangkok Times 3 September 1907).
Fig. 5.2 The arch of the Army Department; National Archives.
basket which contained a written address of welcome. On his part, the king handed the representative a message emphasizing the friendly relations between the government and the Western business community, and the linkage between the success of foreign enterprises and the country's prosperity. After this exchange the royal progress was resumed and moved through the arches of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice. The first arch had four towers in latticework with gangways on the top and was filled by Japanese lanterns and a large number of electric lights. The other arch featured a gilded design inspired by Buddhist motifs with the cut-out figures of four genii and a Buddha under a radiant sun (Fig. 5.4). Ropes of lotus flowers and lanterns hanging from side to side of the road completed the decoration of this section of Ratcha Damnoen, leading up to the new Phanfa Lilat bridge, which was inaugurated during the progress.

Across this bridge stood the fifth arch, that of the Ministry of Municipal Government, a three-door Chinese gateway (Fig. 5.5). The street decoration in the stretch between this arch and the Makwan Rangsan Bridge, in which the arches of the Ministries of Education and Agriculture also lay, featured a Chinese pattern too. Yellow flags emblazoned with ideograms hung from the roadside masts which were connected lengthwise by lanterns and crosswise by coloured silk strips. Just after the Ministry of Municipal Government's arch, the royal coach stopped again to let the representatives of the Chinese and the Indian Muslim communities pay obeisance to the king. Similar to the greeting by the Western entrepreneurs, the presentation of gifts to the king was followed by the exchange of written messages.

Besides the general words of welcome and thanks, the address of the Chinese community contained an important passage on the need for Chinese immigrants to be able to visit their homeland in the future without compromising

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18 The basket, chased with figures from the Ramakien and Chulalongkorn's monogram in gold, rested on a wooden base inscribed, "From the foreign banks and mercantile community in Bangkok in commemoration of His Majesty's return to His Kingdom, November 1907". Before the celebrations, the basket was put on display on the premises of the goldsmith who made it (Bangkok Times, 12 November 1907).

19 Damrong, Prakop ruang krai ban, pp. 100-102.
their loyalty to the king of Siam. The king’s reply also contained a significant appraisal on the status of the Chinese in Siam as a result of the policy followed during his reign, particularly the enjoyment of equal business opportunities and the protection of their interests despite the absence of diplomatic relations with the Middle Kingdom. The king’s reply to the address of the Indian merchants emphasized his commitment to maintain equality of conditions for all the different ethnic and religious communities in Siam.

The progress then reached the blue and gold arch of the Education Ministry, carrying a Pali inscription and surmounted by the figure of a hero on an elephant amidst dragons. In this section large flags inscribed with “Long live the king” in Thai, Pali, and English, were hung over the roadway, and several side attractions were shown, such as the side arch of the Royal Military College and tableaux inspired by mythical tales. Some three thousand primary school children were also assembled on the spot to sing the royal hymn while the king slowly passed by, “evidently highly pleased with the efforts of young Siam”, as the Bangkok Times reporter wrote. The next arch, in moorish style, was the Agriculture Ministry’s, placed at a short distance from the Makwan Rangsan bridge crossing the Krung Kasem Canal. There the progress made its last stop to allow the local entrepreneurs to present their address to the king. This praised the fostering of local industry and commerce, still in its initial stage, through the granting of privileges to institutions such as the Siam Commercial Bank; and the growing interest about Siam as a result of the royal travels. The king’s reply contained the assurance of further improvements in the legislation on commerce and the granting of charters by the government. Across the bridge the street decoration was carried on with pillars on either side of the road connected by streamers of flags and lanterns. Also on display were the standard lamps to be installed in Dusit Park, gift of the Siamese mercantile community.

20 Ibid., pp. 102-6.

21 Ibid., pp. 106-7. This speech, never really uttered, has been taken as Chulalongkorn’s most explicit statement on the Chinese. See Skinner, Chinese Society in Thailand, pp. 161-62. Incidentally, the Siamese year 1907/8 (Buddhist Era 2450) registered the highest number of Chinese entries in Siam prior to the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911 (ibid., p. 61).

22 Damrong, Prakop ruang klai ban, pp. 109-12.
Fig. 5.3 The arch of the Ministry of War; National Archives

Fig. 5.4 The arch of the Ministry of Justice; National Archives

Fig. 5.5 The arch of the Ministry of Municipal Government; National Archives
In the final stretch of Ratcha Damnoen, from the Krung Kasem canal to the entrance of Dusit Park, stood the last two arches: that of the Ministry of Finance, featuring a circular passageway inscribed in square columns with the models of two large medals hanging down from it (Fig. 5.6); and the arch of the Ministry of Public Works, a colossal portal in Indo-saracenic style, 21 metres long and 40 metres high, surmounted by flags and covered with electric lights. In front of the arch a plaster statue of the Hindu god presiding over Chulalongkorn’s day of birth (Phra Hatsabodi) riding a deer had been erected on a tall pedestal (Fig. 5.7). According to the Bangkok Times, the intention was to have the arch rebuilt in marble as a memorial to the reign. From the last arch to the entrance of Dusit Park, lamp posts decorated with four-headed elephants and topped by royal umbrellas ran on both sides of the road. After the firing of a salvo signalled the king’s arrival in Dusit, commemorative medals were handed out to the people along the route at each ministry’s arch.

The public entertainment was to continue in the evening with a fireworks display offered by the Western business community and carried out by a London firm on a site adjacent to Dusit Park. But the heavy rain that fell shortly before the show affected it badly, disappointing the large audience that had gathered to watch. Still, there to provide a nocturnal spectacle were not only the arches but also public buildings and private premises, and even the tramcars, all specially decorated and lit. The celebrations had a sequel the following day, with a review of troops on Sanam Luang which was attended also by many Westerners, and a dinner for the princes of the royal household followed by a reception for the foreign representatives in the Chakri Maha Prasat. The arches and city sights were

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23 On the existence of a project for a monumental gate to Dusit Park see King Chulalongkorn, letter to Chaophraya Yomarat of 15 April 1907, in Phraratchatthalekha ... phraratchathan chaophraya yomarat, pp. 30-32; and above, Ch. 4.

24 The elaborate fireworks programme provided for almost forty items, including the ascent of a magnesium balloon, the devising of the mottos “Welcome home to His Majesty the King”, and “Prosperity to Siam”, the fire portraits of the king, the queen, and the crown prince, the royal arms, the Chakri wheel, and the grand naval combat finale (Bangkok Times, 13 November 1907). The fact that the fireworks display was entrusted to the London firm of Mr. J. Pain & Sons could appear extravagant in a place with such a large Chinese community like Bangkok. As the Bangkok Times had earlier pointed out (27 August 1907): “By the desire of the Siamese themselves, the whole display will be as European as possible, although portraits of their Majesties and the Crown Prince will be shown in the fireworks”.

Fig. 5.6  The arch of the Ministry of Finance; National Archives

Fig. 5.7  The arch of the Ministry of Public Works; National Archives
once again illuminated, and people congregated to watch lakhon performances until another burst of rain. It was reported that “along by the palace wall it was almost impossible to walk for the crowds of sightseers”, and indeed Bangkok’s two tram companies registered an absolute record of earnings: some 12,000 Baht on the day of the progress, and some 10,000 on the next day.

* * *

In the Southeast Asian theatre of power royal progresses were a well-known form of political display. Of one of the most famous literary texts of the region, the Negarakertagama, a fourteenth-century political treatise in poetic form composed at the height of the Javanese empire of Majapahit, Clifford Geertz says that it “is not only centred around a royal progress but is in fact part of it”. In Siam too, the king customarily took part in processions by land on his coronation (originally a tour around the city that since the fourth reign included also a visit to temples) and by water in the annual kathin ceremony. It was the procession of barges staged along the river on this occasion that struck European visitors of Ayutthaya such as Schouten, Tachard, Kaempfer, and van Vliet, as well as Carl Bock, who witnessed it in Bangkok in 1883. But Chulalongkorn’s progress clearly had its model in European royal pageants, which could be related to the Western business community’s precursory role in its planning. In particular, the progress’ mise en scène (the ride in a carriage, the triumphal arches, the welcoming addresses by state officials, clergy, and merchants) presented all the characteristic elements of the royal entry performed by absolutist monarchs in Europe in the fifteenth to the

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25 Bangkok Times, 19 November 1907.

26 Ibid. The two companies were the Siam Electricity Co., a Danish company, and the Siamese Tramway Co., established in 1905 by Prince Norathip as a joint-stock company but whose majority share was bought in 1907 by the Siam Electricity Co. Arnold Wright (ed.), Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam (London: Lloyd’s Greater Britain Publishing Co., 1908), p. 192.

27 Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma”, p. 20. The Negarakertagama was written in 1365 by a Buddhist cleric resident in the court of King Hayarn Wuruk (1350-69).

28 Wales, Siamese Ceremonies, pp. 106-15, 200-08; Reid, Age of Commerce, vol I, pp. 179-80. Bock, Temples and Elephants, pp. 108-10. This is how Bock described (p. 110) the impression the procession of barges made on him: “The effect of the scene and its surroundings, the deep, wide river reflecting the brilliancy of the sunny sky, and doubling every gay object upon its surface, while ashore, on either side, flags fluttered and gilt spires glittered, will never be effaced from my mind”.  
seventeenth centuries, which was itself modelled on the Roman triumph. In the words of an authority on Renaissance pageants,

A royal entry reflected the achievements of the present and reviewed those of the past while turning an optimistic eye to the future. . . . The royal entry thus became an essential part of the liturgy of secular apotheosis. It was a vehicle whereby public acclamation could be focused on the person of the ruler as the incarnation of the State, the anointed of God, the pater patria, the defender of Holy Church and of Religion, the heir of mighty ancestors, the source of all beneficence whose rule showers peace, plenty and justice on his subjects and cause the arts to flourish. 29

Generally speaking, the symbolism of the royal entry would seem to have fit the occasion. Returning to Bangkok after several months of absence, the king “retook” possession of the city, and metonymically of the whole realm, while celebrating the triumphs of his visit to Europe and his exceptionally long reign. The speeches presented by the welcoming parties, vocally and in writing, emphasized the twin themes of progress and material prosperity which connect to the image of Chulalongkorn as champion of the people’s well-being, themes that are central to the rhetoric of absolutism in the later fifth reign as much as to the archaic Buddhist ideal of benevolent monarch. Even the procession’s route, from the originary “exemplary centre” -- the Grand Palace -- to the new locus of the monarch -- Dusit Park -- along the Western-style boulevard built by Chulalongkorn, can be seen as tracing onto the cityscape the transformation in the image of the monarchy. In addition, the presence, next to the king, of Vajiravudh throughout the ceremony marked his public investiture as crown prince as he relinquished his role as regent.

A closer parallel between the mise en scène of Chulalongkorn’s progress and that of the royal entry of the Renaissance may be of help in identifying the meanings conveyed by the former. Triumphal arches, ephemeral as well as permanent, were a characteristic feature of the European royal entry. Arches were decorated with statues, paintings, emblems, and inscriptions, that exploited the imagery of mythological heroes and Roman emperors to convey allegorical meanings relating to the realm of politics. Explanatory books were published in

29 Roy Strong, Splendour at Court (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp. 23, 36. Strong points out (pp. 16-17) that in the Renaissance the staging of these spectacles had the collaboration of eminent artists such as Tintoretto and Palladio (for Henry III’s entry into Venice in 1574), Leonardo da Vinci (for the entries of Louis XII into Milan and Francis I into Pavia), and Paul Rubens (for the entry of Archduke Fernand in Antwerp in 1635).
order to make this allegoric idiom intelligible to those who did not possess classical erudition because, as Wortman explains, "absolute monarchies did not leave the understanding of visual symbols to the imagination".\textsuperscript{30} As shown in the the review of Chulalongkorn's progress, monarchical-religious emblems (conical crowns, fans and tiered umbrellas, elephant-emblazoned flags, the \textit{chakr}) featured prominently in the street and arch decoration en route, and it might be assumed that a large part of the audience were acquainted with them.

Knowledge of the function and activities of institutions such as ministries (established in their modern form in 1892) might have been comparatively less widespread. However, out of nine arches, only four made clear what they stood for: the Army Department's arch with its scene of traditional warfare; the Ministry of Finance's hanging coins; less evidently, the Ministry of Justice's with its Buddhist imagery (equating Buddhist law [\textit{dhamma}] with judicial law),\textsuperscript{31} and the Ministry of Education's arch, with its inscriptions in Pali, the learned man's language. (This arch, with its mythic figure and its mottos in a clerical language, was the closest in its iconography to the Renaissance triumphal arch.) So, if the organizers' intention was to employ the arches to visualize the institutions of the modern state, the idea was only partially executed. In fact, it would seem that the primary function of the arches and the rest of the celebrative apparatus was to create an otherworldly landscape along a thoroughfare then running, for most of its length, through the rural outskirts of Bangkok.\textsuperscript{32} The three "Oriental" arches in particular (those of the ministries of Municipal Government, Agriculture, and Public Works) and the massive use of electric lighting suggest that, besides historical models, the ephemeral architecture of international exhibitions provided an important source of inspiration for the organizers.\textsuperscript{33} And, like the visitors of

\textsuperscript{30} Wortman, \textit{Scenarios of Power}, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{31} One can note that the word for "justice" (\textit{yutthitham}) is lexically cast on the word "\textit{dhamma}" (\textit{tham}).

\textsuperscript{32} On the otherworldly effect produced at Versailles by night festivals (particularly fireworks shows) as evidence of the king’s prodigious powers, see Louis Marin, \textit{Portrait of the King} (Paris, 1981), trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{33} The similarities between the spectacle of the exhibitions and the celebrations for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 have been pointed out by Timothy Mitchell, \textit{Colonising Egypt} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 17. The effect of nocturnal lighting by electricity instead of gas was initially
the exhibitions in Europe and America, the people of Bangkok must have been truly amazed by the grand and exotic spectacle of Chulalongkorn’s progress.

In resuming a ceremony which had been among the most emblematic of Western absolutist kingship and adapting it to the Bangkok stage, the fashioners of Chulalongkorn’s progress produced thus a celebration of his autocratic rule as much as of his role as an agent of modernization. The welcoming addresses given at the beginning of the progress openly praised the king’s role as civilizer but, of course, there were no loudspeakers to amplify these panegyrics (couched, moreover, in the royal vocabulary that few outside the court understood), so only the officials surrounding the king could appreciate their meaning. To the mass of the spectators it was the uniformed soldiers lining the street, the triumphal arches’ fantastic architecture, and the dazzling night illumination that conveyed the sense of “movement towards progress that is the distinctive trend of our age”, as the king himself put it.

II

Only a couple of weeks after these welcoming celebrations, Ayutthaya was the scene of more pageantry. But while the former had emphasized the king’s power to effect progress, the latter were aimed at outlining continuities with the past. Thus, instead of the cosmopolitan spectacle of ephemeral arches and electric lights seen in Bangkok, the one staged in Ayutthaya relied on oil lamps, traditional fireworks, and, of course, the local ruins. Above all, a historical analogy furnished the reason for organizing a festival in the place known to the Thais as the “old capital” (krung kao). In November 1907, Chulalongkorn’s reign had equalled in duration that of Ramathibodi II (1491-1529), the longest yet in the history of the Siamese monarchy -- a record that Chulalongkorn himself was to outdo the following year.

The festivities in Ayutthaya were planned almost one year in advance. On 13 December 1906, the Ministry of Interior, Prince Damrong, informed the king that he had instructed the high commissioner of the Ayutthaya province to use convict labour for uncovering the site of the royal palace and clearing up and levelling the ground along the route, and requested 20,000 Baht for setting up the

revealed at international exhibitions; Rosalind Williams, Dream Worlds, p. 85.
pageant.\(^{34}\) After the desertion of Ayutthaya following the Burmese sack of 1767, its remains were buried in the jungle while new settlements (the core of the modern town) had sprung up in a different area since the 1830s. By the early 1900s, according to an ex-employee of the Royal Survey Department, the high commissioner of Ayutthaya had had the vegetation regularly cleared and paths laid in the area of the ruins for the Siamese elite and the Westerners who came to visit.\(^{35}\) To add to that, commissioner phraya Boran Buranurak (an apposite title meaning "preserver of antiquities") was a hobby archaeologist credited with having located the sites of the royal palaces mentioned in the Ayutthayan chronicles.\(^{36}\) So he was the perfect choice for organizing a pageant aimed at reviving the days of the old capital. It was reported that the reconstruction of the royal palace relied upon the descriptions by M. de la Loubère and other seventeenth-century European visitors of Ayutthaya, and the other temporary buildings and festive decorations too were realized after historical models. For instance, illumination was provided not by the Japanese lamps then commonly in use but by old-style Siamese lamps. Likewise, all entertainments (khon, lakhon, even the fireworks) purportedly were in the "traditional" style.\(^{37}\)

There are no figures on how many people attended the celebrations. But an idea of the number of spectators whom the authorities expected to turn up is furnished by the order for the cheapest memento produced for the occasion: a metal, leaf-shaped pendant (sema). Letters by the Siamese ambassador in Paris, where the souvenirs were produced, indicate that sixty-four thousand cheap sema, plus five hundred silver sema and thirty gold sema were sent to Bangkok.\(^{38}\) The rewards for the officers present at Ayutthaya were specified by Damrong in a message to phraya Boran Buranurak: a medal for officials of royal rank; six Baht per head for the 120 headmen (kamnan); and four Baht for the 1,400 village chiefs.

\(^{34}\) NA, RV, Department of Royal Secretariat 2/24.


\(^{36}\) Bangkok Times, 5 March 1907.

\(^{37}\) Bangkok Times, 14 October 1907.

(phuyai). Also, the Bangkok Times reported that the celebrations were largely attended by locals: “Every train brought crowds from the north, and people from Bangkok poured in by river and rail”, while “the absence of the European community in any numbers” was noted.

The festivities lasted three days, from 30 November to 2 December, 1907. The king arrived on the afternoon of the twenty-ninth (a Friday) and settled in the small isle of Loi. The next day the anniversary of his reign was celebrated in the throne hall built for the occasion. After disembarking at the river landing, the king was borne on a palanquin to the throne hall, where the crown prince, several princes and high officials were waiting. Once ceremonial rites were completed, Chulalongkorn took his seat on the throne in the hall’s front balcony, facing an open space where common people had gathered (Fig. 5.8). Phraya Boran Buranurak then read an address on behalf of the officials and the people of the province in which he sketched the accomplishments of Ayutthaya’s greatest kings and praised Chulalongkorn as the inheritor of their power and virtues. The king, after praising the high commissioner for his historical overview, pointed out in his reply that, while the achievements of the kings of Ayutthaya had been the establishment of their sovereignty over the territory and the preservation of its integrity, he had faced in his reign the task of giving the country prosperity, stability, and freedom. He also reminded the officials in the audience that the pursuit of those aims and the securing of their people’s loyalty (khwamchongrak phakdi) was dependent on their fulfilment of duty.

At night, the king watched from the terrace of his prefabricated throne hall lakhon plays and a fireworks display which were performed in the open space

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39 Ministry of Interior, letter of 7 January 1908, NA, RV, Department of Royal Secretariat 2/24.

40 The Bangkok Times, 2 December 1907. The newspaper imputed the scant participation of Europeans to the rudimentary accommodation and food available in Ayutthaya, but remarked that “those who did go were well repaid”.

41 NA (comp.), Chotmaihet phraratchaphiti ratchamangkhla phisek ro.so. 126, 127 [Documents concerning the celebrations for the royal jubilee, 1907 and 1908] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2527 [1984]), pp. 23-25.

42 Ibid., pp. 34-36.

43 Ibid., pp. 37-38.
facing the edifice. Various other entertainments were featured over the next two days, including dances in archaic costumes, bullock races, kick-boxing, and more fireworks. A special ceremony also took place in which the thirty-two kings of Ayutthaya and King Taksin were evoked in effigy by as many Buddha images placed inside the throne hall (the number thirty-three has a special potency in the Indic cabbala as it indicates the king of gods, Indra, and the thirty-two lesser gods inhabiting Mount Meru). But the event that imbued the entire festivities with meaning came right toward the end, on the evening of 2 December. This was the inaugural meeting of the Archaeological or, as it is occasionally translated, Antiquarian Society (borankhadi samosom).  

44 The king gave a long inaugural speech in the presence of nobles and high officials. He began saying that while most countries could boast evidence of their past going back one thousand years, and some three times that much, Siam had the misfortune of having lost most of its historical records in war. The fragmentary nature of the evidence, he argued, allowed at the most a knowledge of the past four or five centuries of Siamese history, not enough to make it notable. Moreover, historical evidence largely came from court chronicles that were themselves in need of verification. To advance knowledge of the past thousand years one should start, Chulalongkorn suggested, by studying the many regional polities, all of which were powerful at one time or another and together formed Siam in its present entirety. But the compilation of a history of Siam, which the king hoped would be accomplished as quickly as possible, had to rely on a careful examination of sources and documents. The results of the scrutiny of evidence, the king concluded, should cause no embarrassment but rather be welcomed as contributions to a better understanding of the history of Siam.  

The king’s exhortation was put into practice the following day, which was devoted to a sightseeing tour of Ayutthaya’s ruins.

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44 Ibid., pp. 25-31.

45 King Chulalongkorn, “Samakhom subsuan khong buran nai prathet sayam” [The society for archaeological investigation in Siam], NA, RV, Miscellany 15/5; also published in Sinlapakorn 12, 2 (2511 [1968]): 42-46.
Fig 5.8 Record reign ceremony in Ayutthaya, 30 November, 1907. King Chulalongkorn is seen seated on the balcony under a spired canopy; National Archives.
At the beginning of this section, the contrast between the political symbolism, and consequently the *mise en scène*, of the 1907 pageants in Bangkok and Ayutthaya -- the first celebrating the power of the monarchy to bring about progress, the second placing these achievements in a historical continuum -- was emphasized. These different representations of the monarchy’s agency were, in fact, two sides of the same coin: the legitimation of the ruling elite in political as well as cultural terms. A shared notion of the past is indeed critical to establishing bonds among members of a given social group. Shared notions of the past come, however, in different forms: a spontaneous one, a collective memory that, as French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs proposed long ago, is largely the result of attachment to an ancestral territory; and, once such a continuity is broken, a unifying narrative of past events -- history -- which is instilled primarily through schooling and is such a distinctive feature of the cultural stock of the citizens of modern nations.

In his inaugural speech of the Archaeological Society, King Chulalongkorn repeatedly stressed the necessity for Siam to have an “authenticated history”, one which would be both founded on empirical evidence and reaching far into the past. He repeated three times that the temporal scope of such a history was to be one thousand years. The king’s speech, Thongchai contends, “was a landmark of historical scholarship in Siam” envisaging “the new discourse of Siam’s past”.46 As someone who had just been awarded a honorary doctorate by Cambridge University for his (economic) contribution to Orientalist scholarship, the king was undoubtedly fully aware that “civilized” countries were recognizable not just by their wealth and military strength but by verifiable national histories. Given that the only initiative towards the empirical study of Siamese past culture up to that point had been the creation of the Siam Society in 1904 by a group of European


47 Thongchai contends that the legacy of Chulalongkorn’s polycentric vision of ancient Siam is more visible in the 1980s trend of Local History *(prawattisat thongthin)* than in the dominant nationalist historiography of the 1930s-70s. Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, pp. 162-63, and “Changing Landscape of the Past”, p. 119, fn. 76.
government employees, the founding by royal initiative of the Archaeological Society, with Vajiravudh as its first president, was an act whose time had come. But while representing a further proof of the cultural Westernization of the Siamese elite, the Archaeological Society must also be seen as a means to increase the cohesion of the growing bureaucratic class by providing them not only with a uniform dress, as pointed out earlier on, but a uniform past in preparation for the time mass education would transform this into Thailand’s national history.

III

The culmination of the celebrative crescendo set in motion in November 1907 by the pageant for the king’s return from Europe was reached exactly one year later with the festivities (11 to 18 November) for the fortieth anniversary of Chulalongkorn’s reign (ratchamangkhla phisek). The public celebration of anniversaries of reign is an emblematic case of the late nineteenth-century invention of tradition. Launched by the jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, the ceremonial anniversary was immediately imitated by the other ruling dynasties of Europe as a new form of publicity and soon any rounded anniversary, even when not a fiftieth one, was taken as an excuse for celebration.

Chulalongkorn’s jubilee was organized by a committee which included the various ministries and the chief commanders of the Navy and the Army under the presidency of the crown prince. In his days as a student in Britain, Vajiravudh had taken part in the pageant staged for Queen Victoria’s sixtieth reign anniversary on 22 June 1897 (designated “diamond jubilee” to distinguish it from that of 1887). The celebrations started with Queen Victoria’s entry into London on 21 June, the day after the sixtieth anniversary of her accession to the throne. On the twenty-second, the queen rode for six miles in an open carriage drawn by eight horses.

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49 King Chulalongkorn’s first coronation took place on 11 November 1868; a second coronation was performed on 16 November 1873, when the king came of age. The incumbent monarch, King Bhumibhon, exceeded this record in 1987 and in 1996 became the first Thai king to have achieved fifty years on the throne.

50 Hobsbawm, “Mass Producing Traditions”, p. 281. Probably the first to celebrate his fortieth anniversary of reign (later designated silver jubilee) was the Rumanian monarch in 1906 (ibid.).
from Buckingham Palace to St Paul’s Cathedral and back, in a procession headed by five hundred representatives of the colonial troops followed by British and foreign princesses and princes among whom was Vajiravudh, who rode with the Duke of York and Prince Waldemar of Denmark. Chulalongkorn, who was in Europe at that time, deferred his visit to Britain until the end of July because the jubilee invitations extended only to the offspring of foreign monarchs.

Vajiravudh’s personal experience of Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee certainly came in handy when he took up the supervision of the celebrations for his father’s anniversary. In a series of meeting held in September 1908, the organizing committee presided over by the crown prince drew up a festive programme lasting four days (10 to 13 November) and proposed a budget of 200,000 Baht. The budget was to be allocated as follows: 10,000 Baht to the Ministry of Public Works; 20,000 Baht to the Army and 40,000 Baht to the Navy Department; 10,400 Baht for the entertainments; 13,000 Baht for the fireworks; 400 Baht to each of the sixty-eight groups taking part in the pageant; 79,400 Baht to the Ministry of the Royal Household. The sum was hardly exorbitant considering the cost of almost five million Baht for Vajiravudh’s second coronation which was held three years later (December 1911) in the presence of guests from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Great Britain, France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Holland, Germany, Belgium, United States of America, and Japan. However, the Department of the Royal Treasury found that this amount of money was not at its disposal and suggested financing the celebrations by drawing partly from a special fund for guest reception and partly from the advances in the salary of government officials.


52 For this last figure see NA, Budget Reports of the Financial Adviser, BE 2456 [1913/4], p. 14 (3,781,675 Baht and 93 Satang) and BE 2457 [1914/5], p. 18 (1,103,066 Baht). A parallel will certainly make these figures more significant. The cost of George V’s coronation in 1911 was 185,000 Pounds (Cannadine, “The British Monarchy”, p. 163, table 1). If calculated in Pounds (at the exchange rate of 1 Pound for 13 Baht valid at that time), the cost of Chulalongkorn’s jubilee celebrations amounted to some 15,400 Pounds, while the cost of Vajiravudh’s re-cronation to a staggering 376,000 Pounds.

An essential feature of anniversaries of reign and other special celebrations was the issuing of commemorative medals and stamps as mementos of the event. As on previous occasions, the commemorative medals for Chulalongkorn’s jubilee were produced in Paris. The medal’s design was to be drawn by Prince Narit; however, his design was submitted too late so the medal was eventually realized by a French engraver, Patey, following a suggestion by the king himself. Its initial coinage was of thirty gold, four hundred gilt, and one thousand silver medals.\(^{54}\)

As for the stamps, at the opening of the celebrations the series with the king’s left profile that was first issued in 1905 was overprinted with the inscriptions “ratchamangkhla phisek 87-127” and “jubilee 1868-1908”. This was followed by a special issue in seven denominations (1 Baht the smallest, 40 Baht the largest) designed by Mario Tamagno, of the Public Works Department. It depicted Chulalongkorn’s equestrian statue inside a rectangle flanked by floral motifs with the inscription “ratchamangkhla phisek RS 127” at the bottom and the word “Siam” inscribed in a panel on top.\(^{55}\)

The duration of the celebrations was eventually twice as long as was originally planned: eight days, beginning on 11 November and preceded, on the tenth, by religious rites performed in the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Keo. The main event of the jubilee was the unveiling, on the opening day, of Chulalongkorn’s equestrian statue. Entertainments during the following four days (12 to 15 November) included a motorcar parade, a procession of floats, and the king’s visit to the Chinese quarter. Besides, banquets for officials and foreign representatives and a ceremony for the conferral of honours and decorations were held according to state protocol. A military review on Sanam Luang on the eighteenth marked the end of the celebrations. A precise idea of popular attendance at the celebrations is not possible; however, the tram companies’ revenue for the five days 11 to 15 November, totalling some 36,000 Baht (a daily average in excess of 7,000 Baht), at least indicate that those who took a tram to join

\(^{54}\) NA, RV, Ministry of Privy Seal, 16/13.

\(^{55}\) NA, RV, Ministry of Public Works, 3.5/3; *Centennial of Thai Postage Stamps*. 

the celebrations were less numerous than for the royal progress one year earlier.56

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After this overview, I shall focus now on the main ceremonies that marked the 1908 anniversary of the reign. On the early morning of 11 November, the foundation stone of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall was laid. After arriving at the building site, the king, accompanied by the crown prince and other princes, performed religious rituals. At the auspicious time of 7.29 a.m. 8 seconds set by the court astrologers, he laid down a number of bricks covered with gold, silver, and bronze. Medals, stamps, king’s letters concerning the throne hall, and a copy of the building’s plan, were placed inside a recess in one of the stones. Among those present at the ceremony were Carlo Allegri, Mario Tamagno, Annibale Rigotti, E. G. Gollo, and the British F. B. Shaw, of the Public Works Department; Monsieur Benabeng, on behalf of the French firm which had sunk the building’s foundations; and the project’s supervisor, the minister of Municipal Government Pan Sukhum, who on the occasion of the jubilee was granted the title of chaophraya Yomarat (Fig. 5.9). The ceremony lasted about half a hour and ended with the distribution of medals to the officials, offerings to the monks, and the firing of a salute by the artillery.57

Despite the morning rain, a sunny afternoon befitted the unveiling of the king’s equestrian monument. The Phra Lan, the open space at the end of Ratcha Damnoen Avenue, presented a remarkable scene of pomp. Rows of ornamental towers ran on each side, faced by masts surmounted by royal umbrellas and carrying fireworks (the latter presented by various monasteries); effigies of the wheel symbol of the dynasty enclosing the king’s monogram, were placed around on short poles; tall masts crowned with tiered umbrellas, and from which flags and festoons hung down, supported canopies that marked the area around the statue, which was hidden under a yellow silk cloth. The decorations were enriched by a profusion of tens of thousand of electric lamps which must have

56 Bangkok Times, 16 November 1908.
57 Ratchakitchchanu bekkasa [Royal Government Gazette], vol. XXV (29 November 1908), repr. in NA, Chotmaihet phraratchaphiti, pp. 99-101; Bangkok Times, 18 November 1908.
Fig. 5.9 The laying of the foundation stone of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, 11 November, 1908. Second from right is chaophraya Yomarat. Next to him on the left is Engineer-in-Chief of the Public Works Department, Carlo Allegri. National Archives.
created an impressive sight at night although probably less so in the blaze of the afternoon. A white platform, roofed by a nine-layered umbrella, stood in the centre of the Phra Lan next to the veiled statue. Around it, princes of the royal household, high-ranking officials, foreign representatives, provincial lords from the north, and even dignitaries from the Malay sultanates (then in the process of becoming British protectorates) had assembled. The royal pavilion lay on the far end of the Phra Lan, next to the enclosure of Dusit Park, while the pavilions of the various ministries stood near the entrance to Ratcha Damnoen. With the troops massed on both sides, the Phra Lan also contained a standing crowd who came to witness the ceremony (Fig. 5.10).

At four o’clock the king, wearing the full-dress uniform of Army Field-marshal with which he is represented in the statue, made his appearance in the royal pavilion and from there walked, flanked by two rows of officials, to his seat in the platform standing in the middle of the Phra Lan. First came the turn of the crown prince, who proffered the speech of dedication of the statue. His speech did not really present an overview of the accomplishments of Chulalongkorn’s reign but was a eulogy of the special relationship the king had established with his subjects. Vajiravudh began by congratulating the king for the attainment of an absolute record in the history of the Siamese nation (tamnan haengchat thai). But such a record, Vajiravudh remarked, was made even more significant by the degree of welfare the reign had achieved for the people. At the most arduous time when Siam was pursuing the path towards progress, he continued, Rama V had made his appearance as an avatar (the incarnation of a heavenly deity), to lead Siam to its present prosperity. The virtue of compassion (metta) inspiring the king’s action had won him the heart of his subjects and even the admiration of foreigners. Like a merciful father, the king had promoted the well-being of the populace and offered them an example of probity. The ensuing feelings of loyalty and devotion that even the foreign residents shared, Vajiravudh concluded, prompted the realization of a statue to stand for future generations.\footnote{NA, RV, Ministry of Municipal Government 48.2/12 (also NA, Chotmaihet phrarachaphiti, pp. 104-7, 108-11). The English translation of the crown prince’s speech, published in the Bangkok Times (12 November 1908), was made by phraya Borirat, corrected by J. Westengard (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ General Advisor), and recorrected by Vajiravudh himself. It was couched in a}
Fig 5.10  Shortly before the unveiling of the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn, 11 November, 1908. The king is standing inside the nine-tiered pavilion next to the veiled statue.
In his reply, twice as long as the crown prince’s address, Chulalongkorn developed in historical perspective the theme, already outlined in the speeches he had recently given in Bangkok and Ayutthaya, of his reign as one of momentous change. In truth, the king said after the opening thanks, his fortieth anniversary of reign must not induce too much pride because his record had been equalled, and even excelled, by sovereigns of other countries (an indirect reference to Queen Victoria). The merit of so long a reign, Chulalongkorn said, was that it had allowed the implementation of a series of reforms whose results were now apparent. The success of every ruler, he continued, lies in his ability to deal with his own times. In the past the defence of the country and the fostering of agriculture were the primary concerns. The establishment of diplomatic relations in the fourth reign opened the way to international trade that benefited the people but also demanded changes in the way of government that King Mongkut did not have time to pursue. In his own reign, Chulalongkorn went on, the necessity for major reforms had become pressing, but these had to be pursued with thoughtfulness and the timely seizing of opportunities without upsetting traditional customs and habits of the populace (prapheni kanbanmuang lae khwamniyom khong prachachon). The time span of one generation was needed for that, also because the slow start of internal reforms in Siam was contrasted by dramatic external changes. Still, the king proudly claimed, the last forty years had achieved what the previous five centuries had not. International relations, he then noted in a crucial passage, had effaced the time when small things were considered important and near places remote, and aims and desires reflected this narrow view. But dealing with the foreign powers required a stable government capable of maintaining the country’s independence and fostering its development. Instrumental to this end was “a sense of unity (khwamsamakkhi) between the nobility and the populace”, to make them feel one “nation” (chat annung andiao) regardless of social and religious differences. External factors had also concurred with internal ones in hindering modernization but, the king concluded, its results were now evident,
and the statue erected with a public subscription should stand as an incitement towards a brighter future and as a memorial of social harmony in Siam.59

At the end of his speech, Chulalongkorn pulled the cord holding the cover on the statue, which got caught in one of the bronze horse’s ears and thus retarded for a few moments the monument’s disclosure. With it, the inscription on the bronze plate fixed on its marble basement was also uncovered.60 Once the unveiling was over, a salute was fired and the king returned to his pavilion. From there he presented new colours to twelve Army companies, which then performed the trooping of the colour, thus marking the whole afternoon ceremony as a display, as far as the situation allowed it, of state grandeur and martial pride.

In contrast, the progress of motorcars held on the afternoon of the twelfth under Prince Damrong’s supervision was probably the oddest spectacle of the jubilee. The cars, a total of 112 on the programme, were all painstakingly decorated, some in the manner of animals, others simply with flowers. The king’s in particular looked like a movable sculpture, as Prince Narit had decked it with the figure of a Garuda surmounted by the Hindu hero Narai. So decked, and after a heavy downpour, the cars were driven around the city by princes, officials, and


60 The inscription on the statue’s base, as translated by the Bangkok Times (12 November 1908) reads: “In the year 2451 of the Buddhist Era and the 127th of the Rattanakosin Era, His Most Gracious Majesty King Chulalongkorn attained a reign of forty years over his Kingdom. This period of rule has never been reached by any other monarch in the history of the Siamese nation. His Majesty is endowed with all the greatest attributes of a wise ruler. He has ruled his country with an unswerving sense of equity. He has devoted his whole heart to the care of his dominions, to preserve them in a state of national independence and to promote the unity and contentment of his people. He is highly gifted with a keen perception of all that is good and evil in the manners and customs of His country, and has always eliminated the bad and introduced nought but what is good and beneficial. He has always set himself as a meritorious example and guided his people in the path of progress and lasting benefits. He has succeeded by his high personal qualities in conferring happiness and contentment upon his people. He has never been deterred by any obstacle, however great, nor has he hesitated to sacrifice his own personal comfort, whenever the welfare and advancement of the people and the State were concerned. He has been the true father of his people. His great qualities and exalted traits of character have brought the Kingdom of Siam to the high state of prosperity and independence which she enjoys at the present time, and earned the undying love and gratitude of his people. Now that His Majesty has attained this unprecedented historical distinction by the great length of time he has sat upon the Throne, we, his grateful people, from the highest to the lowest, have felt deeply moved by the remembrance of all the immeasurable blessings conferred upon us all during his long reign, and have heartily united in erecting this royal statue as a token which shall be preserved for all generations of our supreme appreciation, gratitude and love for Our Great and Good King Chulalongkorn. Long live the king!”.
members of the diplomatic corps (some of whom had borrowed their cars from the royal garage). From Dusit the motorized procession headed, through the recently opened Prachechin Road, for the Pathumwan area to inaugurate the "birthday bridge" Chelimlok 55. The bridge, built with the innovative ferro-concrete system after the design of a French engineer, de la Mahotier, was realized by the Ministry of Municipal Government’s Sanitary Department. It was thus the minister, chaophraya Yomarat, who read a commemorative speech in which he emphasized the contribution to the public welfare by the king’s Private Purse. After the king’s reply and the inauguration of the bridge, the motorcars returned to Dusit through New Road where, according to the Bangkok Times, large crowds had gathered and waited to see “a somewhat ragged procession”.

Again the Bangkok Times defined the carnival procession staged along Ratcha Damnoen on the thirteenth as “the great popular event of the whole celebrations”. In the procession, which lasted from the early afternoon to the evening, took part some twenty-thousand people and seventy-seven floats. Government undertakings, economic activities, distinctive features and products of the various provinces were represented by tableaux vivants in a spectacle that made visible to the king, and the people of Bangkok, the subjects who inhabited different parts of the realm. The idea itself was not entirely new, as a similar procession on a considerably smaller scale had taken place in March 1900 for the conveyance of a Buddha image to the wat in Dusit (see Ch. 4).

The procession was opened by the crown prince’s float, representing the abolition of slavery, which was followed by those of ministries and departments. Deserving mention as the most fanciful and ingenious floats was the Health Department’s, with its cardboard hospital and make-believe doctors and patients, the whole preceded by men carrying giant models of medicine bottles, surgical instruments, and medicinal herbs; the Inland Revenue Department’s, accompanied

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63 Bangkok Times, 14 November 1908.
64 Ibid.; NA, Chotmaihet phrarachaphiti, pp. 178-80.
by men carrying goods liable to taxation and graphs showing the revenue increase during the reign; the Mining Department's, demonstrating the working of a water boring system; the floats of the Railway, and the Post and Telegraph Departments, which illustrated their activities with models of locomotives, telephone and telegraph sets, and giant replicas of stamps and postcards; and the Irrigation Department's, which was surrounded by a hundred men walking close to each other with bunches of paddy on their heads in the guise of a rice field. The parading of the ministries' floats was spaced out by the display of the local costumes, regional products, and distinctive features of sixteen different provinces. Closing the procession, twenty-four floats marshalled by private firms and entrepreneurs represented industrial and trade activities with models of banks, rice mills, a motorboat, and a tramcar.

The next day the floats were put on display on Sanam Chai Road, along the Grand Palace eastern walls, and inspected by the king while upcountry people wandered around Bangkok. Also that night, the royalty and nobles were treated to a special entertainment -- cinema -- with projections on three screens erected in front of the pavilions on the Phra Lan, from where common Bangkokians as well watched the show. Several thousand people also congregated at Sanam Luang four days later, on 18 November, for the review of the troops which closed the jubilee celebrations. The king arrived on a carriage holding the baton of rank that had been presented to him five years earlier, and was received by the Army's Commander in Chief, the Prince of Nakhon Chaisri, Chiraprawat; by Vajiravudh, in his quality as Inspector-General of the Land Forces; and other officers. A recent addition to state ceremonial, the general military review in the presence of the king had been first held for his coronation's anniversary in November 1906. In fact, troops were a common sight in all the ceremonies reviewed above, evidence of the modernization effected by the monarchy as well as of its new powers of coercion and repression.

As the welcoming celebrations of the previous year had anticipated, the leitmotif of the jubilee of 1908 was the civilization of Siam under King Chulalongkorn's guidance. But while the welcome to the king had been played out largely as an
ephemeral event, the fortieth anniversary of the king’s reign was heightened by the manufacture of “memory sites” which appropriately marked its historical significance and allowed for its later recollection. The most important of these sites was the king’s equestrian statue, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Medals and (a first for Siam) celebrative stamps, not to mention the mementos later distributed to the statue’s contributors, also served to further this purpose.

I am inclined to argue that the fashioners of Chulalongkorn’s jubilee appropriated celebrative forms from the contemporary Western theatre of power without the intention of altering their symbolism. From this point of view, the quaint procession of bedecked motorcars, hard to imagine at a royal jubilee elsewhere, was the most unique aspect, interestingly foreshadowing the embellishment of motor vehicles to be witnessed in Southeast Asia today. Whether this motorcars’ procession conveyed any political meaning is, however, doubtful. Given the globalized style of the pageantry, it is in the official speeches which were delivered by the king and the crown prince that the distinctive political ideology of the ruling elite is to be detected. In these speeches the king was presented as both the embodiment of the Buddhist benevolent monarch and as a secular leader standing as his country’s unifying symbol in accordance with modern monarchical rhetoric. Language provides, in this case, a useful indicator. Whereas the Thai vocabulary of power in which the speeches were couched blended these differing conceptions of the monarchy, their English translations and the related comments which were published by Bangkok foreign press unmistakably spoke the language of Western nationalism. Thus, with reference to the king’s speech at the unveiling of the statue, the Bangkok Times wrote: “The spirit of unity, inspiring mutual confidence and help among all, from Prince to peasant, is the ideal His Majesty sets before the nation. It never has been realized anywhere but it is the end that every good ruler and patriot strives for”.

Yet it is exactly in concepts such as samakkhi and chat, somewhat deceptively translated as “unity” and “nation” that, as Murashima suggests, the

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66 Bangkok Times, 14 November 1908.
distinctive quality of Siamese modern state ideology reveals itself. Unity, for instance, had been invoked from 1903 by Chulalongkorn in a discourse in which the possibility that conflicting parties emerged within the ruling elite was subjected to the primacy of the king’s leadership, reasserted as the foundation of the state. By restating the need for “unity” in his speech at the statue’s unveiling in November 1908, a speech addressed to the officials standing around the royal pavilion, the king revealed his concern for the growing discontent with his autocratic rule at a time which is otherwise considered to have been the apogee of the dynasty. Had he lived a few years longer, Rama V might have seen his authority challenged as his successor did only some three and a half years later, in 1912. Perhaps one of Chulalongkorn’s greatest achievements, if not really dependent on him, is that he should forever stand in the Thai collective memory as an instigator of change, not an opponent.

IV

The last public ceremonial event associated with Chulalongkorn’s reign took place posthumously on 16 March 1911, the day of his cremation. The king had died of a kidney disfunction (uraemia) at 00.45 a.m. on 23 October 1910 in the Amphon Sathan mansion. The following evening the corpse was moved from Dusit Park to the Grand Palace with a procession along Ratcha Damnoen. Army regiments bearing the arms reversed and holding lighted candles headed the procession. They were followed by the palace guards and the bearers of royal insignia. The octagonal urn with the king’s corpse came next, borne on a catafalque surmounted by the nine-tiered umbrella. The king’s brothers walked by its side, followed by retainers carrying the ceremonial fan. Next was Vajiravudh, walking alone at the head of his regiments of the Royal Guard. Following him, between long lines of guards, came the male members of the royal family, dressed in white, and the

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68 Atthachak, Kanplianplaeng lokathathatkong chonchan phunam, pp. 179-181. King Chulalongkorn’s speech, “Phraborom ratchathubai khwamsamakkhi keakhwam nai khatha thi mi nai ham phaendin”, is in Prawatisat lae kanmuang [History and politics] (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 2516 [1973]).
government officials. The procession was closed by naval officers and sailors. Few novelties in the ceremonial were seen at this stage. The king’s body was dressed in full regal robes and his face covered with a gold mask, according to the royal custom, before being placed in the coffin. The Death March from Handel’s “Saul”, which the military band played along with indigenous tunes, was an already established addition to funeral processions of the royalty. However, Vajiravudh issued a message inviting people not to shave their heads, as mourners were expected to do at the death of a king.

Chulalongkorn’s passing was the first of a Siamese monarch to cause a worldwide response. On the day following his decease, telegrams of condolence were received from many of the European sovereigns and heads of state the king had met in the course of his trips: King Edward and Queen Alexandra, Tsar Nicholas II, the Austrian and German emperors, the royals of Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, the presidents of France and the Swiss Confederation, Egypt’s khadive, and even the Japanese emperor whom Chulalongkorn had never met. Bangkok’s firms and banks remained closed on the day after the king’s death while flags were reported to have been at half-mast throughout French Indochina on 25 October. Expressions of sorrow, often accompanied by the request of an appointment to pay homage to the king’s corpse, came from many Western residents and firms in Bangkok.

Interposed with the public mourning for Chulalongkorn’s death were the ceremonies of Vajiravudh’s accession, which started on 7 November and lasted until the 11th, the day of the coronation performed in the Amarin Hall, in the

69 *Bangkok Times*, 24 October 1910; see also the first-hand account of Malcom Smith, *The Court of Siam*, pp. 96-97. Smith claims (p. 94) that the arrangement of the funeral procession and the search for precedents in old documents involved a considerable delay in the conveyance of the king’s corpse to the Grand Palace. The illustrated supplement of the Parisian *Petit Journal* had, on the cover of the 6 November issue, an engraving of the funeral procession, in which the exoticism of the scene was somewhat exaggerated by depicting two elephants marching along.

70 Jottrand (in *Siam*, p. 258) reports that it was played at the funeral of a prince in February 1900.

71 *Bangkok Times*, 26 October 1910.

72 NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 17.3/7. Besides the messages of condolence from diplomatic and commercial bodies, there were those of two Russian gentlemen and their wives on a private visit to Bangkok, and of the Italian firm Marmifera Ligure, supplier of part of the marble for the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall.
Grand Palace, in the presence of the entire royal family, ministries, officials, and the chiefs of the diplomatic corps. The anniversary of Chulalongkorn’s coronation was celebrated too with memorial services on 15 and 16 November. On the fifteenth, Vajiravudh opened the last but one of his father’s “birthday bridges”, Chelimdet 57.73 At the inauguration the minister of Municipal Government pointed out that the bridge marked the completion of the development of Phraya Thai Road, which Rama V had wanted to link Dusit with the railway station at Hua Lamphong.74 A few weeks later the newly enthroned king issued an edict to thank the populace for “the touching demonstration of affection and respect to the memory of His Majesty’s late royal father”, and inform that he was praying that it could result “in prosperity and happiness for everyone”.75

The next February (1911), when the date of the cremation was approaching, dispositions were issued for those wishing to participate in it, thus making the king’s cremation ceremony into a public event. On 13, 14, and 15 March, everybody, “without distinction of class, race, or language, men as well as women”, was allowed to attend the services performed at the lying-in-state in the Dusit Maha Prasat (in the Grand Palace). The services included the reading of chapters from the Buddhist scriptures, the chanting of prayers, meditation, and the raising of donations for the repair of temples, construction of new buildings, educational purposes, and nursing. Those who intended to witness the funeral procession on the sixteenth were asked to bring offerings of flowers and joss sticks, and were allowed to assemble on both sides of Sanam Chai Road (running along the Grand Palace’s eastern walls), although only on the grass, and in the upper section of Sanam Luang (the Pramane Ground). At the end of the procession, spectators could join in bringing their offerings. From 17 to 20 March, Chulalongkorn’s ashes would lie in state in the Dusit Maha Prasat for the last public homage. White mourning dress was to be the general rule, but exceptions

73 This bridge was built for Chulalongkorn’s 57th birthday on 20 September 1910, his last. In fact, another “birthday bridge” was opened posthumously, Saphan Chelim Sawan 58, at the northern end of Khlong Lot, considered to be the most imposing of the entire series. Sirichai, Old Bangkok Bridges.

74 Bangkok Times, 16 November 1910.

75 “Black-edged royal memorandum informing the entire population”, issued on 9 December 1910, NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 17.3/1.
were permitted to suit everybody’s customs. A collection of religious sermons was printed and distributed on the occasion.

As a consequence of the reduction in the scale of cremations in the fifth reign, Chulalongkorn’s funeral pyre was considerably smaller than that erected for King Mongkut, and the same was true for the temporary buildings and the area occupied on the Pramane Ground. The pyre, a central tower with four smaller structures at the corners raised on a platform measuring 11 and a half square-metres, was the work of luang Sammit. The other edifices (the pavilion for the royalty and those for state officials and the diplomatic corps) were designed and erected by the Public Works Department under the supervision of the minister, Prince Naret Worarit. Due to the earlier abolition of funerals’ side shows (e.g, fireworks and plays) by Chulalongkorn, in whose “civilizing” view they diminished the solemnity of the ritual, the only other buildings to be seen on the Pramane Ground were the refreshment tents (water tanks were also placed along the route of the funeral procession). The cremation ceremony’s mise en scène was a traditional one but for the parade of modern military uniforms -- a choice made more significant by the presence, for the first time on such an occasion, of representatives of Western countries. The initial idea of using a

76 “Royal proclamation announcing the royal permission for the populace to have the opportunity for making merit at the funeral of King Chulalongkorn”, issued on 28 February 1911; and “Words of explanation and advice to those who will follow the king’s funeral”, issued on 1 March 1911, NA, RVI, Ministry of Municipal Government 17.3/3.

77 “Phrathamthesana lae thambanyai satthaphrot”. Title page reproduced in Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 281.

78 Wales, Siamese State Ceremonies, p. 138, 145. Witnessing the cremation of Rama VI in March 1926, Wales reported that the expenditure for his pyre was one-eighth of that for King Chulalongkorn’s.

79 Photos of both pyres are reproduced in Anake, Chulalongkorn, p. 75 and p. 280, respectively.


81 On the abolition of entertainments at royal funerals Wales (Siamese State Ceremonies, p. 147) opined: “... this interference with tradition seems to me to be a mistake; such entertainments are highly appreciated by the people, and even commoners, unless very poor, do their best to provide at their cremations at least one theatrical performance, or nowadays [late 1920s] a cinema. Such a reduction in the grandeur of the royal obsequies cannot fail to decrease the popularity of a Royal Cremation, and, what is more, decrease its impressiveness and sociological value”.

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carriage pulled by horses to convey the urn was abandoned in favour of the royal funeral car pulled manually (the same one used for Mongkut’s funeral but with a renovated understructure and placed on springs). The setting of the ceremony was Bangkok’s historic core. The procession’s route followed the perimeter of the Grand Palace counter-clockwise, from the western to northern gate.

Short after 1 p.m. the urn was removed from the Dusit Maha Prasat and borne on a palanquin along Maharat Road to Wat Chethupon (Wat Pho). There it was placed on the funeral car while ministers, officers, and consular representatives assembled on the spot. Meanwhile the troops heading the procession (the Royal Guard and regiments of cavalry, artillery, engineers, infantry, plus five musical bands playing Handel’s and Chopin’s death marches) began marching past Sanam Chai Road entering it from the intersecting Thanon Charoeng Krung (New Road). Preceded by the bearers of royal insignia, the funeral car drawn by 220 men pullers made its appearance followed by the king, the royal princes, the military officers, the special representatives of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, the United States of America, and Japan; high-ranking officials; the diplomatic corps; ministerial personnel; and, closing the procession, the Navy band and the marines. The only stop along the route was made at the pavilion of the Queen Mother, Saowapha. When the funeral car reached the building of the Ministry of Justice, the procession halted briefly to allow the mourners to take their seat in the pavilions. Then, at a given signal, the procession moved again into the open space of the Pramane Ground toward the pyre. The prince patriarch Wachirayan came first, on a palanquin, reciting the scriptures; following him, also borne aloft, were two of Chulalongkorn’s sons, garbed in courtly robes: Prince Atsadang, who distributed roasted rice, and Prince Chakrabongse, who held the long strip of silk connected to the urn. King Vajiravudh and the other princes walked behind it. At 6.33 p.m. the king lit the fire, counterpointed by the volleying of the troops and the playing of the royal hymn. The next day the ashes were removed from the pyre and taken, in a small procession, to the Dusit Maha Prasat to be enshrined there.

82 Bangkok Times, 17 March 1911.
83 Ibid.; and Somphom, Phra meru rat, pp. 214-36.
Chulalongkorn’s cremation ceremony was attended by a large number of people -- 10,000 to 12,000, according to the estimate of the Bangkok Times, the only source on which to rely. The day after the ceremony, the newspaper wrote: “This is said to be the first time in history on which members of the ratsadorn [populace] as such have been allowed to take part in the cremation of a king, and the same was also true for their being freely admitted to the lying in state”. The participation of common people in the king’s cremation was a momentous change with respect to the “unpopulist” character of Indic royal ritualism, one which accorded with the nineteenth-century demotic image of European monarchies. At the same time, the first royal cremation to have been conceived of as a public event was also remarkable for the traditionalism of its mise en scène while accommodating innovations such as Western musical accompaniment and military honours. Given the several months that still today elapse between the passing and the cremation of members of royalty in Thailand, the style of the ceremony must be considered to have been carefully planned by the king and court officials.

It is significant that the archaic style of Chulalongkorn’s cremation rite anticipated that of the funeral of that other symbol of Asian modernization, Emperor Meiji, on 13 September 1912. An ox-drawn hearse, the display of court costumes and paraphernalia, the musical accompaniment by gongs, drums, and reed mouth organs, and the final journey of the emperor’s coffin from Tokyo to Kyoto, the old imperial capital, conjured up a scene of Oriental pomp not unlike that in Bangkok. Fujitani shows that one main reason behind this “spectacle of antiques” was the Japanese officials’ awareness that the dynasties of Austria, Prussia, and Russia (indeed, among Europe’s most conservative) were keen on retaining old customs, and that the same must be done to express the majesty and glory of the Japanese imperial household. And the presence of a Japanese

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84 Bangkok Times, 17 March 1911 (ratsadorn without italics in original). An idea of the gathering of ordinary people for the funerals is also given by the takings of Bangkok' two tram-cars companies on 16 March, which totalled 7,378 ticals against the daily average of 7,200 ticals in the five days of the jubilee of 11 to 15 November, 1908.


86 Ibid., p. 148.
representative at Rama V's cremation, while ignored by Fujitani, might have furthered such a frame of mind.

This "rediscovery", both in Siam and Japan, of the importance of a vernacular ritualist idiom as a "national" attribute signals the assertion of a nationalist sentiment in both countries. As had already happened in Europe, cultural and artistic expressions were deemed crucial to the awakening of such a sentiment. At the same time, this revaluation also reflected the internalization of the dichotomy posited by Western Orientalist scholarship between traditional cultural forms and practices as authentic, and modernized ones as a mimicry of the West.87 The parallel is not meant to sound irreverent, but long before the archaic spectacles of the cremation of Chulalongkorn and the funeral of Emperor Meiji, "traditional" displays had been set up by Siam and Japan at international exhibitions. It is to these spectacles that we shall turn our attention in the next chapter.

Thus far, this study has been concerned with the reinvention of the Siamese monarchy's public image through the appropriation of social practices and cultural artefacts of Western origins. This final chapter presents an ideally complementary standpoint of this public image: the representation of Siam which was produced at successive international exhibitions in Europe and America for the benefit of local audiences. The focus is specifically on the Siamese displays at some of the grandest exhibitions held at the time of the fifth reign: those of Paris in 1878, 1889, and 1900; Philadelphia in 1876; Chicago in 1893; St Louis in 1904; Turin in 1911 (but organized since 1908). The discussion relies on two kinds of primary sources: archival documents and materials which were published as companions to those events. These publications -- general guidebooks, illustrated periodicals for the duration of exhibitions, and catalogues of the Siamese displays -- should be regarded as integral to the contextualization of the material exhibits because, as Carol Breckenridge argues in her essay on Indian colonial displays, "objects on display do not provide their own narrative. ... [They] require verbal and written explication in the forms of signs, guides, and catalogues."\(^1\) Also, for those who could not afford to visit the exhibitions, such publications represented a means to experience them vicariously, adding to their overall impact.

Before focusing on the Siamese displays at the venues mentioned above, a brief introduction to the subject is needed. The vogue for international exhibitions began in London in 1851 with the Great Exhibition of the Work of Industry of all Nations. The demountable glass and iron building erected on that occasion, the Crystal Palace, set the model for the ephemeral grandeur of subsequent events, which were regularly held at intervals of a few years until the eve of the Second World War. Mingling the commercial nature of trade fairs with the classificatory and didactic approach of the museum and the amusement of itinerant shows, exhibitions represented a quintessentially modern form of spectacle. Advertised as universalist events and characteristically global in their outlook, international

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\(^1\) Breckenridge, "Aesthetics and Politics", p. 205.
exhibitions were in fact ideal loci for the crystallization of national identities by virtue of their juxtaposition with the "others" on display: ethnic others, as represented by exotic artefacts and "native villages" usually with patronizing intent; and, within the circle of Western countries, cultural others, as embodied by works of art supposedly indicative of distinctive "national" characters.

In the relatively peaceful context of the second half of the nineteenth century exhibitions represented a sublimated expression of international rivalry, particularly between the two world powers of that time -- Britain and France. First seen in London, the spectacle of exhibitions became closely identified with Paris whose bustling image at the turn of the century earned it the appellation of "city of lights". Telling, in this regard, were the expenses Britain and France lavished on conjuring up their overseas empires through the display of the products, artefacts, and even people of their colonies; and also the fact that the improved relations between the two countries following the Entente Cordiale of 1904, which was also significant for Siam's destiny, were cemented by the Franco-British Exposition of 1908. Likewise, on the other side of the Atlantic, the ever-increasing dimensions of American world fairs (as exhibitions were popularly called there) held from 1876 on, anticipated the ascendancy of the United States as the dominant world power of the twentieth century.

Like imposing national pageants and the "statumania", exhibitions are one of those invented traditions of the nineteenth century which scholars have recently rediscovered and studied with a greater or lesser conceptual sophistication. One reason for this renewed interest seems to lie in the fact that the spectacle of exhibitions brought to the fore phenomena such as the fetishism of commodities, the reification of hybrid cultural forms, and the ubiquity of visual representations which are still with us. As Breckenridge points out, "The world fair mixed commerce with culture in a mode that was then innovative, even radical". As

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these recent studies detail, the reality and ideology of empire were central to the idea of international exhibitions as was the worldwide assertion of capitalist modes of production and exchange. At the same time one must realize that, in an epoch preceding the invention of television and mass tourism, expositions provided their millions of visitors with “a window on the world” whereby a variety of cultures and lifestyles became visible even if in the form of clichés.

If exhibitions innovatively mixed commerce with culture, they also bound culture to nationalism in a fashion which still enjoys some currency. Of course, in the case of colonies such as India and Cambodia, which were given centre stage at exhibitions as particularly suitable to make empire alluring to metropolitan populaces, their cultural distinctiveness was predicated as an “imperial” rather than a “national” attribute. One of a handful of non-Western sovereign states along with Japan, China, the Ottoman Empire, and few others, Siam had its displays set up by its government and tagged as “national” manifestations. At the same time, their attempts at projecting a unique national profile faced a major obstacle: eluding self-Orientalizing while asserting the status of a modern, or at least modernizing, country. The following discussion should make clear to what extent Siam’s ruling elite was successful in using international exhibitions as an arena to globally legitimate their leadership.

I

If in its diplomatic manoeuvring with France and Great Britain the Siamese government is often said to have leaned towards the latter, a look at diplomatic relations through the medium of international exhibitions reveals a rather different picture. Over the period 1851-1911, Siam participated at none of the exhibitions which were held in England (the invitation to that of Glasgow in 1901, the only one in the records, was declined because it came too late⁴). However, Siam regularly attended those in Paris, right in the “crocodile’s mouth” to use Mongkut’s allegory of French imperialism, a fact which was even more significant in the light of the strained relationship between Siam and France up to the early years of the twentieth century.

⁴ NA, RV, Miscellany 11/60.
Siam's semi-official debut at these events was at the Paris exhibition of 1867, which was the follow-up to the first Exposition Universelle of 1855 and was visited by eight million people. The Siamese display occupied three halls and was marked by a pasteboard white elephant. It was set up at the initiative of the consul for Siam in France, Amedee de Gréhan, with King Mongkut’s approval. De Gréhan also authored an often-reprinted book on Siam whose subsequent editions included notes on the displays presented at other exhibitions. Siam was awarded a gold medal for its specimens of cotton, tobacco, cereals, and fishing implements (which also received a gold medal at the Maritime International Exhibition at Le Havre in 1868); three honourable mentions for clothes, fans, and swallow’s nests; and a special medal for the nine metre-long models of royal barges.

Ten years into the fifth reign Siam officially took part at the Paris exposition of 1878, which was held under the auspices of the republican government that had replaced the Second Empire after the defeat of Napoleon III by Prussia in 1870. The largest portion of the exposition, which was visited by twelve million people, was located in the area of the Champ de Mars along a streetfront of several hundred metres called the Rue des Nations. The Rue des Nations contributed to the exhibition format a motif that was destined to great popularity: national pavilions in the architectural style distinctive of the exhibiting countries. The Siamese display, however, was housed with those of Persia and the French colonies of Tunisia, Morocco, and Annam, in a single pavilion whose frontage was divided into distinctive segments. This made the five countries “brotherly united in a 10-metres façade”, according to the remark (which sounds ironic but was perhaps unwitting) of an observer. In addition, a small Thai kiosk, originally designed to contain the models of three royal barges which never materialized, stood in the other site of the exposition on the opposite bank of the Seine.

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6 Boyer, City of Collective Memory, pp. 262-69.

7 Giovanni Sacheri, Le costruzioni di tutte le nazioni alla esposizione universale di Parigi del 1878 (Turin: Camilla & Bortolero Editori. 1883), p. 92.
Together with the exhibits (four hundred and sixty items for sale to which the commissioner, de Gréhan, added some objects from his own collection) a catalogue in English was sent from Bangkok and then reprinted in a French version. In the end, two grands prix went to silk fabrics and apparel; a gold medal to hunting and fishing implements; a silver medal to musical instruments; three bronze medals to agricultural products, painting and drawing materials, and samples of their application; and two honourable mentions to furniture and saddlery. At this stage, however, the king figured as the sole exhibitor, so the display only indirectly served to promote the agricultural and manufacturing industry. A book published at the end of the exhibition which reviewed Siam’s display along with the earlier stages of Franco-Siamese relations, particularly in the reigns of Narai and Mongkut, emphasized that the “first and principal clients of His Majesty the King of Siam” were high-society personalities including theatre diva Sarah Bernhardt, who were “guarantors of intellect and good taste”.

In the same book, the author compared the three prizes awarded to Siam for exhibits in the category of education (musical instruments, painting materials, and drawings) with the three gold medals won in the same category by Japan, said to represent “an eminent model to follow in the vital sphere of teaching”. This comment was followed by praise of the French, and in the second instance American, missionaries in Bangkok -- “humble and ardent pioneers of Christian civilization who work not only for the conversion of the souls but also for the development of the minds”. While this praise of missionary educational activity in Siam clearly had partisan tones it must be remembered that it was fully appreciated by the local elite. After the scant result of the palace school established in the early 1870s, in that very year 1878, education for the sons of the nobility was given new impetus by the appointment of the American Reverend Samuel McFarland as teacher at the Suan Anand School.

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3. Ibid., pp. 138-40.
Between May and the end of October 1889, Paris hosted its fourth Exposition Universelle, which was visited by twenty-five million people. The event gave Paris its foremost landmark, the iron tower built by Gustave Eiffel amidst strong criticism but which was never dismantled as originally planned (Chulalongkorn himself ascended the Eiffel Tower on both his visits to Paris). Siam participated despite two factors which could have given it a good excuse not to. First, because the exposition marked the centenary of the revolution which had ousted the Bourbons, some European monarchical states deserted the venue. Queen Victoria even recalled the ambassador in Paris so that no British official representative would be present at the opening. Second, the French imperial drive in Indochina was then on the rise. It was four years since the occupation of Tonkin had been accomplished while complete control over Hanoi dated only to the year before. At the exposition French colonial ambitions in Southeast Asia took the form of a 40 metre-tall model of a Khmer prang standing at the centre of a 6,000 square-metre walled enclosure with monumental doors on each side, which contained such exhibits as agricultural produce, cloths, jewels, weapons, musical instruments, and models of local housing.

The building was said to reproduce an archway of Angkor Wat, which the French explorer Henri Mohout had brought to world fame in the 1860s. At that time the territory where the monument lies was loosely subject to Bangkok, whose kings also regarded the Cambodian rulers as vassals. Norodom, the Cambodian sovereign contemporary of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn who allied himself to the French, had spent his youth in Bangkok as a sort of hostage. When the province of Siemreap with the ruins of Angkor was eventually ceded by Siam to France in 1907 as a condition of the settlement of the military incident of 1893, the French and their Cambodian protégés were not alone in rejoicing. Sustained by the recent "cordial agreement" with Paris, the Daily Telegraph commented: "It is well that its [Angkor's] future it is to be cared for by so appreciative a people as our neighbours across the Channel". Fifteen years later a full-scale replica of the

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13 Quoted in the Bangkok Times, 1 May 1907.
third level of Angkor Wat was built for the Colonial Exposition of Marseilles.\textsuperscript{14} One could see, however, an intriguing parallel to the custom of erecting replicas of monuments at exhibitions as a way to laying symbolic claims on them and their originating culture in the small model of Angkor Wat which King Mongkut had built in a corner of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, apparently around the very time Angkor was ascending to the status of one of the world’s wonders.

Siam took part in the 1889 exhibition once again with the king as sole exhibitor. Its display was housed in the Manufacture Building (Palais des Industries Diverses) between the Japanese and Egyptian exhibits, on a 250 square-metre area which was the same as Hawaii’s and two-third of Persia’s. Exhibits included male and female apparel, silk and linen clothes, embroidery, jewelry, copper and ivory enamelware, musical instruments, fermented rice, and, most noticeably, a set of gilded furniture featuring a canopied bed, armchairs, sofas, a writing-desk, coffee tables, and chairs.\textsuperscript{15} An Italian commentator, writing about the exhibition for the public back home, praised the fine workmanship of the Siamese enamelware, “...lacking the mechanical finish of European jewelry but presenting those small imperfections that reveal individual labour, man’s creative hand – in a word, the artist”. He also commented favourably about the 64 square-metres kiosk which had been sent in sections from Bangkok and stood along the extension of the Rue du Caire, the exhibition’s exotic promenade (Fig. 6.1). The fretwork pattern of the kiosk, the glass mosaics of its roof, the floor’s marquetry, its red upholstery, and the gilded and carved decorations showed a “pomp [that] is neither jarring nor heavy ... the Asian sensibility that sustains this miracle should be studied by our artists whose creations are so often out of place”.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Sylviane Leprun, a stereotypical view of exotic artefacts as small, ornamental, charming but not beautiful, asserted itself since the London exhibition of 1867.\textsuperscript{17} The comments quoted above indicate, however, that


\textsuperscript{16} “La sezione Siamese”, \textit{Parigi e l’Esposizione del 1889} (Milan: Treves, 1889), vol. XIX, p. 147.

\textsuperscript{17} Leprun, \textit{Théâtre des colonies}, p. 261.
Fig. 6.1  Siamese kiosk at the Paris Exposition, 1889; Monod, *L'Exposition Universelle de 1889*, p. 65.
handicraft such as those displayed in the Siamese section could also embody in the eyes of Westerners that nostalgia for pre-industrial workmanship that animated, for example, William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement. While largely muted at international exhibitions by the emphasis placed there on modern industry, this nostalgia for a more "authentic" past was in fact the other face of the nineteenth-century fascination for technological development and was destined to assume a more definite character in Europe at the turn of the century with the assertion of nationalism, which fostered the revival of vernacular cultural forms as distinctive manifestations of "national" genius.

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In the first half of the 1890s the relations between Siam and France had grown tense following the latter's annexation of Laos and the incident on the mouth of the Chaophraya River in 1893. So, when in 1895 the French minister resident in Bangkok presented the minister of Foreign Affairs Devavongse with the invitation to participate in the exposition scheduled for 1900, acceptance did not follow suit. The decision to participate was taken only in 1898, after Chulalongkorn's visit to France the year before. An apposite commission was formed, with Prince Bhanurangsi as president; Prince Norathip as secretary; and Phraya Suriya Nuvat as commissioner-general (he had held the same office at the Chicago exposition of 1893). The consul for Siam in Paris, de Gréhan, who had been commissioner at the previous exhibitions was given a secondary role as vice commissioner. The cost for the Siamese government to participate in this exposition amounted to some 218,000 Baht—equivalent to one fifth of that year's budget of the Ministry of Public Works.

As the event symbolizing the beginning of the twentieth century, the Exposition Universelle of 1900 was designed to outclass all previous exhibitions. Open for seven months, from 14 April to 12 November, it was officially attended by thirty-six states and visited by fifty-one million people. Three permanent structures, the Grand Palais and Petit Palais and a bridge dedicated to Alexandre III linking the two sites of the exhibition, were built for the occasion. French

18 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/29.

19 NA, Budget Reports of the Financial Adviser, R.E. 117 to 120 (1898/9 to 1902/3).
colonies too were highlighted as never before. The few French strongholds in India were evoked on a 3,000 square-metre area by a Hindu temple, stalls, workshops, and a restaurant. But the main effort had gone into the Indochinese display, laid out on a 20,000 square-metre site and featuring several buildings. The largest was a Cambodian-style temple built atop an artificial hill, whose interior was in the shape of a grotto for worship; the temple's external staircase was flanked at the base by monumental lions on both sides. A large stupa stood behind the temple with two smaller ones in front of it, on either side. The whole was surrounded by a village complete with Cambodian and Laotian people housed there as part of the show. Unlike most of the attractions at the exposition, entry to the Indochinese display was free of charge. Journalist Maurice Talmeyr, one of the few who reported critically on the exhibition, wrote in the prestigious *Revue des deux mondes* of "Hindu temples, savage huts, pagodas, souks, Algerian alleys, Chinese, Japanese, Sudanese, Senegalese, Siamese, Cambodian quarters . . . a bazaar of climates, architectural styles, colours, cuisine, music".

At this exhibition, Siam had for the first time a pavilion of its own. It was designed by Architect E. Chastel (de Gréhan's son-in-law) and, following Leprun's threefold typology of colonial buildings at exhibitions, could be regarded as a stylized interpretation evoking the flair of Siamese architecture via elements such as a spire and gilded ornamentation. The pavilion actually comprised two structures linked by a gangway: a main octagonal hall with a front porch topped by a thirty metre-high spire; and a smaller hall with a similar but simpler form. At any rate, the pavilion must have been far from impressive, as in the general publications on the exposition this is not even mentioned. Its description is found in the booklet to the Siamese display, which lists the usual range of exhibits (specimens of rice, wood, and rubber; models of royal barges, temples, houses; manufactured articles; fabrics and clothes). One exhibit stood out, however: a large map of the kingdom.

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20 *Esposizione universale del 1900 a Parigi* (Milan: Treves, 1901), vol. I, pp. 6, 132.

21 Quoted in Williams, *Dream Worlds*, p. 61.

22 This three-fold typology included: replicas of actual buildings; composite, but not heterogenous, assemblage which represented a synthetic image of a given architectural tradition; buildings made of "signes interprétés" allowing easy identification by the viewer despite bearing no resemblance to any real architecture. Leprun, Théâtre des colonies, p. 96.
measuring five by twelve metres (scale 1: 760,320) which had been realized by the Survey Department of the Ministry of Interior under the direction of Prince Damrong and Surasakdi Montri.²³

While there is only a passing mention of it in Thongchai’s study, this map is emblematic of the way Siam’s modern “geo-body” was engendered in the late nineteenth century.²⁴ Charting by the British and French figured prominently in the map, which used the toponymy established by London’s Royal Geographical Society. The area of Indochina included in the Siamese map followed the charting done by the Mission Pavie in the years 1881-1885 which, however, had not marked boundaries yet as these were the subject of negotiations between Siam and France. So, the only frontier marked in the Siamese map was the one dividing Siam and British Burma, according to the mapping carried out by the British in 1890-1891. Also important is the fact that the “social life” of the map had already begun by the time it was exhibited in Paris in 1900. One hundred copies of it had been printed in England in a twelve-sheet format and put on sale in Bangkok at the price of 24 Baht in the early months of 1898,²⁵ four years before the Pavie map was made available in printed form in 1902. The display of a map with borders marked on the west but not the east in Paris can be seen as an invitation to the French authorities for an agreement on the eastern frontier. As a matter of fact, the treaty that settled the question of the borders between Siam and French Indochina was finally ratified in 1907 while King Chulalongkorn was in Paris. It cannot be a coincidence that, at the exposition that boasted as never before the magnitude of the French empire, this map-in-progress earned Siam a gold medal – a medal that would have looked like a seal on the colonial pacification of Southeast Asia.²⁶

²³ Le Siam, Exposition universelle de 1900 (Paris: n.p., 1900).
²⁴ Thongchai, Siam Mapped, p. 128.
²⁵ Bangkok Times, 14 January 1898.
²⁶ From October 1902 to the end of March 1903, France held in Hanoi one of those minor expositions imperial powers devoted exclusively to their colonial possessions – a vogue initiated by the British with the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition and first taken up by the French with the Colonial Exposition of Lyon in 1894. Besides displaying products from Indochina and other French colonies, the Hanoi Exposition saw also the participation of the British colony of Hong Kong, the Federated states of North Borneo, the cities of Canton, Shanghai, Tianchin, and Peking, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Siam. Siam was given 400 square-metres of exhibit space housing the usual range
II

If Parisian expositions were above all designed to express France's role as the "Queen of Civilization" irrespective of commercial profit, at American world fairs the rhetoric of republicanism and democracy went hand in hand with an unapologetic concern for trade and business. In this latter regard, Asia came soon to be seen as "an almost unlimited field for the disposal of American manufacture" and a region where "American enterprise is wanted". China and Japan are usually said to have been the countries that most influenced perceptions of Asian peoples and cultures in the initial stage of American engagement with Asia. These two countries are repeatedly mentioned in Rydell's thorough work on American exhibitions while there is not one mention of Siam.

In fact, the establishment of relations between the United States and Siam dates to 1856, two years after Commodore Perry's "opening up" of Japan, when a commercial treaty was signed in Bangkok. Also, Baptist and Presbyterian missionary groups from America had been active in the kingdom since the third reign. Immediately after the signing of the treaty, King Mongkut addressed a letter to the U.S. president Franklin Pierce accompanying it with gifts in return for those presented to him by the American envoy, Townsend Harris. The gifts included, among other objects, indigenous weapons, gold boxes, a silverware set, sets of clothes, and a daguerreotype that is the oldest extant portrait of Mongkut with his queen consort. After their delivery to President Buchanan, Pierce's successor, these objects were put on display for some time in Washington's National Institute, apparently being the first Siamese artefacts ever to be publicly exhibited in America. In the letter of thanks President Buchanan sent to King Mongtut in 1859, he stated that the objects had "elicited the admiration of


28 Rydell, World's a Fair, p. 29, quoting from the Press, 9 July 1873; and the Philadelphia Enquirer, 2 August 1873.

thousands of visitors”.

Later they were stored in the Smithsonian Institution, which itself was to play a crucial role in setting up scientific and ethnological exhibits at world fairs.

Yet the display of a very different kind of “exhibit” had made the name of Siam popular in America over the previous three decades: the twin brothers born joined at the chest who became universally known as the Siamese Twins. The twins, named Hin and Chan (Eng and Chang), were born around 1811 and were taken to America in 1829 by an Englishman, Robert Hunter, who foresaw the commercial gain of exhibiting them in freak shows and circuses, including P. T. Barnum’s. The twins, initially “rented” from their parents for a three-year period, eventually settled in North Carolina, became American citizens with the surname of Bunker, and even married two sisters, Sarah and Adelaide Yates, who bore Hin and Chan twelve and ten children, respectively. Hin and Chan died within a few hours of each other in 1874, and were buried in the Baptist cemetery of White Plains, N.C.

Another subject needs to be mentioned, if in passing, in accounting for American perceptions of Siam in the later nineteenth century: the abolition of bondage, which was given a particular significance by the still fresh memory of five years of American civil war (1861-65). In fact, in both cases humanistic rhetoric was upheld to conceal the dominant economic motivation behind the termination of slavery in the two countries: the need for increased revenue in Siam, and the clash between the industrial and export-oriented North and the agricultural and protectionist South in the United States. In any case, irrespective of the enormous differences in the practice of slavery between the two countries, its abolition was regarded as a secure proof of the civilizing intents of Siam’s

30 Abbot Low Moffat, Mongkut the King of Siam (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1961), pp. 87-88, 189-91.


absolutist regime in spite of its gap with the republican government of the U.S.A. Yet the gap continued to be perceived and shaped the early image of Siam held by the American public as a contradictory place. This point of view transpires from the speech that a U.S. officer long acquainted with Siam delivered at a function at the time of the Chicago exposition of 1893: “Siam is probably the most despotic country in the civilized world. Everything and everybody belongs to the king ... yet it is the present king who has issued the first edict that no one shall henceforth be borne a slave in his dominion”.33

* * *

In 1876 the first of the American world’s fairs was held in Philadelphia to celebrate the centenary of the Declaration of Independence. The Centennial Exposition, as the fair was officially designated, was visited by almost ten million people -- that is, nearly one-fifth of the U.S. population at that time. At the end of 1874, the U.S. consul in Bangkok, following instructions by the State Department, presented the king with a formal invitation to the forthcoming event. The appointment as commissioner to the fair of the ex-American consul in Bangkok and now secretary of the Siamese Foreign Office, J. H. Chandler (who was also a Baptist missionary), provoked, however, a dispute over matters of personal prestige with the incumbent consul, F.W. Partridge. The dispute led to a serious delay in the shipment of the items destined for the fair and only five months after its opening, on 10 May 1876, was the Siamese exhibit set up at Philadelphia.

The exhibit, which perhaps because of its late entrance was curiously set up in the Navy Department’s section inside the U.S. Government Building, was qualified as being “presented by His Majesty to the United States of America as a souvenir from the Kingdom of Siam”.34 A 34-page booklet was printed to illustrate the exhibit, which was said to show “articles generally used in the country and of samples of trade of Siamese origin”, such as matting, native woods, rice and other soil products; farming utensils; theatrical masks and musical

33 The Chicago Sunday Times, 1 October 1893 reporting a speech by Major T. Harris (clipping in NAT, RV, Miscellany 11/47).

instruments; models of country houses, temples, and royal barges; a bust of Mongkut and a photograph of Chulalongkorn in full regalia taken at his coronation in 1873; and -- the exhibit’s showpiece -- a silverware set. To an Italian reporter at the fair the Siamese exhibit inspired the following comment:

Isn’t it strange that a sovereign from an old lineage in the remote and relaxed Asia takes an interest in the fate of a new republic? But then, the king of Siam has been among the first to open the doors to European civilization. The Siamese king has remarkably improved the living conditions in his country, and has signed treaties with the principal European states, entertaining good relationships with all of them. His gifts, enamelled silver cups and lamps, show a simple but original style, different from our taste yet beautiful.

The reporter obviously mistook the incumbent king with his predecessor, but his remarks suggest that the small and belated exhibit sufficed to promote the image of the Siamese monarchy as outward-looking and open to change.

Seventeen years later, with a degree of experience of exhibition routine, Siam took part at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, a landmark in the history of these events. The focus of the Chicago exposition was a majestic Court of Honour made of five massive neoclassical buildings encircling a large artificial basin, the so-called White City, which between 1 May and 30 October welcomed more than twenty-seven million visitors. Apart from the White City, the fair included two other locations: the Midway Plaisance, where ethnological exhibits and amusements were located; and the secluded Wooded Island where Japan’s pavilion, the Hooden, a building partly inspired by an eleventh-century temple, was erected by Japanese craftsmen specially sent to Chicago.

Following the fair’s proclamation, signed by President J. B. Harrison on Christmas Eve of 1890, at the end of January 1891 the U.S. minister-resident in Bangkok presented the Siamese authorities with the invitation to Chicago, which

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36 "Le coppe del Re del Siam", L’Esposizione universale di Filadelfia del 1876 (Milan: Sonzogno, 1876), p. 338.

37 The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition occasioned a large number of publications; one of the most exhaustive is Hubert H. Bancroft, The Book of the Fair, 2 vols. (New York: Bancroft Books, 1894), which describes the Siamese exhibits displayed in each section. For a critical look at the fair see Rydell, World’s a Fair, Ch. 2; and John E. Findling, Chicago’s Great World Fairs (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1994), Ch. 2, which both contain a rich bibliography of original publications.
was accepted four months later. In comparison to the exhibitions Siam had previously taken part in, that of Chicago saw a deeper involvement of the Siamese authorities in the mechanism of organization and public relations. The commissioner-general was phraya Suriya Nuvat, the secretary of the Berlin legation, who for the occasion spent a period in Chicago. The decision disappointed Isaac Townsend Smith, the consul-general for Siam in New York, who had to content himself with being Suriya’s assistant. The Siamese minister of Foreign Affairs had even to turn down the offer to act as commissioner by author Jacob Child, who had just published *Pearl of Asia* and might have seen the office as a source of some publicity.

On this occasion, the Siamese minister of Agriculture and Trade (phraya Phakharawong, who was replaced in 1892 by Surasakdi Montri), was in charge of forwarding the exhibits. The decision indicates a growing appreciation by the Siamese authorities of international exhibitions’ commercial opportunities. In December 1892, before being shipped to Chicago, the exhibits were put on display for a few days in the Agriculture Department in Bangkok. A sixteen-page pamphlet by a member of the Board of Judges provided a survey of the exhibits for the fair’s visitors. He described Siam as

> the largest and richest piece of the earth’s surface remaining in the possession of a race not strong enough to defend it but sufficiently civilized and willing to develop it. . . . Under the enlightened policy of the actual ruler mighty changes in the condition of the people of Siam have taken place. The innovations which have been wrought within the last few years are indicative of the rate of progress likely in the future. The post and telegraph system throughout the country has been extended; telephone service is in active use; the passenger and postal services are being effected by large and new steamers; tram-car lines and electric cars have been extended; new roads built, bridges erected, and . . . there is every indication of prosperity and happiness for the great kingdom.

The point to remark here is not so much the patronizing tone of these comments, but the way they placed material exhibits which were not “modern” in any particularly way into a narrative of progress with the sovereign as a key-actor.

38 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/45; see also the pamphlet, *Royal Siamese Commission to the World’s Columbian Exposition Chicago 1893* (n.p., n.d.).

39 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/46; Jacob Child, *Pearl of Asia* (Chicago: Donohue Hanneberry, 1892).

Siamese exhibits at Chicago exposition were on display in the Agriculture, Forestry, Transportation, Ethnological, Manufactures, and Women’s buildings. Siam’s white and gold pavilion in the Agricultural Building exhibited soil products, several species of fish, local implements (ploughs, hoes, rakes, shovels), cooking utensils, and “a very good display of the national military instruments”. The exhibits in the Forestry Building, particularly teak, were said to indicate “what a wonderful opening there undoubtedly exists for the importation of all ornamental woods from the southeast corner of Asia into this country”. In the Transportation Building (designed by the emergent Chicago architect Louis Sullivan) Siam was represented by joss chairs used to “convey statues and sacred relics”, a wooden cart, and “a quantity of Siamese boats of different shapes and sizes”. Costumes and toys figured prominently in the Siamese display in the Ethnological Building. But the exhibits to be more likely indicative of the country’s progress were found in the Manufactures Building, in a pavilion “inlaid with variegated glass, and [that] has an artistic and at the same time a very rich appearance”. There, among the ivory handicrafts, enamelware, silverware, lacquerware, tapestries, coins, and models of floating houses, stood out “the model of a letter-box used in the country from 1883 to 1887; the improved model in use from 1887 to 1892; and the latest one in actual use” together with the plan of Bangkok’s General Post Office and models showing post delivery by land and water, proving that “postal arrangements in Siam are as perfect as the most fastidious citizen could desire”.

A distinctive feature of the World’s Columbian Exposition was the Women’s Building. It was intended by the organizers as a forum for women’s clubs and organizations from various countries to meet and exchange ideas while enjoying facilities that included parlours, committee rooms, a library, and a congress hall. The design of the building itself was selected from a number of sketches submitted by women architects. With a view to this outcome, the president of the Board of Lady Managers, Mrs Bertha Potter Palmer (wife of the

41 Ibid., pp. 7-15.
president of the Chicago fair’s commission and owner of the city’s top hotel), in April 1892 addressed a letter to Queen Saowapha soliciting the appointment of a female commission for the selection of exhibits that could “most fully and fitly illustrate the progress and achievements of the women of Siam”. The request was followed by the assurance of “the profound and universal esteem and admiration in which Your Majesty is held by the women of America”.43

The choice for this office fell predictably on Linchi Suriya, wife of the commissioner-general to the fair, who, as one of the few Siamese women then living overseas, must have appeared an ideal cultural broker. Indeed, Lady Suriya’s appointment was by no means merely symbolic as the zealous Board of Lady Managers asked her to submit a survey dealing with the following ten subjects: physical and aesthetic characteristics of Siamese women; female education and religious belief; maiden’s lives; wives’ rights and duties; polygamy; women’s general position in society; industrial pursuits, including assistance given to men in both the low and high classes; charitable activities by and for women, including the involvement of the royal family and of public institutions; and women of races other than Siamese living in the kingdom’s dependencies. This call for information was part of a major project of the Board of Lady Managers: the compilation of an encyclopedia documenting women’s lives all over the world. Yet the task must have proved overwhelming for Lady Suriya, because her husband wrote from Berlin to the minister of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok asking for advice and reporting that in Germany a similar survey had been entrusted to a group of princesses and not one person alone.44

The Siamese section in the Women’s Building occupied one hundred square-feet (about nine square-metres). In it were exhibited embroidery in gold, silver, and silk, including “the cap of the young prince of Siam”; a prince’s full state costume and the royal robe used in the ordination ceremony; and traditional jewelry “loaned by the queen”, which were particularly admired not just because of their value -- “about $58,000” -- but for documenting standards of Siamese workmanship at the time before relations with the West (“Nowadays” it was


44 Phraya Suriya to Devawong, letter of 2 September 1892, NA, RV, Miscellany 11/46.
remarked, "the Siamese wear European jewelry"). While these exhibits, like the majority in the Women's Building, tended to reinforce deeply rooted notions of feminine domesticity, the undertaking can be seen to reflect the emancipatory tension sustaining the local movement for women suffrage. Although immediate echoes in Siam of concerns about the female condition which were raised in the context of the Chicago exposition would be hard to document, some intriguing chronological contiguities at least can be teased out.

Change affecting the status of women in Siam began in the fourth reign under the pressure of Western moral and religious values, particularly the condemnation of polygamy. During the negotiations with the American envoy which led to the commercial treaty of 1856, King Mongkut himself had suggested the introduction of an article binding the king to monogamy in order to appease the Americans. Chulalongkorn, on the other hand, apparently regarded monogamy as unsuitable for Thais as constitutionalism; yet, significantly, his polygamous lifestyle attracted much less criticism from Westerners than his father's. The king managed to raise Queen Saowapha to the public role of queen-consort and even nominated her regent during his visit to Europe in 1897, which represented an unprecedented profession of trust in women's capacity. Due also to her activity in promoting female education within the court, Queen Saowapha has been accorded the place in the Thai official historical narrative of a champion of women's rights, almost a counterpart to her late Victorian contemporaries. It was only under the constitutional government that monogamy was codified in 1935 as the only legal union between wife and husband.

Of more immediate significance for the Siamese authorities than the emergence of a proto-feminist consciousness was the eruption, in the course of the Chicago fair, of the crisis with France. Echoes of the military incident at Paknam in July reached the venue and the hosts, faithful to their boldly proclaimed

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46 Domosh, "A 'Feminine' Building?", p. 313.
principles of self-determination, showed themselves to be standing by Siam’s side. At a banquet given in Chicago by the Siamese commissioner-general to celebrate Chulalongkorn’s birthday in October, the consul-general for Siam, Townsend Smith, stating beforehand that “Americans dip as naturally in politics as a duck takes to water”, voiced his support for Siam at risk, like the other “smaller nationalities of the Oriental World [of being] shaped out, obliterated, or absorbed by the great powers of the Western World”. A more diplomatic stance was taken by the commissioner-general, phraya Suriya, who avoided reference to France focusing, instead, on business prospects. He foreshadowed new opportunities for trade as a result of the construction of the country’s first railway line, the Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima, which had been initiated the year before (its first section, the Bangkok-Ayutthaya, was opened in March 1897). He also reportedly referred to the king as being “particularly interested in America, and especially in American methods of business”, and “desirous to see more American people and to welcome more American enterprise to his hospitable shore”.

* * *

After rejecting invitations to the Tennessee Centennial Exposition (1897), the Trans-Mississippi Exposition (1898), and that held in conjunction with the Philadelphia International Commercial Congress (1899), the Siamese government agreed to participate in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, which was held in St Louis from 30 April to 1 December 1904 to commemorate the centennial of the purchase of Louisiana from France. A baby with a top-knot was thus drawn in the upper right corner of the fair’s commemorative postcard sponsored by Singer which depicted a swarm of children representative of various countries holding a cloth in the shape of the United States’ map and the female personification of America sewing on it an oversized “Louisiana” – of course with a Singer sewing machine.

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49 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/49-51.

50 Reproduced in Davis, Siam Society, p. 53.
The forthcoming fair was initially announced to the ministry of Foreign Affairs by the American legation in Bangkok on 4 October 1901.\textsuperscript{51} Exactly one year later Vajiravudh, while on a world tour leading him back home after the conclusion of his studies in England, visited the United States and stopped in St Louis as the guest of the fair's organizers. Upon his return to Siam, the crown prince took a keen interest in the matter, becoming the president of the royal commission which was set up for the Louisiana Exposition. This commission included also the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Agriculture as vice-presidents; thirteen other members among princes and officers; the American C. A. Carter, an adviser of the Education Department, as secretary-general; and as commissioner-general in charge of the organization \textit{in situ}, Professor J. H. Gore of Columbia University, whom Vajiravudh had met on his American tour. Coincidentally, 1904 was also the year an American, Edward H. Strobel, was given the office of General Adviser to the Siamese government for a four-year period. Following Strobel's death in 1908, another American, James O. Westengard, was entrusted with that office.

The Louisiana exposition aimed at establishing a record as the largest exhibition ever, and achieved this with over 445,000 square-metres of exhibit space and a total area of some five million square-metres. That such dimensions could be inhibiting was realized when the dean of the local Barnes Medical College warned his colleagues to dissuade neurasthenics from visiting the fair because its vastness was likely to cause them to collapse. Eventually the fair, which was indeed described as "a succession of mental shocks, cumulative and educative", attracted over nineteen million visitors.\textsuperscript{52} However, despite its immense size, the site allocated to Siam measured some 296 square-metres only (3,193 square-feet). To house the exhibit a pavilion was built on this site, which without doubt was an improvement on the one Siam had had at the Paris exhibition, four years earlier. It reproduced the recently built chapel (\textit{ubosot}) of Wat Benchama Bhopit with its two guardian lions at the entrance (Fig. 6.2 and 6.3).

\textsuperscript{51} N.A.RV, Miscellany 11/52.

\textsuperscript{52} Rydell, \textit{World's a Fair}, Ch. 6.
Fig. 6.2  The Siamese pavilion reproducing Wat Benchama Bophit at the St Louis Exposition, 1904; Davis, The Siam Society, p. 26.

Fig. 6.3  Interior of the pavilion; Davis, The Siam Society, p. 27.
Planned by the Public Works Department in Bangkok, the pavilion was entirely realized by American carpenters -- not in St Louis, however, but in far-away Washington, which the commissioner-general, Gore, found to be more economical. According to Gore, the pavilion was regarded as the most interesting of the fair along with China's. By the time of the pavilion's inauguration on 16 June, one and a half months after the exposition's opening, Gore had printed for distribution a leaflet containing explanations about the building, some statistical information for the press, and souvenir postcards with an elephant's silhouette. Gore also informed the Siamese authorities that on the fourth of July, Independence Day, he had placed a decoration (presumably Siamese) on the pole of the American flag -- a gesture he described as "widely and favourably commented on. No other foreign commissioner thought of it". Less enthusiastic was the tone of H. E. Hamilton King, at that time the U.S. consul in Bangkok, in the review of the Siamese display he wrote for the fair's bulletin:

Avoiding the spectacular and the curios the Commission have confined themselves to that which represents the actual conditions of the country at the present time ... If the exhibit were to be criticized in any direction indeed it would be in failing to convey a proper impression of Modern Siam. But this failure arises from the thought that as the new ideas in architecture, transportation, industries, etc., are distinctively occidental rather than Siamese, it were better ... to give emphasis to the more strictly national characteristics.

Hamilton King's comments reveal the dilemma between the attempt to project an image of Siam as a progressive country and the preoccupation of organizers with the display of distinctive "national characteristics" that entailed a less developed image of the country. That in the American mind Siamese exhibits qualified more as curios than commodities is shown by the fact that, at the end of the fair, the pottery was sold to the Metropolitan Museum in New York while manufacture, agriculture, mining, and fish and game exhibits were acquired by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum in Washington.


55 Smithsonian Institution, letter of 8 September 1905; American legation in Bangkok, letter of 6 November 1905. NA, RV, Miscellany 11/53.
Nonetheless, the display at St Louis was judged to be the amallest exhibited by Siam thus far and was awarded the remarkable number of one hundred and sixteen prizes (four grand prizes, thirty-one gold medals, thirty-four silver medals, and forty-seven bronze medals). Moreover, forty-three awards were given to collaborators; a grand prize to the crown prince “in consideration of his excellent taste as shown in the choice of articles he selected for display”; and a special commemorative diploma to King Chulalongkorn,

... in consideration of His humane decree abolishing slavery in His kingdom; for his interest in the collection, arrangement, and publication of the Buddhist Scriptures for gratuitous distribution to the libraries of the World; and for His benevolence as seen in His donating to the peasantry the Crown lands which they have occupied for a certain period and fixing the ownership by the registration of titles in a Bureau established for that purpose.

After quoting the official citation for the award, Gore added gladly that, as commemorative diplomas were also awarded to the king of England and the German emperor, “it is quite generally acknowledged here that this places Him [Rama V] in the same category with their Majesties referred to.”

Overall, Gore proved to be a dedicated commissioner equally capable as a manager and public relations person. The cost involved in setting up the display amounted to 247,500 Baht -- some 25,000 Baht more than had been spent at Paris four years earlier, but with more results. One of this was the publication of a thick illustrated handbook, The Kingdom of Siam, four thousands copies of which were published in September 1904 (three thousand for official distribution and the rest for sale) at the cost of U.S $ 2,000. Publications about Siam had already appeared on the occasion of

56 J.H. Gore, letters of 6 and 24 December 1904 to the Siamese Royal Commission (containing the award’s citation quoted above), NA, RV, Miscellany 11/53. Siamese exhibits were awarded prizes in the following categories: Liberal Arts, 7 gold medals, 3 silver medals, 1 bronze medal; Fish and Game, 2 gold medals and 1 bronze medal; Forestry, 1 grand prize and 6 bronze medals; Transportation, 1 gold medal, 1 silver medal, 1 bronze medal; Manufacture, 2 grand prizes, 15 gold medals, 19 silver medals, 17 bronze medal; Mines, 2 gold medals, 2 silver medals, 4 bronze medals; Education, 1 silver medal; Anthropology, 1 grand prize; Agriculture, 4 gold medals, 8 silver medals, 17 bronze medals.

57 NA, Budget Reports of the Financial Adviser, R.E. 123 to 127 (1904/5 to 1908/9). Actual expenditure amounting to 247,523 Baht were, in fact, some 11,000 Baht less than originally allocated in the financial budgets.

previous exhibitions, but this was a 280-page volume with thematic chapters written by foreign advisers such as Dr Frankfurter (on history, language, religion) and Colonel Gerini (on archaeology). More than a guide for the fair’s visitors (the link with the Louisiana exposition is spelt out only on the front page), the book appears to have been designed as a reference for scholars, businessmen, and perhaps politicians, almost a prototype of those handbooks produced later on by American government agencies.59

III

As part of its tardy pursuit of world power status, in 1908 the Italian government launched the project for an international exhibition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the country’s unification to be held in 1911 in the cities of Turin (in the northern Piedmont region) and, as a picturesque appendage, Rome. Unification, achieved in 1861 by the House of Savoy, Piedmont’s rulers, through the progressive annexation of autonomous states, was enshrined in the national historical narrative as an epic called the Risorgimento (rebirth). Turin itself had been the first national capital before this was moved to Florence in 1865 and finally to Rome in 1870, when the city was taken away from the Pope by the army. Half a century later, Turin was Italy’s major industrial centre (the first Italian car industry, FIAT, was established there in 1899) and, as it were, still its moral and cultural capital. Turin had also hosted a national exhibition in 1884 and the International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art in 1902 (to which Siam, although invited, declined to participate60), and was thus the most suitable location for an event like that envisaged for 1911. At the end of April 1908, shortly after the launching of the exhibition, the Italian chargé d’affaires in Bangkok presented the ministry of Foreign Affairs, Devawongse, with an invitation to the forthcoming event.61

59 E.g., Frank J. Moore, Thailand (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1974).

60 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/63. The Siamese government also declined to participate at the exposition held in Milan in 1906 celebrating the opening of the Simplon Tunnel and mostly devoted to transportation. NA, RV, Miscellany 11/64.

61 NA, RV, Miscellany 11/1.
Diplomatic relationships between the two countries were established with a treaty signed in October 1868. An informal connection between Bangkok and Turin had developed both through the informal diplomacy of visits by members of the House of Savoy (in 1881, 1889, and 1895) reciprocated by Chulalongkorn in 1897 and 1907, and the presence of several Turinese in the Public Works Department. One of these was Annibale Rigotti, the architect of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, who sat in the executive committee of Siam at the Turin exposition as the director of the pavilion construction and supervised its erection in situ. Another Turinese was Cesare Ferro, who had spent there years in Bangkok as painter and decorator for the king between 1904 and 1907 and was to return there in 1923. He realized the watercolour sketch of the Siamese pavilion which was included in the catalogue (Fig. 6.4).

Entrusted with the office of commissioner-general for Siam at the Turin exhibition was Gerolamo E. Gerini (1860-1912), who had arrived in Siam in 1880 as a military instructor and had ended up as a scholar and one of the founding members of the Siam Society in 1904. Gerini’s deep knowledge and sympathy for the country he had lived in for several years led him to assemble an extensive catalogue, enriched by a historical introduction on the relations between Siam and Italy. Although rich in background information, the catalogue focused on the exhibits, differing in that respect from the handbook published for the Louisiana exposition. The fact that an English version of Gerini’s catalogue was published the following year indicates that it appealed to a wider international readership.

62 An agreement for the export and sale of beverages in Siam was also stipulated in 1884. Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, Political Series A, File 113.

63 Among Gerini’s scholarly works see A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the That Mahachat Ceremony (Bangkok: Bangkok Times, 1892); Chulakantamagala, or the Tonsure Ceremony as Performed in Siam (Bangkok: Bangkok Times, 1895 [repr. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1976]); ”Trial by Ordeal in Siam and the Siamese Law of Ordeals“, The Asiatic Quarterly Review (April and July 1895); “A Historical Retrospect of Junkceylon Island“, The Journal of the Siam Society 2, 2 (1905) and 3, 1 (1906) (repr. as one volume, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1986). On Gerini see Ferri de Lazara and Piazzardi, Italians at the Court of Siam, Ch. 1.


65 Siam and its Productions, Arts, and Manufactures (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1912). Gerini specified in the preface to this edition that “this catalogue is a translation of the preceding Italian one only in so far as the articles from the Editor’s pen are concerned. The others are given in the original
Fig. 6.4  Watercolour sketch by C. Ferro of the Siamese pavilion at the Turin exposition, 1911; Gerini, Siam and its Productions, frontispiece.
On the Siamese side, Vajiravudh, who by the time of the exposition’s opening had succeeded his father on the throne, was still the president of the commission for foreign exhibitions created at the time of the St Louis’ fair. The vice-president was Prince Ratchani and the secretary-general A. C. Carter, later replaced by A. H. Duke. A sum of 125,000 Baht was allocated for the exhibition,\(^6\) which was half the sum spent for St Louis, where the Siamese pavilion was one third the size of that in Turin. On 23 December 1910 the recently enthroned Rama VI inspected the exhibits destined for the exposition which, as had become customary, were put on display in the Royal Museum.\(^6\)

The Turin exposition opened on 29 April, 1911, and lasted until 20 November. The Siamese representative at the opening was luang Montri, the ambassador in Paris, who had also attended the official celebrations for the anniversary of Italy’s unification held in Rome the previous March. The day after the opening luang Montri met with the commissioner-general Gerini and the Italian prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, at the Siamese pavilion; but it took another month for the pavilion to be opened to the public, on 27 May. In a piece on the exposition’s opening, Turin’s newspaper La Stampa referred to the Siamese building as being one of the most interesting, noting that its golden spire was visible from almost every point of the exposition site.\(^6\) This covered a total area of one million square-metres, one quarter of which was indoor exhibit space, on both banks of the River Po which runs through the city. The Siamese pavilion lay on the right bank, between those of Serbia and the United States of America. The pavilions of Germany, France, Belgium, Brazil, Argentina, and the one reuniting six other Latin-American countries lay on the same bank, while on the opposite stood the pavilions of Hungary, the French colonies of Algeria and Tunisia,

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\(^6\) Memorandum of 23 December 1908, NA, RV, Miscellany 11/1. According to this memo, the sum was to be thus allocated: 10,000 Baht in the year R.E. 127 (1908/9); 21,000 Baht in 128 (1909/10); 52,000 Baht in 129 (1910/11); 42,000 Baht in 130 (1911/12).

\(^6\) Bangkok Times, 24 December 1910.

\(^6\) La Stampa, 29 April 1911.
Switzerland, Russia, Turkey, and Great Britain. Although sensibly smaller than the other national pavilions, the thousand square metres of Siam’s marked a record in its visibility at international exhibitions thus far. The absence of pavilions of China and Japan, whose exhibits were displayed in the Arts and Industries Building, also added to the exotic appeal of the Siamese building.

Cruciform in plan and surmounted by a polychrome roof with spires 45-metre high, the white pavilion had a frontage of 65 metres and rested on a base formed by a triple order of terraces leading down to the embankment along the river. Flagstaffs hoisting the white elephant on the red ground stood at the sides of the pavilion. While not a reproduction of any specific building, the pavilion typified the architecture of the early Bangkok period such as the Dusit Maha Prasat in the Grand Palace. In the catalogue Gerini described it as exemplifying “that genuine Siamese style which still survives in temples and monuments of the past, more than in those which have to a large extent been modernized. When viewed from the opposite bank of the River Po”, he emphatically added, “it gives one the momentary illusion of actually finding himself on the shores of the Menam, before one of those sumptuous buildings that embellish the Siamese capital”.

Gerini also explained that “the door-posts and corners of the building are not plumb, but slightly inclined toward one another”, an architectural feature derived from the necessity of stabilizing wooden buildings in lands subject to periodical inundations; and also explained the complex structure of the roof in the light of Indic iconography pointing to the decorative motifs as figurations of mythical beings such as the Garuda and the Naga, attributes of royal power. The pavilion, however, was designed by Mario Tamagno and Annibale Rigotti. Their activity as designers of a neo-Baroque throne hall in Bangkok for the king of Siam and a pavilion in the Siamese architectural style for an exhibition in Italy is highly

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69 The sizes of other national buildings were, in ascending order, U.S.A.: 5,000 sq.m.; Latin America (Chile, Dominica, Equador, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela): 6,000 sq.m.; Brazil: 8,000 sq.m.; Belgium and Germany: 9,000 sq.m. each; France: 13,990 sq.m.; Great Britain: 20,000 sq.m. Guide pratique pour visiter l’Exposition Internazionale de l’industrie et du travail établie à Turin (Turin: Jassa & Ferruto, 1911).

70 Gerini, Siam, p. xlix.
representative of the peculiar nature of transnational cultural flows at the turn of the century.

Internally, the Siamese pavilion was divided into three halls extending at both sides into wing galleries. On display in the left gallery there were animal skins, hides, horns, tanning barks, and mats hanging from the walls. The first hall was mostly devoted to the exhibit of the Education Department, which had even printed a 6-page catalogue in English.71 The exhibit documented the activity of primary and secondary students of both sexes in both government and foreign missions schools through samples of drawing, embroidery and knitting; photographs of schools, classrooms, and classes at work; abstracts of courses, timetables, and textbooks. Another government agency at the forefront of modernization, the State Railways, also exhibited in this hall. Framed pictures of railway lines, stations, bridges, and trains were accompanied by the report of railway traffic for 1910. The remaining exhibits in the hall represented the textile industry: a rosewood loom for silk-weaving, spinning and weaving tools, specimens of silkworms, cocoons, cotton fabrics and other fibres.

The richly decorated central hall, also accessible from the embankment along the river, was replete with religious and regal insignia probably arranged by Gerini himself: golden images of the Buddha placed in niches up on the walls and emblems of the dynasty, the chakr-tri (the wheel of the dharma intertwined with Siva’s trident); flags, the Chakri’s coat of arms, and two seven-tiered umbrellas; a framed life-size photo of Chulalongkorn surrounded by festoons and garlands, and life-size portraits of Rama VI and the Queen Mother, Saowapha. At the centre of this hall stood a showcase displaying masks used in the performance of the Ramayana and chased and enamelled silverware; at its corners, fans, wicker specimens, and samples of minerals and gems. The third hall was mostly devoted to agricultural and manufactured products: samples of paddy and other cereals, fishing implements, trunks of various kinds of trees, resins, essences, perfumery oils, drugs, tobacco, and of course silk fabrics. “Here”, the catalogue recited, “men of business will be especially interested”. Besides, several photographs illustrated

71 Catalogue of Educational Exhibits Prepared in the Schools of the Education Department to be Shown at the International Exhibition of Industry and Labour, Turin (Bangkok: printed at the American Presbyterian Mission Press, n.d. [c. 1911]).
the activity of the Survey, Public Works, and Post departments. Finally, the gallery on the right contained earthenware and models of boats.\textsuperscript{72}

The jury of the Turin exposition awarded Siam eighty-nine prizes; another four prizes were awarded as part of an international photographic competition. Acknowledging exhibits showing the advancements in infrastructure and communication, the highest prizes -- five \textit{grands prix} -- went to the Public Works Department, the Railway Department, the Post and Telegraph Department, the Royal Agricultural College for its mining exhibits, besides that given to the Royal Commission for foreign exhibitions for its theatre masks. Ten \textit{diplômes d’honneur}, twenty-one gold medals, twenty-five silver medals, eighteen bronze medals, and ten special mentions were also awarded to Siam’s exhibits. Besides these prizes, a diploma of special merit was conferred on the king; six diplomas of high merit to the ministers of Public Works, Interior, Finance, Justice, Education, and Agriculture; and another fifteen awards to state officials, Thai and foreigners.\textsuperscript{73}

Throughout the duration of the exhibition the Siamese pavilion was visited by seven and a half million patrons -- “exactly the population of Siam” as Gerini remarked -- including the king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, and one of Chulalongkorn’s son, Prince Mahidol (the father of King Bhumibol). One of the organizers pointed out that with this exhibition Siam had “successfully put in evidence the high standard of civilization she has reached, which is such as to place her abreast of the most progressive countries of our Old Europe”.\textsuperscript{74} And there is reason to believe that such a remark could have hardly displeased King Chulalongkorn.

IV

The story of Siam’s presence at international exhibitions over a period of some forty years practically coinciding with the fifth reign is not the story of a remarkable success but neither that of failure. Over the years, Siamese displays became

\textsuperscript{72} Gerini, \textit{Siam}, pp. liv-lxiv.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., pp. 282-294.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., pp. 276-77.
steadily more visible, especially since the Paris exposition of 1900 when Siam had for the first time at its disposal an individual pavilion. Although the size of Siamese pavilions was markedly modest in comparison to those of most other countries, the allocation to Siam of increasingly larger spaces can be put in relation to the increasing attention Siam commanded in the international arena since Chulalongkorn’s first tours of Europe in 1897. There was also a growing interest, particularly manifest at exhibitions in America, about the commercial opportunities afforded by Siam in terms of the export of agricultural products and raw materials. Rather less successful Siamese exhibits would appear to have been in conjuring a distinctive cultural profile. Curiously, the presentation of the monarchy itself as a distinctive Siamese institution was neglected except at the Turin exposition, in which Gerini made regalia and royal portraits the centrepiece of the display.

Should a brief comparison be made between the exhibition performance of Siam and Japan, the gap to the latter’s advantage would be immediately evident. Although economic constraints over the budget to be destined for the displays at exhibitions were probably sterner for Bangkok than Tokyo, this gap clearly reflects the Meiji government’s determination to assert via any means its authority and prestige vis-à-vis the West. At the Chicago exposition of 1893, besides making a big impression with its pavilion, a Japanese delegation participated at the World’s Parliament of Religion which was held in concomitance with the fair, promoting there as the national faith a rationalistic form of Buddhism that was the product of the Meiji religious revival.75 At the St Louis fair of 1904, the year of the Russo-Japanese War, a Red Cross stand was hosted in the pavilion of Japan manifesting its commitment to the rules of international relations in the case of war with a Western state.76 Finally, the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 represented the legitimation by the number one imperial power of East Asia’s emerging power, casting the Japanese occupation of Formosa, Korea, and Manchuria in the same

76 Harris, “Japan at American Fairs”, p. 50.
vein as the Crown's rule in the British colonies. In fact, the case of Japan clearly demonstrates that the politics of representation of international exhibitions ensued unmistakably from the political arena; because of this it would have been unlikely for Siam to occupy on this stage a place outdoing its actual political weight.

A final mention should be made of events which were held in Bangkok as early as 1882 and reproduced on a domestic scale the model of world fairs. In that year, during the festivities for the centenary of the dynasty, an exhibition was organized in Sanam Luang with specially built bamboo pavilions. On display were natural products, manufactured articles, and arts and crafts, among which stood out the king's jewelry. In April 1910, and again the following year, an Annual Exhibition of Agriculture and Commerce was held in Sapathumwan Palace, which housed the Agricultural College, and reports of it were published. Rama VI also planned a Siamese Kingdom Exhibition to be held in January 1926 to celebrate his fifteenth anniversary of reign. His death in November 1925 led to the cancellation of the project, yet the volume designed to accompany the exhibition was nevertheless published. As shown in the previous chapter, even the grand pageants of the end of the fifth reign derived some of their inspiration from the spectacle of world fairs, blending globalized cultural forms and vernacular motifs to claim a unique place for Siam, and its ruling elite, in the coalescing community of modern nation-states.

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77 Official Report of the Japan-British Exhibition 1910 at the Great White City (London: Unwin Bros., 1911). Mention of Japan at international exhibitions can be also found in Greenhalgh, Ephemeral Vistas, passim, and Rydell, World's a Fair, passim; however, there is not, to my knowledge, a comprehensive English-language study on the subject.

78 Bock, Temples and Elephants, Ch. 31.

79 Sakda, Kasattri lae klong, p. 171.

80 Souvenir of the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition at Lumbini Park (Bangkok: Siam Free Press, n.d.).
Conclusion

This study has been devoted to an examination of practices, spaces, and spectacles whereby a public image of the Siamese monarchy which conformed to contemporary Western norms was engendered and propagated during the fifth reign. I have argued that, via habits of consumption informed by Westernized tastes, the royalty realized a lifestyle which allowed them to identify with the reigning houses of Europe. Novel forms of deportment, dress, and recreation were introduced and promoted at the Siamese court and manifested in state visits abroad. Another related aspect of the making of the monarchy’s modern public image was the Westernization of the local theatre of power. Pageants were staged and monuments created in Bangkok which exploited foreign motifs and modern technology. Their purpose was to dramatize the monarchy’s role as a “national” institution under whose leadership Siam was progressing on the path to civilization. This message was also diffused in the global arena through the medium of international exhibitions. By way of conclusion, it may be a useful exercise to focus on the three key issues that underlie the present study. First, what compelled the Siamese monarchy to reconfigure its public image? Second, who engineered this transformation? And finally, who was its intended public?

Prior to the appearance en masse of Europeans in Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth century, the authority and prestige of the Siamese monarch was, like that of neighbouring rulers, predicated on a common idiom of Indic origins which through interaction with indigenous motifs had resulted in an elite culture at once distinctive and cosmopolitan. Wolters, for instance, talks of the “opportunist and pragmatic attitude towards the present” of Southeast Asian pre-colonial elites and their “sense of being an integral part of the whole of the known ‘world’”, seeing in these features a “remarkable propensity for being ‘modern’”.¹ The Indic culture of Southeast Asian elites concerned itself with courtly civility, self-presentation, monumental architecture and, most notably, the theatre of power. Casting their

selves and public images in a foreign mould was thus nothing particularly new for the Siamese elite.

From this point of view, Western civilization can be said to have represented the latest instance of encompassing trends such as Indianization and Sinification in whose milieu the Siamese elite's cultural and social identity had been forged. Uniforms and mustaches, oil portraits, and European-style villas could be seen to have had the same role as Indian silk robes, Brahmanic rituals, and Chinese architectural and decorative styles, in that they proclaimed the Bangkok court's association with a foreign civilization whose potency was manifest through trade, diplomacy, and religious preaching, as well as military might. Also to be taken into consideration is the fact that the Siamese elite, like elites in any time and place, regarded themselves as carriers of novelty. By claiming that they represented the vanguard of progress, the fifth-reign elite derived their self-esteem and, in the second place, a degree of prestige and legitimation in the global arena as well.

We come thus to the second key issue, that of agency. In examining how the monarchy's modern public image was effected, this study has placed emphasis on one historical actor in particular: King Chulalongkorn. One reason for this emphasis lies in the nature of the primary sources available (official documents, press reports, and correspondence by, and addressed to, the king). Another reason is the gap in the data which confronts the historian of Thailand even in relation to a period as late as the fifth reign. As a result of this state of things, agency tends to be ascribed to the most prominent historical figure. I do think, nonetheless, that Chulalongkorn had a precise idea of what was needed, and what was not, for him, the court, and the elite to feel and look "civilized". This, of course, does not mean that the creation of the monarchy's modern public image should be regarded as solely his accomplishment. Those among the king's many brother-administrators who had knowledge of the West and had travelled abroad; his Western-educated sons; and the many Europeans and Americans purposely hired by the government, must all be imagined as potential contributors to the reinvention of the monarchy's public image. And it is not surprising that their ideas diverged as to what would give the monarchy the requisite aura of modernity. We saw, for
instance, that the project for an imposing, Western-style throne hall met with criticism. That criticism was, as a rule, indirectly voiced (if at all) and that the king’s plans went ahead anyway seems to fall squarely within the pattern of autocracy.

It is obvious that the making of the monarchy’s modern public image was undertaken with an audience, possibly more than one, in mind. In other words, who did the Siamese modernizing elite want to impress with their prestige and lifestyle? Undoubtedly, Western rulers and public opinion were primary intended recipients. After all, the whole enterprise has been described as the appropriation by the elite of what were deemed to be the appropriate trappings of civilization according to the notion of it upheld by the dominant classes in Europe. But, as I have endeavoured to argue, this modern public image affected the self as much as the external perception of the Siamese royalty as civilized individuals and enlightened rulers. What I am suggesting is that Chulalongkorn and the elite contemplated themselves in their new clothes, their new mansions and new urban space, and ended up convincing themselves, above all, of being modern. For this reason, it would be misleading to consider the process I examined in this study simply as “repackaging”, a mere camouflage employed by the monarchy to manipulate the threatening colonial powers. Instead, I proposed that a redefinition of the social identity of the Siamese elite took place in a way that made it possible for them to claim a role as the country’s legitimate ruling class in the international arena.

The imposing and carefully orchestrated public celebrations which were held in the final years of the fifth reign add Siam to the list of those countries that were struck by a fever for spectacles of power in the period 1870-1914. Hobsbawm’s contention, in reference to Europe, that monarchical rhetoric in the last quarter of the nineteenth century “made the ruler the focus of his people or peoples’ unity, the symbolic representative of the country’s greatness and glory, of its entire past and continuity with a changing present”,\(^2\) can equally be applied to Chulalongkorn by the time he had celebrated his fortieth anniversary of reign in 1908. In this connection, a third kind of public comes to the fore, the common

people (ratsadon), defined here largely as those living in Bangkok. The formation by the latter years of the fifth reign of what Hobsbawm calls "the growing armies of the state’s employees and the growing captive public of schoolchildren", together with the development of urban transport and infrastructure that facilitated mobility, gave a new resonance to the Siamese theatre of power. Admittedly, the change might not have been to the monarchy’s long-term advantage, given the loss of authority this institution suffered in the following reign. But I would regard the study of how the image of the monarchy became tarnished from the 1910s onward as someone else’s task.

Finally, I should like to draw once again attention to the usefulness of Carol Breckenridge’s concept of the Victorian ecumene and to her intuition that the spread of nationalism in the late nineteenth century was paralleled by the emergence of a global, cosmopolitan elite united by common tastes, lifestyles, and rites of self-glorification. There is no better example of the cosmopolitan strand of the Thai elite than the present sovereign himself, born in Massachusetts to a son of Chulalongkorn studying there for his medical specialization, raised and educated in Switzerland, and a resident of Thailand only since the age of twenty-four. It is tempting to go still further and highlight the similarities in the way the monarchy reinvented itself at the turn of the century and the way in which King Bhumibol and his advisers have carried into effect the impressive monarchical revival witnessed in Thailand in the past four decades.

One could note, for instance, that one of the first acts designed to refurbish the public image of the Thai monarchy was a seven-month state visit to Europe and the United States of America which King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit undertook in 1960. In similar fashion, the ephemeral arches erected along Ratcha Damnoen for the king’s Golden Jubilee in 1996, more than just marking this festive event, represented a direct historical reference to Rama V’s own jubilee -- even though they seemed both smaller and less accomplished than the arches erected in 1908. Bhumibol has also followed in Chulalongkorn’s footsteps in that they are

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3 Ibid., pp. 263-64.

4 The King of Thailand in World Focus (Bangkok: The Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, 1988), Chs 1-2.
the only Thai kings who had the appellation of "great" (maharat) applied in their lifetime -- an appellation which, albeit redolent of the Buddhist cosmological concept of "universal ruler", is itself emblematic of the project of boosting the prestige of the Siamese monarch in the global arena by refashioning his image along the line of the Western regal tradition.  

Of course, one must be careful in pushing the parallels between King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol, avidly promoted by contemporary royal image-makers, too far. Whereas the former was an unapologetic autocrat who controlled every aspect of government, the latter is a constitutional monarch whose authority, though considerable, derives largely from his symbolic capital. On the other hand, in a world in which only a handful of crowned heads are left to celebrate their weddings, jubilees, and funerals, televised domestically and worldwide, King Bhumibol's visibility seems comparatively less remarkable than Chulalongkorn's, who emerged at a time when the world's royal population was considerably larger and the mass media were still at an embryonic stage. Indeed, the Thai media's thirst for Chulalongkorn today is, in a sense, compensation for the lacunae in representation due to the state of technology in his own time. One could even go as far as proposing that the dyarchy that characterized the Siamese monarchical institution for most of the nineteenth century, with two kings simultaneously holding sway in Bangkok, has reproduced itself today in a peculiar fashion. Both Chulalongkorn and Bhumibol are loved and respected, and even worshipped by some. And unlike the times of the "first" and "second king", they are not a threat to each other. But they may make the heir to the throne toss in his sleep.

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5 Narai of Ayutthaya, the only other Thai king honoured with the appellation of maharat, was a posthumous beneficiary of this upgrading of royal titles, and the fact that he was a contemporary of Louis XIV may have been not extraneous to the granting of this honorific title.
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