SPECIAL ISSUE: SIAMESE MODERNITIES AND THE COLONIAL WEST

Edited by Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson

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Introduction: Siam's/Thailand's constructions of modernity under the influence of the colonial West[1]

The good, the bad and the ugly

As Thanes Wongyannava remarks elsewhere in this issue, Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) captivated Thai cinema audiences, as did other Spaghetti Westerns of the time (Figures 1–3). The film was released under the Thai title *Meu peun phet tat phet II* (literally

[1] Some elements of this essay are adapted from sections of the introduction to our forthcoming (2010) volume, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (see Harrison, 'The allure of ambiguity: the West and the making of Thai identities', pp 1–36). We would like to thank the contributors to this special issue of *South East Asia Research* for their participation and generous cooperation in making this related volume possible; and Janit Feangfu and Chusak Pattarakulvanit for comments on earlier versions of this introductory essay. Thanks also to John Edmondson for his support and interest in the wider project and his remarks on Victorian literature, which have enabled a more informed comparative perspective to be taken up in this paper.

Figure 1. Thai 'cowgirls' [*khoban*] featured in Anake Nawigamune, *Poet kru phap kao*. *Source:* undated, from *Photos from the Olden Days*, Saithan, Bangkok, p 57.

Figure 2. Scene from the Thai '*Tom Yam* Western', *Fathalaijone* [*Tears of the Black Tiger*], dir Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000, picturing the cowboy hero, Seua Dam [The Black Tiger].

Figure 3. Poster advertising the release in Thailand of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* under the title *Meu peun phet tat phet II*.

The Diamond-Cuts-Diamond Gunman, II), echoing one of the most popular ever Thai action flicks, *Phet tat phet*, which starred the iconic Thai cinema duo Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat.[2]

Thanes's observation speaks directly to themes that run throughout this issue of *South East Asia Research*: the consumption, appropriation, adaptation and reinvention of aspects of European and North American culture by Siam/Thailand[3] and the questions of cultural authenticity and hybridity that this allegedly 'happy history' of cultural larceny evokes.

This special issue, 'Siamese modernities and the colonial West', focuses on the ambivalences and ambiguities of agency and subordination that pervade the impact of the colonial West on Thai history, culture and socio-political development. The papers by Thanet Aphornsuvan and Thanapol Limapichart draw on the relationship (a fundamental term for this issue) established between Western missionaries and the Bangkok elite in the latter half of the nineteenth century, under the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r 1851–68). Crucially, rather than adopting a one-dimensional view of these processes of encounter, Thanet's paper examines 'the interactions that occurred *between* Westerners and the Siamese elite in their working engagements with each other'. As Thanet himself defines it, the key focus of his paper is to consider 'the *processes of modernization*' that took place in this period, spurred on by the presence of these strange *farang*.[4] As Thanet explains, it was difficult for the Siamese to understand why the *farang* might want to leave their own country and travel elsewhere when all was well at home – for the Thai, travel to faraway

[2] *Phet tat phet* (dir Khunawut Phankham and Prakob Kaewprasert, 1966), though literally meaning 'diamond cuts diamond', took the English title *Operation Bangkok*. For a further discussion of the action genre of Mit Chaibancha and his female co-star Petchara, see Harrison (forthcoming). Mit died an untimely death in 1970 while filming a stunt from a helicopter. The hybrid nature of the Thai cowboy genre – the 'Tom Yam Western' – is examined with reference to *Fathalaijone* [*Tears of the Black Tiger*] in Harrison (2007).

[3] The term 'Siam/Thailand' is used here to accommodate the country's change of name in 1939 from Siam to Thailand, the compound term referring to processes that have been continuous across the modern era from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

[4] The Thai term *farang* refers literally to a 'white person' or Caucasian, though it emerges more broadly as a reference to the West, Western peoples and objects of Western origin. Glossed in *Hobson-Jobson* (Yule and Burnell, 1903, pp 352–354), the cognate word *Firinghee* is noted to have derived from the Farsi: *Farangi* or *Firingi* and the Arabic: *Al-Faranj, Ifranji* or *Firanji*, referring to a Frank. The term reached Siam via Arabic- and Farsi-speaking traders.

places was, at least until the 1850s, largely for the purpose of paying respect to sacred religious sites, such as those housing Buddha relics.

Both Thanet and Thanapol explore 'the good, the bad and the ugly' dimensions of missionary activities at court and in the wider public sphere of the day, as perceived by Siamese eyes. In Thanapol's chosen emphasis on the Siamese public sphere, it becomes evident that the public sphere emerged from a series of historical events related to Siam's encounters with the colonial West: the advent of print technology, initially introduced by the American Presbyterian missionary Dr Dan Beach Bradley in 1935; the signing of trade treaties, such as those with Britain under Bowring in 1855; and the subsequent introduction of extraterritoriality clauses. As a result, both Thanapol and Thanet acknowledge the centrality of power as a fundamental mediating factor in the interaction between the Siamese and the *farang*, set as it was amid the rising presence of Britain and France as strategic colonial forces in the region.

Sud Chonchirdsin takes up an associated theme in his exploration of the relationship established with Europe by Mongkut's son and successor, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r 1868–1910) – a relationship inflected by colonial power and consistently framed by the potency of acquisition and consumption. Sud discusses not only the Siamese monarchical responses to the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of Europe and its people that Chulalongkorn encountered on his lengthy visits in 1897 and 1907, but also, with reference to Peleggi (2002), notes the extensive royal shopping sprees to purchase such consumer goods as jewellery, porcelain, paintings, bronze statues, cameras, toys, rocking chairs and Venetian lace. 'The acquisition of Western objects and self-representation in Western style,' Sud observes, 'gave the king more than personal pleasure' and played a vital role in refashioning the monarchy's image as modern and civilized (see Peleggi, 2002, pp 26–27, 99, 143).

Chulalongkorn's conspicuous consumption of Italian, French and English cuisine at home and abroad is examined in Thanes Wongyannava's paper on the evolution of 'eastern spaghetti' in Thailand. Starting with a historical assessment of the place of Western food in the Thai diet, Thanes moves this special issue from its primary focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to conclude it in our contemporary period. His perusal of a rapidly globalizing Bangkok society assesses the relatively newfound love of pizza – albeit topped,

Thai-style, with fiery *tom yam kung* or *phat khi mao* and served *à l'américaine* with ketchup on the side.[5]

The further consumption of things Western by cosmopolitan Siamese society is comprehensively addressed in this collection by Thak Chaloemtiarana's analysis of the 1915 novel *Khwam mai phayabat* [*No Vendetta*], a Thai 're-invention' of Marie Corelli's popular Victorian novel *Vendetta*. Thak's paper, like Thanet's, places the topic of Siamese modernity centre stage among its concerns. (Thanet's title, 'The West and Siam's quest for modernity', provides an apposite allusion to Thongchai Winichakul's seminal article in this field, 'The quest for "siwilai"' – see Thongchai, 2000).

It is in connection with the overarching focus on Siamese relations with the West, and their allegedly 'civilizing' influences, and on the Siamese response to their effects, that each paper in this special issue addresses, explicitly or implicitly, the topic of Siamese modernities. As Thak notes, modernity in Siam is commonly associated with an appropriation of advancements made in the West, and the general discourse on modernity [*khwam than samai* or *khwam samai mai*] in Thai is closely related to 'the Thai obsession with *khwam jaroen*, or "prosperity and progress" ' reflected in the material well-being so often derived from the adoption of Western technologies. Thak's discussion of *Khwam mai phayabat* focuses therefore on the novel's cautionary condemnation of an early twentieth-century Bangkok high society, considered too Westernized for its own good and careering recklessly away from traditional values towards the dangerously alluring forms of modernity imported from overseas.

All the articles assembled here form a specific contribution to our wider collaborative research project on 'The ambiguous allure of the West: power, aesthetics and the making of Thai identities, from 1850 to the present'. With the exception of Thanapol's paper, which was completed later, each article was originally presented at a workshop on 'The Ambiguous Allure of the West', kindly hosted and part-funded by the Southeast Asia Program of Cornell University, under the directorship of Thak Chaloemtiarana in November 2004. We are grate-

[5] *Tom yam* is a spicy herbal soup, normally made with prawn, lemongrass, lime leaves and galangal, which has acquired the status of a primary national dish. It is therefore deployed as the Thai title of the sequel to the internationally successful kick-boxing blockbuster *Ong Bak* (dir Prachya Pinkaew, 2003). *Tom Yam Kung* (dir Prachya Pinkaew, 2005) was largely set in Sydney. *Phat khi mao*, as Thanes explains, is a spicy, stir-fried meat dish favoured by heavy drinkers [*khi mao*].

ful to the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell, to the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and to the British Academy for their generous financial support of the project, of which this special issue forms an integral part.

Taken together, the papers presented in this issue serve to make it indeed special among English-language studies of Thailand in that it combines five Thai voices on the questions of Western influences in the modernization of the country. The Thai contributors provide distinctive perspectives to a field in which British, American, Australian, Canadian and other scholars who are native English speakers, including ourselves as editors, have long represented Thai culture and history to the world. As such, this collection of essays internationalizes Thai historical and cultural studies by providing an opportunity for five Thai scholars who have an intimate knowledge of and deep familiarity with the Western academy to contribute to the dialogue on how we should understand Siam/Thailand's position in a world order that has been dominated by Western powers since the nineteenth century.

Deconstructing Damrong: cultures of borrowing and the question of 'authenticity'

Returning to Thanes's discussion of the Spaghetti Western, his observations on authenticity have wider implications for the subject of Siamese modernities and the colonial West. American Westerns, Thanes points out, might in some sense be considered 'authentic' examples of US culture because the genre was 'the one type of film in which Hollywood could claim originality and "Americanness"'. But in fact, the Western has subsequently been recreated in many parts of the world, producing 'inauthentic' or 'alien' local versions, variously labelled, according to national cuisines, as 'Sauerkraut', 'Paella', 'Camembert', 'Chop Suey' and 'Curry'.

One central question posed by this special issue, and by the broader research project mentioned above, is the matter of what constitutes the 'authentic' and the 'inauthentic' *vis-à-vis* official constructions of Thai cultural identity by the Thai state, which have been passed down to its citizenry to absorb and adopt. And how is this 'authenticity' interwoven with the assimilation, hybridity and adaptation implicit in Siam/Thailand's cultural contact with, for the purposes of this issue, the

colonial West?[6] Thanes draws our attention to the banner of one Italian restaurant in Bangkok, specifically advertising 'Italian Food with Thai Flavour'. His assertion that Thai diners' judgments of foreign cuisines are not concerned with issues of authenticity might arguably be extended to refer to wider cultural spheres; and this assumption is supported by his quotation of fellow Thammasat University lecturer S. Tsow: 'ingenuity and adaptation are essential components of the Thai character'. This statement strikes an important, if dubious, chord. The characterization of Thai culture as one that is adept in extensive borrowing, copying and adapting – the unabashed culture of *lak witthaya*, or 'stealing (practical) knowledge' referred to by both Thak and Thanapol in their contributions – has long been officially sanctioned and widely approved by Thais, as well as by outsiders with a commitment to the field.

Illustrations of this assumed cultural feature are not difficult to find by way of example. In a conference paper readily available on the Internet through Chulalongkorn University's Website, Faculty of Education lecturer Ampai Tiranasar remarks (2004, p 8) with reference to Sanit Smuckarn (1991), Suttinee Kesten (1988) and the National Identity Board of Thailand (2000), that: 'Thais are highly adaptive and pragmatic […] and can be quick to adopt new ideas. For example, the adoption of foreign culture as in foreign foods [...] The characteristic that is deep rooted in many aspects of the life of Thai people is a habit of imitation.' (Ampai, 2004, p 8)[7]

[6] As with the broader AHRC research project on *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*, this issue limits itself to discussions of Siam/Thailand's cultural interactions with Western Europe and North America, despite our recognition and acknowledgment of the intellectual validity of looking at additional cultural Others – most notably China and the diasporic Chinese – as a continuously shaping force in the structuring of Thai identities. As we explain in Harrison and Jackson (2010), our chosen emphasis on the West derives from a number of assumptions – most notably, as the contributors to this special issue observe, that since the mid-nineteenth century the West has represented a privileged Other in the Thai imagination. While the reign of King Mongkut saw the consolidation of links with Britain through the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, it simultaneously marked the decline of Chinese influence in Siam following the defeat of China by the British in the Opium Wars in 1842. And over the next 45 years, following the despatch of its final tributary mission to China in 1854, Siam contrastingly signed so-called treaties of 'amity and free trade' with 13 other Western powers, as well as with Japan.

[7] Ampai further notes that an officially sponsored 'enhancement of Thai Identity' commenced in 1976 under the premiership of Tanin Kraivixien, to 'promote awareness of cultural heritage and pride in being Thai on the part of the people, particularly children and youth' (Ampai, 2004, p 2). In addition to the dissemination of the royal speeches, information on royal activities, and development projects, the campaign

The stereotype is duly transferred to non-Thai perceptions of Thai culture, as expressed by the freelance writer and long-term expatriate resident in Thailand, Philip Cornwel-Smith, in his colourful study of popular culture, *Very Thai* (2005). Cornwel-Smith quotes 'Siamologist' Niels Mulder as providing the academic assessment of the Thai 'cultural personality': 'Eclectic borrowing, temporization, adaptive skill, and pragmatism are the very flavour of the Thai cultural genius […] They trust their own ways; meanwhile they are not shy to incorporate whatever is perceived as useful or attractive.' (Mulder, in Cornwel-Smith, 2005, p 11)

The notion to which Mulder alludes, that Thais are somehow distinctive in trusting their 'own ways' while at the same time incorporating 'whatever is perceived as useful or attractive' (a feature of Thai uniqueness that pervades many studies of the country's culture) is in part symptomatic of the field's relative isolation from the vital tool of comparative analysis.

Thai anthropologist Sanit Smuckarn reiterates the alleged exceptionality of this cultural feature via a pointed use of the term 'cultural phenomenon' [*prakotakan thang watthanatham*] in his definition of Thai culture's primary feature as 'highly adaptive' [*mi khwam samat nai kan prap tua sung*]: 'Thai culture has been mixed with many other cultures and this is a very important cultural phenomenon which one might refer to as the "cultural genius" of Thais, a genius which has made a small-scale society such as that of Thailand, enduring and resilient to this day' (Sanit, 1991, p 80). (Although this passage has been translated from the Thai original, Sanit himself uses the English expression 'cultural genius'.)

To view Sanit's reflections through a different optic, it is worth contrasting them with Edward Said's broader observation that '*all* cultures are involved in one another; *none* is single and pure, *all* are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic' (1993, p xxix, emphasis added). As Said (1993, p 15) goes on to point out, 'Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more "foreign" elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude'.

included 'educational' programmes such as *Yu yang thai* [How to live as a Thai]. In 1977, the National Identity Board was established under the Prime Minister's Office 'to inform the public about royal activities and development projects; outstanding and positive features of Thailand and its people; positive role of religion in the country's social development' (Ampai, 2004, p 2).

Julia Kristeva's observation of intertextuality, devised in the context of her work on semiotics and literature, resonates here too for a broader understanding of cultural evolution and heterogeneity (though strictly speaking this does not equate directly with literary allusion and/or conscious quotation). As Allen (2005, p 1) defines it: 'no text, much as it might like to appear so, is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts. These in turn condition its meaning; the text is an intervention in a cultural system.'

Accordingly, although Braginsky (1996 and 2000), with reference to South East Asia, emphasizes that extensive cultural borrowing was certainly common across the region, it cannot truly be considered distinctive from the rest of the world in its propensity for the assimilation of external influence. Buruma and Margalit provide examples of similar practice in Japan's Meiji period (1868–1912), when everything Western, from natural science to literary realism, was, as they describe it, 'hungrily soaked up by Japanese intellectuals. European dress, Prussian constitutional law, British naval strategies, German philosophy, American cinema, French architecture, and much, much more' (Buruma and Margalit, 2005, pp 3–4).

Similarly, Roman influences shaped 'British' culture during the Roman occupation of Britain (43–410 CE), as archaeologist Francis Pryor (2005) has shown. It was under the Romans that the Britons accepted Christianity in place of, or alongside, pre-existing pagan beliefs. From the sixth century onwards, Roman cultural authority was remoulded by waves of invasion by the Angles, Saxons, Vikings and Normans, each bringing with them new patterns of cultural belief to be accepted or rejected in differing degree.

Furthermore, Said provides useful instances of parallel hybridities in cultural evolution with reference to Greek civilization, with its roots in Egyptian, Semitic and various other southern and eastern cultures (Said, 1993, p 16). It is because of such processes of continual adaptation and flux that 'national' cultural features defy easy characterization and resist attempts to confine them as static. Taking account of Said's assessment, Thai culture can be seen as, true enough, syncretic, heterogeneous and hybrid – but not necessarily more so than its global neighbours, or exclusively so. The logical conclusion of this assertion is to render spurious the concept of 'authenticity' in connection with discussions of Thai cultural characteristics, as with the characteristics of any national culture. This view is echoed by Morris in her work on

modernity in northern Thailand when she argues against 'the postulation of a unified Thai authenticity as anything but the product of nationalist culturalist politics'(Morris, 2000, p 242). And it finds philosophical resonance with Butler's rejection in *Gender Trouble* (1990) of the possibility of an 'authentic' expression of gender followed by a deficient copy.

If such is the case, what are the origins of these widely held notions of Thai culture as one authenticated by its propensity for absorption and assimilation? The answer appears to lie in the era in which Siam felt itself to be under threat of excessive influence from the colonial West, at the close of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth – the time frame with which this special issue is principally concerned.

The construction of a notion of Thai identity or 'Thainess' [*khwam pen thai*] as typified by the act of borrowing can be dated back at least to Prince Damrong Rachanuphap (1862–1943), 'The Father of Thai History' and younger brother of Chulalongkorn. In a speech given at the Society for University Lecturers [*Samakkhayajan samakhom*] on 8 October 1927, Damrong officially proclaimed the three key qualities of Thai identity, as he imagined them: 'A dedication to national freedom [*itsara khorng chat*]; tolerance; and *an acuity in assimilation* [*prasan-prayote*]' (quoted in Saichon Sattayanurak, 2003, p 115, emphasis added). Moreover, in his early-twentieth-century attempts to project the notion of a constant Thai national character back in time, he observed that throughout history, 'The Tai knew how to pick and choose. When they saw some good feature in the culture of other peoples, if it was not in conflict with their own interests, they did not hesitate to borrow it and adapt it to their own requirements.' (quoted in Peleggi, 2002, p 12)

As noted above, the features that Damrong claims for Thainess have their roots, hypothetically, in history and have persisted into present-day cultural stereotypes, exemplified in the writing of both Thai nationals and outside observers. Sanit's contemporary summary of the 'three main features of Thai culture' [*laksana den khorng watthanatham thai thi samkhan*], as he sees them, bears a similarity to Damrong's earlier delineation: to be 'highly adaptive' [*mi khwam samat nai kan prap tua sung*]; to be 'highly flexible' [*mi khwam yeut yun sung*]; and to hold an unswerving conviction in Thainess [*mi khwam yeut man nai khwam pen thai yang niaw naen*] (Sanit, 1991, pp 79–81). Furthermore, Sanit links the first feature, adaptability, with the notion of historical conti-

nuity: 'Thai culture is an old culture, dating back over 1,000 years, and it has long adapted to the changing environment, hence becoming extremely adept at doing so. This is the reason why Thai society survives and has preserved its independence [*khrorng khwam pen ekkarat*].' (Sanit 1991, p 78) Significantly, Sanit's assessment speaks to a discourse of sovereign survival.

To understand the construction at play in these pervasive discourses of Thai cultural identity, a return to Said's work on *Culture and Imperialism* offers telling parallels from other parts of the world, as do citations of historian Eric Hobsbawm's cultural analyses in *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2009 [1983]). What is outlined above in the 'invention' and maintenance of a Thai cultural tradition proves, in fact, to be unremarkable in comparison with the formation of many other national cultures: most assimilate external influences, and do so with agency, selecting those that resonate and inspire, while rejecting those that do not. As Said notes (1993, p 15):

> 'As the twentieth century moves to a close, there has been a gathering awareness nearly everywhere of the lines between cultures, the divisions and differences that not only allow us to discriminate one culture from another, but also enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote.
>
> There is in all nationally defined cultures, I believe, an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance.'

With the effect of reversing the Thai appropriation of syncretism as a defining marker of its cultural identity, Said's discussion (1993, p 16) of Greek and European culture reveals how cultural representations were massaged in the nineteenth century to erase unwelcome aspects and recreate an alternative national image.

Hobsbawm further demonstrates that, just as cultural features can be erased, depending on the requirements of different politico-historical moments, they can also be invented, so that they assume an air of longevity, continuity and resilience. He illustrates this point with a critical reference to 'British culture':

> 'Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past,

> than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet […] in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. […] "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2009, p 1)

Hobsbawm defines such 'invented tradition' according to three overlapping types:

> 'a) those 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 and Ranger, 2009, p 9)

In the case of Siam at the height of its relations with the colonial West, the second of these categories would appear to be the most apposite.

Following the political thrust of Hobsbawm's critique of cultural 'invention', the culture of borrowing, redefined as a distinctive and unique 'culture of Thai borrowing', was arguably constructed by the Bangkok elite for political reasons, to legitimize the position it adopted *vis-à-vis* relations with the West. Appropriating this feature as an act of 'Thainess' consequently justified the extensive voluntary appropriation of Westernness, from the acquisition of Western material goods, to the consumption of Western arts and cuisine, to the adoption of Western science and technologies, including, as Thanapol notes in this issue, medicine, astronomy, geography, shipbuilding and printing (and all these aspects of the agential assumption of attributes from the West are extensively observed in the papers in this collection). 'Thai borrowing' was defined as such through direct association with the will to political survival and national sovereignty – and hence was closely informed by a particular historical context of negotiating the influence of the colonial West. Sanit makes this apparent in his discussion of 'Thai flexibility' (1991, p 80):

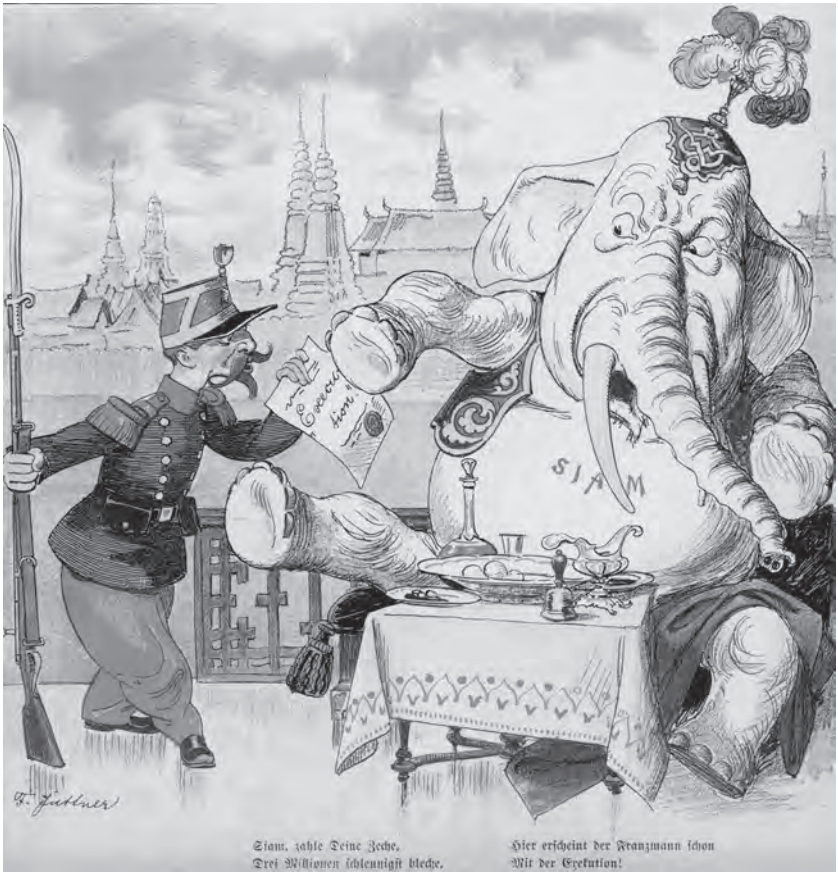

Figure 4. Cartoon of Siam ceding territory to the French, 1893.

> 'We have the saying that in order to support the country in its survival (*janlong hai yu rort*) then it has to know how to bend with the wind (*lu tam lom*) like a giant reed in a storm which therefore does not break […] Thai people's knowledge of how to negotiate […] made Thai society able to survive the danger of Western colonial endeavour, whereas all our neighbours were colonized by Europe and America.'

From this perspective, 'Thai flexibility' is constructed as a political

survival strategy to fend off potential colonization, and was spearheaded by the elite in the dissemination of a wider understanding of 'Thainess'. Announced as a shrewd assertion of independence in the face of perceived colonial threat, the ruling elite purportedly deployed the tactic of 'donning the (Western) wolf's clothing' to conceal fears of falling victim as the (Siamese) lamb (see Figure 5).[8]

But, as several scholars have argued in the wake of Udom Srisuwan's seminal 1950 text *Thai keung-meuang-kheun* [*Thailand, A Semicolony*], Siam was in several senses informally colonized (see, for example, Anderson, 1978; Thongchai, 2000; Kasian, 2001; Herzfeld, 2002; Hong, 2003 and 2004; Jackson, 2004b and 2010; Loos, 2006 and 2010; and Thanapol in this issue). A series of trading treaties in the wake of that signed with Britain under Sir John Bowring in 1855 established colonial-style economic relations between Siam and the West and imposed terms of extraterritoriality, and, as Thanapol further elucidates here, Siam's territorial boundary was crucially determined by the French and British, particularly in the last few decades of King Chulalongkorn's reign. This influence was epitomized by the cession of territories to the French in 1893 (see Figure 4).

Viewed through this lens, Siam looks like a colony. In fact, the adoption and adaptation of aspects of Western culture, such as literature, during and after this period, differ very little if at all from those of its directly colonized neighbours. In the early twentieth century, the Burmese, the Javanese and the Sumatrans, for example, were as captivated by *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* as were their Siamese contemporaries – and each created their own translations, reinventions or rewrites of these alluring tales (see Figure 6).[9]

In this sense, then, Siam can be understood as semi- or, as Herzfeld (2002) terms it, crypto-colonial. In particular, the imposition of extraterritoriality caused a sense of both grievance and anxiety among the

[8] The analogy is drawn by Thai public intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa in his newspaper article 'Siam fought off the "wolves" by donning their "clothing"', *The Nation*, 27 April 1998, p C6. His comparison evolves from the 1893 caricature that appeared in the British magazine *Punch*, depicting a French wolf braced on the eastern banks of the Mekhong River and towering over a vulnerable Siamese lamb on the opposite side. The illustration appears on the cover of Patrick Tuck's (1995) *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858–1907*, White Lotus, Bangkok.

[9] For further details on the impact of these literary texts on colonial Indonesia, see Doris Jedamski, 1995, 2002 and 2009 (forthcoming), and for a more detailed discussion of their impact in Siam, see Harrison, 2009 (forthcoming).

Figure 5. King Chulalongkorn at the reception given in his honour at the Siamese Legation, Ashburn Place, South Kensington, London.
Source: Illustrated London News, 14 Aug 1897. Copyright Mary Evans Picture Library/ Illustrated London News.

Figure 6. *Khwam phayabat*, the Thai translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*, by 'Mae Wan' (pseudonym) or *Phraya Surintharacha*, also known as *Nok Yung* or 'Peacock': hence the cover design.

Siamese ruling elite, as Thanapol exemplifies in this issue (see also Hong, 2003 and 2004). Extraterritoriality made it difficult to confine and contain the *farang* and made explicit and tangible the effects of Western colonial power in Siam.[10] Further to Thanapol's analysis, note the extent of the negotiations that (allegedly) took place, according to Anna Leonowens in her semi-autobiographical tale of *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), between Leonowens and King Mongkut over where she should reside as governess to his children – in the palace (his command) or in a house of her own (her request). The impasse is fully explored in Margaret Landon's play of Leonowens's memoir and in the 1946 and 1956 film versions of the story, *Anna and the King of Siam* and *The King and I* respectively.

The imposition of extraterritoriality caused perhaps the most negative sentiments provoked by disempowerment in the face of the *farang*. Arguably, it brought the Siamese closest to the experience of disconcertedness, something akin to that which Kristeva (1991, p 1) explores regarding the concept of the foreigner in European cultures: 'Strangely, the foreigner lives with us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder'.

Despite these distasteful aspects of contact with the colonial West, however, Siam was not simply exposed, victim-like, to imperial expansion – and by the close of the nineteenth century the alleged menace to Siamese national integrity had receded. Carefully capturing the nuanced position Siam occupied in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Tamara Loos locates it 'at the crossroads of colonized countries and sovereign, imperial powers, sharing some of the traits of both but reducible to neither' (Loos, 2006, p 21). In what she labels an 'imperialist colony', Loos (2010) goes on to highlight some of the aggrandizing activities of Siam's rulers. She comments on the highly agential and imitative relationship built with the West by Siam's ruling elite, marked – and this is crucial – not by a sense of inferiority, but by spirited aspirations to equality. Each of the contributors to this issue reminds us (as do Thongchai, 2000; Kasian, 2001; Peleggi, 2002; and Jackson, 2010) how the elite voluntarily adopted and adapted models of legitimizing power from the West, because there were gains to be had from

[10] As Kristeva (1991, p 54) generalizes in her study of the foreigner within, 'When business is booming and merchants sweep into ports, when tourism develops and people travel out of intellectual curiosity, […] one feels the need to confine foreigners'.

doing so (for it proved possible to deploy the 'good' aspects of what the colonial West had to offer in the extension of local control).

Thanet in particular deals extensively with this major theme of elite power and its hold on the construction of culture. His argument is that, because 'Western knowledge and science were adopted mainly by the royal elite together with a small group of high-ranking nobles, the choices and growth of modern ideas and practices were curtailed to suit the purposes of the elite and did not expand to those of the wider populace'. His subsequent remarks are worth quoting in full:

> 'For the elite, Western borrowings were intended as an adornment of its existing status, and served as powerful symbols in the Siamese mind. Once they were sure of their political power, the elite exercised their liberty and authority in selecting that which they liked from the West, while rejecting that about which they felt self-confident and wanted therefore to preserve, in opposition to the West. The modern practices that were later imitated in fragmented form and content by the common people troubled the royal elite because of what they perceived as a lack of taste and as the "un-Thainess" of such behaviours.'

Thanapol's paper methodically details the Bangkok elite's attempt to maintain a hold on power, frustrated though it sometimes was by the development of a public sphere over which it held diminishing control. The use of newspapers post-Bradley as a central medium for this newly emerging public sphere opened up a space in which the Siamese elite no longer had a monopoly on power, given that all newspapers of the period were published by *farangs*. It did not take the ruling elite long, however, to realize that one option they had was to enter this new space themselves to engage in discursive contestation, in an attempt to re-establish their authority.

Not only did the Bangkok rulers attempt to assert control over the new area of the public sphere, but they also adopted Western colonial strategies to extend their influence in Siam's outlying regions, most notably, as Loos (2006 and 2010) illustrates, in the provinces of the deep south. As she notes (2010, p 85),

> '[I]t was a pre-emptive policy – to prevent unrest that might invite Western imperial intrigue – based on what King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong, *Chao Phraya* Yomarat (Pan Sukhum) and others saw in

> colonial states on their borders. It is not a coincidence that Siam's legal reforms in the south look like those initiated by the colonial governments of the Netherlands East Indies, British India, British Burma and the British Malay states. Each of these states had received at least one visit by King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong, or *Chao Phraya* Yomarat, to observe the administration of justice among other things.'

Viewed in this light, Loos (2010, p 75) concludes, 'Siam resembles an imperial nation that instituted within its territory forms of European colonial modernity'.

Sud's contribution to this issue occasionally reiterates this position. He provides evidence of the enticing attractions of imperial power in operation in his detailed discussion of the visits of King Chulalongkorn in the early years of his reign to Singapore, British India and Java. As Sud remarks with reference to the second royal visit to Java in 1896, the King observed the benefits of dressing 'in Western style clothes because the local people are so scared of Westerners. *They efficiently control the locals*. The people in Java always sit on the floor when they come across Westerners, regardless of the latter's social status' (emphasis added).

The definition of these acts of assimilation as 'Thai' hence associated themselves with a will to power, perhaps more ambiguously coupled with a desire for the Other that is discussed in further detail below. The Thai-ification of this integration serves therefore to mask the pleasure taken in consuming the West by deliberately defining this very consumption as a demonstrable act of Thainess.

However, while adopting what it saw as the 'good' and useful aspects of *farang* culture to serve its own ends, the elite was naturally troubled by the 'bad' and the 'ugly'. The increased Westernization of Siam/Thailand was a catalyst for the introduction of new modernities, of which there were several undesirable aspects. As Hobsbawm (2009 [1983], p 2) notes with reference to Europe, 'It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the "invention of tradition" so interesting'. In Siam, invention around this theme was driven by the potential modernity that was seen to be held responsible for causing cultural chaos and (sexual) decadence. The need for a clear, if imagined, definition of what lay at the immutably 'Thai' (moral) core was therefore reinforced in the recourse to 'tradition'.

At the root of anxieties concerning the encounter with a modernity incited by intensified contact with the West lay the very questions that this encounter raised about Siam's place in a changing world order, and the expression of this relative position in geographical terms. As Thanet elucidates in the section of his paper on 'The changing Siamese world view', prior to the Bangkok era (from 1782), the Siamese Buddhist cosmology of the *Traiphum* situated Siam at the centre of the world, surrounded by other countries and nations. This perceived location persisted into the nineteenth century and even when, as Thanet goes on to point out, Siamese painters defined certain areas according to the modern Western map, they still did not relocate Siam accordingly. Again this is humorously, and condescendingly, alluded to in the two films based on Leonowens's 'memoirs' – *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946) and *The King and I* (1956). In both films, the young princes and princesses under Anna's tutelage find it an affront to Siamese dignity to recognize the layout of the modern map of South East Asia that she teaches them. This cinematic depiction surely draws its parody from an anachronism, given Thanet's assertion that, by the reign of King Rama II (r 1809–24), 'it was common knowledge among educated people that Siam was not the centre of the world and that there were real countries, mountains, seas, and various ethnic groups with different languages inhabiting the entire globe'. Yet the newer version of the modern world that came to replace the resistant mindset to which Thanet alludes, and which provoked an alteration of the elite gaze on Siam's place within it, cannot have emerged without the anxiety invariably linked to necessary change – especially since it concerned a reassessment of 'self'-image in light of the reframed geographical assertiveness of the Other.

The significance of geography and modernity as a source of some anxiety resurface in Thak's study here of Khru Liam's *Khwam mai phayabat*. The novelist's account of crossing the canal from the rural periphery to Bangkok embodies, as Thak indicates, the transformation from a pristine and relatively virtuous traditional Thai life to the modern and corrupted hedonism that is represented by the city. It is epitomized in the depiction of a raucous dinner party, complete with alcoholic excess, *farang* sausage, ice cream, jelly, and surplus condoms. Thak summarizes the novelist's attitude to the new, Westernized Siam as follows: 'With modernity come opportunities for infidelity, for perverted sexual behaviour and for the exploitation of women'.

In addition to the anxieties provoked by budding modernity (anxie-

ties that arguably persist into the present on the evidence of studies, for example, of Thai literary or cinematic works), deeply contradictory levels of concern and underlying ambiguities coloured Siam/Thailand's shaping of its own national cultural identity in relationship to the colonial West. Note the references that Sud makes here to Chulalongkorn's fears that the young princes sent to Europe for their education might become too Westernized. He reminded them to concentrate on gaining the knowledge they needed to make their own country a better place, and not to become mimics of Englishmen.

Certainly, the 'anxiety of influence' (cf Bloom, 1975), kindled by exposure to the colonial motherlands, does seem to have been keenly experienced by Chulalongkorn's son and heir apparent, Vajiravudh (later King Rama VI, r 1910–25), who began his schooling in England in 1893. Having studied at Eton, at Oxford and with the Durham Light Infantry, Vajiravudh went on to adapt traditional Thai dance drama [*lakhorn*] into Western-style spoken theatre [*lakhorn phut*]; to translate several works by Shakespeare into Thai; to cast himself in the role of Scheherazade in his own revision of *The Arabian Nights*; and to earn the accolade of the 'father of Thai detective fiction', thanks to an avid interest in re-scripting *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Nevertheless, at the end of his studies in Britain, the crown prince trenchantly announced to the crowd gathered to bid him farewell at the Siamese Legation in London, 'I shall return to Siam more Siamese than when I left it' (quoted in Batson, 1984, p 14). His statement appears to indicate an over-determination to prove the 'authenticity' of his own Siameseness, despite having spent a full nine years being educated in Britain.[11]

Note too the effects of Western education on Vajiravudh's contemporary, Khru Liam, one of the first Siamese commoner students to win a scholarship to study overseas. Khru Liam's own experience of a two-year period of study in London in the mid-1890s came to a premature close as a result of nervous exhaustion. According to his biographer, Chuay Phunphoem (1990, pp 16–17), Khru Liam's excessive bookishness left him vulnerable to bullying and teasing from fellow

[11] Thanapol draws attention to one manifestation of this negative interpretation of the pervasive cultural weight of the West when he refers to the series of essays entitled 'The 10 Opinions of Asvabahu', published in 1915. The author, Vajiravudh, denounced the comments of those who argued for political and social changes based on European models as a 'cult of imitation' [*latthi ao-yang*], and criticized them for 'sacrificing their Thainess'.

Figure 7. Khru Liam as an elderly man. He died in 1963 at the age of 84.
Source: Photograph reprinted in Chuay Phunphoem, 1990, p 35.

Figure 8. Khru Liam with his peers at a former palace of Queen Elizabeth I in Enfield, Middlesex, in 1896. Khru Liam is on the far left of the picture, standing on the back row.
Source: Photograph reprinted in Chuay Phunphoem, 1990, p 12.

students. When a prankster threw a cloth over the light he was reading by one night, he allegedly suffered a serious panic attack, which then developed into a chronic condition. Having completed his course with first-class results, he promptly returned to Bangkok where he purportedly continued in fragile psychological health for much of his long life[12] (see Figures 7 and 8).

In his paper on Khru Liam in this issue, Thak discusses literary plagiarism [*lak witthaya*] as part of his assertion of the lack of anxiety exhibited by Thai authors *vis-à-vis* their literary relations with the West. Indeed, as a study of Thai traditional literary history and painting reveals, the playful practice of 'imitation' was considered a mark of veneration rather than an indication of creative bankruptcy. The adoption of the Indian epic the *Ramayana* and the Javanese tale of *Inao* provide instances of this practice from across the wider region, and within Siam itself: for example, Thanapol notes Chulalongkorn's revision of the popular poetic tale *Wongthewarat* [*The Devaraja's Lineage*]. Incensed

[12] There is no certainty as to whether Khru Liam was mentally unstable or was victimized in the same way as others referred to by Thanapol by the device of 'dismissive criticism' cultivated by the Bangkok elite. See Thanapol in this special issue on the charges, for example, of asininity brought against K.S.R. Kulap. Parallels are also to be found in the trivializing attitudes to the late nineteenth century female poets Khun Phum and Khun Suwan, whose works were ridiculed as acts of insanity.

by the inaccuracies of the original, the king decided to compose his own version, deploying the identical title. Here 'plagiarism' was alternatively disconnected from notions of respect for the original author and instead marked, as it so often was, by mockery, satire and a display of power.

But literary plagiarism was not unique to early twentieth-century Siam. It was also rife in the literary circles of Victorian Britain from which Khru Liam and his peers drew their inspiration; nor was it practised with much apparent anxiety, but instead to great commercial gain. The early writing of Charles Dickens (1812–70), the most popular novelist of the Victorian era, suffered more plagiarism than any English literary work then or since, particularly in the form of cheap serialized novels based on his plots and characters (Schlicke, 1999, pp 456–457). As Schlicke (1999, p 459) observes, 'Even some of the imitations were imitated'.[13] The plagiarism of Dickens, as with the plagiarism of later Victorian fiction by Siamese writers, was also marked less by anxiety than by humour and profit making. As such, Dickens's writing was adapted to suit the tastes of a rapidly expanding lower-class readership; and although no exact statistics are available, some of these imitations enjoyed sales that rivalled and probably outnumbered those of Dickens's originals (Schlicke, 1999, p 457).[14]

[13] Indeed, Dickens satirizes the problems of literary plagiarism and of 'imitation' in the text of his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, as indicated by the two examples below:

> ' "Shakespeare dramatized stories which had previously appeared in print, it is true," observed Nicholas.
>
> "Meaning Bill, sir?" said the literary gentleman. "So he did. Bill was an adapter, certainly, so he was – and very well he adapted too – considering."
>
> "I was going to say," rejoined Nicholas, "that Shakespeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft at the present day, have shot very far beyond him –." ' (Dickens, 1839 [1978], chapter 48, pp 726–727)
>
> ***
>
> ' "But really I can't," returned Nicholas; "my invention is not accustomed to these demands, or possibly I might produce –"
>
> "Invention! what the devil's that got to do with it!" cried the manager, hastily.
>
> "Everything, my dear sir."
>
> "Nothing, my dear sir," retorted the manager, with evident impatience. "Do you understand French?"
>
> "Perfectly well."
>
> "Very good," said the manager, opening the table-drawer, and giving a roll of paper from it to Nicholas. "There, just turn that into English, and put your name on the title-page." ' (Dickens, 1839 [1978], chapter 23, p 371)

[14] For example, an author called 'Bos' (a play on Dickens's pseudonym Boz) published three Dickens plagiarisms, one of which, under the title *Oliver Twiss*, came out while Dickens was still publishing *Oliver Twist* in serial form (Schlicke, 1999, p 458).

Could these Thai writers possibly have plagiarized even the act of Victorian literary plagiarism, a cultural feature endemic in the Britain of their formative years and of which they would doubtless have been aware? Could the motivation for plagiarism in Britain not have been similar in early twentieth-century Siam? This is not to suggest that Thais copied Dickens – his works never attained significant popularity in Siam or among its South East Asian neighbours. But we know, as Thak relates in this special issue, that they unashamedly plagiarized popular works of the late Victorian era by writers such as Marie Corelli, Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe; just as Conan Doyle, for example, copied elements of Poe, and others, in his work.

In light of these complex interrelationships, any attempt to separate out the network of allusions in search of an ultimate origin is ultimately futile, given the constant, intertextual and derivative 'production of culture'.

The myth of the core and the subject in process[15]

Given the professed pride taken in the extensive act of cultural borrowing by the Thai, a predilection also emerged for an emphasis on a mutating cultural 'surface', as distinct from an immutable, original core. As Morris (2000, pp 201 and 210) exemplifies with reference to the enforcement of full attire in public space during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the presentation of a respectable outer appearance became important for the Siamese under the gaze of the West. Reinforcing the Lacanian contention that the subject seeks confirmation of itself in the response of the Other, Jackson's further delineation (2003) of the surface 'aestheticization' of the elite in response to *farang* criticisms of their 'uncivilized' appearance is also pertinent here. Moreover, Thai architect and academic Chatri Prakitnanthakan notes the persistence into the present of an emphasis on outer surface in Thai building

[15] The term 'subject in process' refers here to Kristeva's *sujet en procès*, a concept which, via Lacanian psychoanalysis, she deploys to emphasize the 'motility' that characterizes the creation of the subject, and to challenge the erroneous notion of the monolithic nature of language. For Kristeva, the concept of the 'subject in process' therefore refers to subjectivity understood as non-fixed and non-unitary. The 'I' cannot coincide with an individual identity in all its plenitude and is always split across unconscious, imaginary and symbolic processes. The subject is always therefore 'in process', and any sense of stable identity is necessarily illusory. See Prud'homme and Légaré (2006), 'The subject in process', in Louis Hébert (dir), *Signo* [online], Rimouski, Quebec, Website: http://www.signosemio.com/kristeva/a_sujetproces.asp, last accessed 2 September 2009. See also Atack, 2005, p 4.

design. Chatri argues that a slimming-down of external detail is frequently deemed shallow by award-winning Thai architects, whereas copious external decoration is taken as an accomplished mark of Thainess. The significance of surface and representation is clarified by Jackson (2004a), who analyses its relationship to the discourses of power at play in the representation of surface in his discussion of the Thai 'regime of images'.

Yet, while a certain privileging of the regularly mutating 'outer surface' persists, the concomitant notion of an original, unscathed Thai centre or core has become essential. For 'Thai borrowing' did lead to some level of anxiety that too much absorption might result in, or might imply, cultural fragility. Sanit observes the rationale for a construction of the Thai core in his assertion that, 'Thai flexibility means knowing when to negotiate [*phon san phon yao*], knowing when to absorb and what to choose as suitable; but at the same time being able to retain *one's original qualities* without change leading to a loss of individual identity [*khat ekkalak khorng ton eng*]' (Sanit, 1991, p 80, emphasis added). Moreover, Sanit goes on to confirm that, 'The flexibility of Thai culture looks superficially like cultural weakness but in fact if you look at it more deeply it is rather more weak on the surface, but strong at the core [*orn nork khaeng nai*]' (Sanit, 1991, p 80). But, the terms of frailty and strength are in fact blunt tools in the definition of culture as it is lived and experienced.

In his assessment in this issue of *Khwam mai phayabat*, Thak observes that, far from being merely another purloined copy of the Western novel, the piece is also 'quintessentially Thai'. 'Adopting Western clothing, architecture, music and artistic tastes,' he further notes, 'may have made the Siamese appear more like the West, and therefore "civilized/*siwilai*", but the core of Thai beliefs and character remained essentially unchanged'. And Sud expresses comparable views, arguing that, despite the broader political aims of the visit, Chulalongkorn travelled to Europe with a distinctively 'Siamese cultural and ethical mindset'.

This section poses the question, however, of how one is to identify essential core 'Thainess' or to recognize certain mindsets as distinctly Siamese, beyond a lack of concern with authenticity and a penchant for plagiarism. How is Thainess to be defined? As part of the state mandate of Thai obedience to the so-called 'fundamental institutions [*sathaban lak*] of Nation, Religion and King [*chat, sat, kasat*]', first introduced as a national slogan by King Vajiravudh, and modelled on

the British triolet of 'God, King and Country', the role and status of Buddhism is, for example, integral to formal definitions of Thainess.

Within the framework of Siam's relationships with the colonial West, the realm of the spiritual was affirmed as one of the 'true essences' of Thainess, in contrast to Western materiality. Despite the close relationships Mongkut forged with *farang* missionaries such as Bradley both before and during his reign, there was never a concern that he or other members of the elite would convert to Christianity.[16] As Thanet argues in this issue, to construct a 'good' modernity meant picking and choosing, a point he illustrates with Mongkut's refusal to be treated with the Western medicine administered by Drs Bradley and Campbell that might have saved his life. As Thanet concludes, despite Mongkut's keen scientific interests, it was as if, in the final instance, he had 'decided to follow his Buddhist *karma* instead of resisting it by means of Western knowledge'. While this act was in part related to strict proscriptions against contact with all but the closest courtiers during the king's final hours, the situation also speaks of the contradictions and ambiguities that repeatedly colour instances of Siamese relations with *farang* Others and 'outsiders'.

Siamese modernity was defined by the elite as resolutely Buddhist, albeit with the trappings of science and modern medicine. Thanet reinforces this point when he states:

> 'From the initial encounters with the West in the new power relations that ensued in nineteenth century Siam, Mongkut placed himself at the fore of the country's engagement with and contention of modernity. The adoption of Western knowledge was measured against the truth of Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist political ideas. One impact of the Westernization of Siam was, ironically, the introduction and development of state religion and its role in politics, particularly the creation and strengthening of the absolutist regime and subsequently the persistence of the monarchy.'

Thongchai (2010) supports Thanapol's assertion through his observation that, in the process of affirming its superiority over Christianity and Western culture, Buddhism was adapted and 'rationalized' from the mid-nineteenth century by Mongkut in response to Siamese relationships with the West. Thus even Buddhism itself is proved to be as

[16] Nor was there a history of serious potential for religious conversion in Siam's encounters with Christian visitors to its shores in previous centuries, as the reign of King Narai (1656–88) aptly demonstrates.

essentially 'inauthentic' as many of the other aspects of 'Thai culture' discussed above. Thongchai captures the issue succinctly, commencing with his reminder that Buddhism was furthermore originally inherited from a foreign source:

> 'Buddhism – an alien philosophy, intellectual paradigm and religious way of life – has been interpreted, translated and localized to the extent that it has become fundamental to the Thai way of life for long enough to have developed its own particular traits. The Lord Buddha is no longer represented in local iconography or images as a Northeastern Indian or a Nepalese man. His image has long been naturalized to meet Thai aesthetic norms and likewise his teachings have been localized and integrated into becoming the heart and soul of contemporary Thai identity.' (Thongchai, 2010, p 149)

Thongchai emphasizes the foreign origins of this aspect of national Thai culture, while drawing attention to the way it has been specifically localized and recontextualized. The dynamics of the shaping of Thai Buddhism as he defines them exemplify the fact that the origins of *khwam pen thai* are drawn from a variety of hybrid sources. From at least the mid-nineteenth century, if not earlier, Thai cultural identity has comprised an element of *khwam pen farang*, or 'Westernness' (though this is by no means the exclusive 'Otherness' within).[17] Thereafter, the influence, assimilation, reinvention and reinterpretation of various elements of *khwam pen farang* have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary popular Thai culture, placed as it is at a nexus of porous boundaries with the globalized, borderless world beyond (see Pattana, 2010). Chatri encapsulates this in his assertion that in architecture Thainess is always mixed with the *sakon* [literally, the international, though more often referring to the Western], and that the two are not opposed to each other, but are, rather, faces of the same coin [*thawi-atthalak*] (Chatri, 2008, p 121).[18]

[17] The evident influences of *khwam pen si lanka*, *khwam pen jin*, *khwam pen yipun* – 'Sri Lankanness', 'Chineseness' and 'Japaneseness' and others are of course noteworthy in this respect, even if they are not the focus of this current project's concerns.

[18] Chatri goes on to argue, however, that, although these two features may be seen side by side in Thai architecture, they should definitely not, according to 'expert opinion', be mixed together, but rather should occupy their separate spaces (2008, p 121). The term he deploys to refer to this unacceptable or unaesthetic blending is *hua mangku thai mangkorn* – an incongruous mixture of a mythical animal *mangku* at the head and dragon at the tail. In this sense, Chatri's observations speak less of the seamless absorption of the West than does the work of Pattana.

In Pattana's own terms, Thai identities have experienced a considerable degree of '*farang*-ization', to the extent of having 'transformed the contemporary Thai cultural consciousness, redefined national and cultural identities, and racially hybridized what it means to be Thai in the postmodern, postnationalist world' (Pattana, 2010, p 74).

Kasian Tejapira alerts us to a related perception of post-modern Thainess as having grown 'insubstantial' when he writes of how, having been 'ripped away from its traditional, historical, theatrical or religious context and deprived of its aura, it becomes an empty shell, a neutral terrain, a free-floating signifier which can be entered in and "exited" at will by commodities of whatever nationality or ethnicity' (Kasian, quoted in Morris, 2000, p 242).

Kasian's analysis of the post-modernization of Thainess incorporates a revealing survey of the ways in which Thai consumers explain away their penchant for multiple foreign goods as surface consumption, beneath which lies, untouched, the spirit of what it means to be Thai. In short, as Kasian (2002, p 205) summarizes their attitude: 'Yes, I am a Thai despite my consumption of many un-Thai things!'

This imagined dictum returns us to what many Thais have learned to view as an outer, flexible surface, supportable only because of the coexistence of a solid, immutable, irreversibly Thai core. But as Kasian goes on to argue, 'the explicit or implicit claim that the interiorized Thai self is more authentic than – or at least none the less authentic despite – the projected un-Thai self in the form of dress, behaviour or activity' reveals a level of fragmented subjectivity or cultural schizophrenia that is reaching epidemic proportions (2002, p 212).

In reverse, however, it might be argued that the widespread availability of Thai curries and stir-fries in pubs and supermarkets on the British high street, the raised profile of Thai kick-boxing, the visibility of key Thai commodities such as Chang and Singha beer on advertising hoardings and the strips of English football teams that may even be (or have been) Thai-owned, have led to a degree of Thai-ification of the UK that is no longer insignificant. The progressively less discernible difference between Bangkok's Weekend Market, Jatujak and North London's Camden Lock in terms of products for sale provides a current illustration – the latter boasting a plethora of mulberry-leaf paper boxes, multicoloured fisherman's yoga pants (do Thai fishermen really practise yoga in lilac trousers?), carrier bags recycled from Thai jasmine rice sacks, wallets sewn from the pages of Thai Manga comics and – the ultimate product to date – footless fashion tights patterned

with images from retro Thai record sleeves and movie posters. The availability of such goods highlights a further layer in the hybridization of 'British culture', however that may be defined!

In actuality, the definition of any culture is extremely slippery and there can be no true cultural core, just as there cannot, in ('Western') psychoanalytical terms, ever be a point in time when the subject can be said finally to emerge as a stable, complete entity. Referring to the work of Jacques Lacan, Sean Homer (2005, p 74) notes that 'The subject is, in a sense, suspended between a "subject-to-be" and the field of the Other, in a continuous vacillation or fading but never substantively present'. Instead, the constant motility of the imagined 'outer surface' of a tangible 'national culture' is only reiterated at its imagined 'central space'. The impermanent and incomplete nature of the decentred subject, a concept that surely resonates in Buddhist ideology as well as the philosophical premises of post-structuralism, dislocates the very notion of a stable core. As Derrida notes, to adopt this perspective has the potential to deconstruct a variety of centrisms – ideological and geopolitical as much as philosophical (see Simon Morgan-Wortham, 2006.)

The fact that there may be no centre of Western culture, of Thai culture or of any culture is, however, to follow Derrida's logic, adamantly not a question of loss, but of greater gain. Derrida's assertion that the non-centre does not equate with deficit is important for a reappraisal of widely held perceptions of Thai culture. Conservative Thai cultural ideology may long for what Derrida derisively designates as 'full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game' (Derrida, 2009 [1978], p 9); but the alternative 'freeplay' that he promotes is a positive cultural yield rather than a deprivation:

> 'As a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay of which the Nietzschean *affirmation* – the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation – would be the other side. *This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center*.' (Derrida, 2009 [1978], pp 8–9)

Derrida's concept of freeplay further opens up the possibility of desire, a philosophical notion that has received little critical attention in the

field of Thai Studies, perhaps as a result of its affiliation with potentially incongruous psychoanalytical thought. Suffice to say that the *relationship* experienced between the Thai and the *farang* is not coloured alone by discourses of power, and any examination of these intercultural encounters may be incomplete without the further consideration of two key psychoanalytical concepts commonly deployed in post-colonial critique: the desire for the Other; and the construction of self in the face of the Other's desire. As Butler (1999) contends, the constitution of the subject entails a radical and constitutive relation to alterity. Crapanzano (1992, p 72) follows through this notion in his assertion of the 'self' as 'an arrested moment in the ongoing dialectical movement between self and other'. Both draw on Lacan's extensive discussions of desire for the Other, which are to be taken up more fully in future explorations of the psychological space *in between* Siam/Thailand and the West and its implications for the construction and perception of Thainess and its modernities.

Conclusion: negotiating the good, the bad and the ugly

On his deathbed in 1851, King Rama III purportedly made the following dramatic royal address, summarizing his perception of the *farang*:

> 'Our wars with the Vietnamese and the Burmese are over and now it is just the *farang* of whom we should wary. We must not lose out to them. Anything which they do and which we think we can learn from then imitate them. But do not grant them your complete and devoted admiration [*ya hai nap theu leuam sai pai thi diaw*].'

The relationships that ensued in the subsequent reigns of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn between the Siamese ruling elite and the *farang* were marked by all aspects of the good, the bad and the ugly, as the papers in this special issue clearly indicate. The overarching question for the Thais during this period concerned how to pick and choose from what the West had to offer, adopting what they saw as beneficial and negotiating the less palatable implications of its extensive influence. This was how the elite navigated the rocky terrain en route to the acquisition of a type of modernity with which they felt at ease. As Thanet and Thanapol explain so emphatically in their contributions, the special relationship the elite formed, for example, with the American missionaries was pivotal to the formation of modern ideas in Siam and to Siam's perception of the modern world.

Thanet shows us that the presence of American missionaries set the tone of Western impact 'as a peaceful and intellectual encounter between both parties'. And Thanapol supports this assessment: 'Despite the fact that their exchanges often ended in disagreement, especially on the issues of politics, religion and customary cultural practices (for example, polygamy), their interactions gradually developed into mutual respect and friendship'. In addition to the exchange of ideas and knowledge, their relationships were based on other reciprocal benefits. Thanapol provides key illustrations of this reciprocity in action: 'While these Siamese elites helped missionaries acquire lands for residences and cemeteries, the missionaries also performed medical treatments for the elites and their family members or served, especially in the early reign of Mongkut, as assistants to the elites on various matters from translation to diplomacy'.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Siamese elite acknowledged the advance of Western technology and administration, Sud reminds us that they had yet to decide on the extent to which Westerners themselves qualified as truly civilized. Sud's arguments alert us to the convictions with which King Chulalongkorn travelled to Europe in 1897 and 1907 – that Siam was itself a civilized nation and that Westerners and Western cultures were typified by positive and negative characteristics alike. While enjoying the company of the Danes and the pleasures of French cuisine, Chulalongkorn found the Italians and the Germans impolite and French women ungracious and unrestrained; and on a visit to the Grand Opéra in Paris, he found the dresses of female performers rather too short and revealing for his conservative tastes!

The ugly aspects of Western modernity, observed by the monarch, are taken up in greater depth by Thak in this special issue in his engaging discussion of *Khwam mai phayabat*. This early Siamese novel exposes, in its many hundred pages, what Thak refers to as 'the decadence of the Bangkok high society, condemning both men and women who departed from traditional values and thus fell prey to the allure of modernity'. In this context, the protagonist's wife, Mae Prung, best symbolizes the pernicious effects, her physical beauty fading under the load of Thai moral decline in the face of excessive Westernization.

To conclude, it is Thanes's observations of the place of Western influence in Thai society *vis-à-vis* the localized consumption of *farang* cusine that best summarize Thai negotiations of the good, the bad and the ugly: pizza is nice [*aroy*] – but greatly improved by the addition of *tom yam* topping.

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