

**LUANG WICHIT WATHAKAN: OFFICIAL NATIONALISM
AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II**



by

Scot Barmé

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ABSTRACT

One of the things that even the casual observer in contemporary Thailand is apt to notice are the endless nationalist appeals by the state calling for unity and co-operation among the Thai public in order for the nation to progress. These official exhortations, which stress loyalty, duty and sacrifice, reflect a phenomenon that first became manifest on a mass level in the turbulent years immediately following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The present work examines the role of the little-studied writer and politician, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, in the development of state nationalism during this period of political upheaval and conflict.

The study, based upon a range of archival materials, diplomatic dispatches and newspapers, together with a series of interviews, traces Wichit's emergence as the pre-eminent intellectual figure in pre-World War II Thailand. This involves an examination of his work in relation to the wider social and political environment both before and after the change in government. Under the monarchy it is shown that Wichit acted as an important conduit of various Western notions into Thailand while at the same time promoting the official nationalism articulated by King Vajiravudh (Rama 6). In the latter period it is argued that Wichit was instrumental in formulating an official notion of 'Thai' identity on behalf of the military-dominated state, and helped to have this deployed on a broad scale via the media and through the expanding school system.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

The present study is concerned with *Luang Wichit Wathakan* (1898-1962) and his role in the development of nationalism in Thailand during the years 1932-1941. This period was a watershed in Thai history, one which marked the transition from centuries of royalist rule to a constitutional form of government dominated by the military. Although *Luang Wichit* has been widely acclaimed as a key figure in this time of change,¹ the nature of his contribution has been largely ignored by historians.

By any standards Wichit had a remarkable career. Born into a family of small-time provincial traders, he joined the expanding government bureaucracy as a junior clerk at the age of twenty and rose to hold a diverse range of official positions over the next four decades. The most important of these were: Director General of the Fine Arts Department (1934-1942), Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Japan (both during World War II), Minister of Finance (1951), Minister of Economic Affairs (1951-1952), Ambassador to India (1952-1953), Ambassador to Switzerland, Austria and Yugoslavia (1953-1957), and special advisor on national administration and general policy planning to Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-1962).² At the same time, he was a prolific author, whose numerous works of non-fiction encompass a range of topics from history and religion to politics and self-improvement. Wichit also produced a large number of influential historical plays and nationalistic songs, and after World War II he enjoyed a good deal of success as a popular novelist and short story writer.

Most studies which take Wichit as their subject vary considerably, often casting him either in the role of hero or villain. Chalieu's work, for example, one of the most extensive on the subject, consisting of a book and a number of articles, portrays Wichit in uncritical terms as a great patriot, scholar and thinker.³ A similar type of idealistic

¹ Wyatt, D. K., *Thailand: A Short History*, Thai Watana Panich (Bangkok) in conjunction with Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984: 253. Batson, B.A., *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1984: 114.

² See *Wichit Wathakan, Luang, Wichit Wathakan Anuson*, Volume II, Ratchadaram, Bangkok, 1962 (a).

³ Chalieu Phasida, *Luang Wichit Wathakan lae ngan dan prawatisat* [*Luang Wichit Wathakan and his Historical Work*], Fu'angakson, Bangkok, 1977. 'Luang Wichit Wathakan nai thana nak kanmu'ang' [*Luang Wichit Wathakan as a Politician*], *Warasan Hongsamut*, March-April 1976:

perspective also informs a recent publication put out by the Thai Ministry of Education entitled *The Drama of Life*, which aims at presenting Luang Wichit to secondary school students as a model citizen.⁴ In stark contrast to the hagiographic approach of these works, are the article-length studies produced by the historians Kopkua and Atcharaphon which examine aspects of Wichit's historical writing.⁵ While both authors recognize Wichit as an influential figure in modern Thailand, they tend to dismiss him simply as an intellectual who used his talents to serve the military, and they suggest that his populist form of history was 'unscientific' and therefore unworthy of serious consideration.

A somewhat more neutral perspective is adopted by Pra'onrat in a recent book-length study which examines Wichit's numerous historical plays written both before and after World War II.⁶ The author's stated approach is to locate Wichit's dramatic works within a specific historical context and show it as both a social product and force. Although this study contains a good deal of information about the plays on a literary level with some useful discussion of such things as theme, character and dialogue, its primary goal of relating the various works to particular periods is rather unconvincing. This failing is due to Pra'onrat's reliance on secondary historical sources which do not provide an adequate picture of the complex socio-political context in which the plays were produced.

The most recent study devoted to Wichit, by Pisanu Sunthraraks, also focusses on his literary output. The author's principal aims are to 'analyze and put into perspective the literary works of Luang Wichit Wathakan', and to reconstruct his world view.⁷ In order to carry out this ambitious task a broad range of Wichit's writings, including his historical plays, patriotic songs, historical novels, romance novels and works devoted to self-improvement are discussed. However, as is the case with Pra'onrat's work, the historical period in which these texts were written is given only summary treatment, a fact which weakens the study as a whole. Thus, while Pisanu asserts that Wichit played the leading role in seeking to win popular acceptance of the post-1932 regime, he does not clearly demonstrate how this occurred, nor does he

107-114. 'Luang Wichit Wathakan nai thana nak prawatisat' [Luang Wichit Wathakan as an Historian], *Warasan Hongsamut*, January-February 1977: 1-26.

4 Suthilak Amphanawong, *Chiwit haeng lakhon* [The Drama of Life], Krom Wichakan, Krasuang Su'ksathikan [Ministry of Education, Bangkok], 1984.

5 Kopkua Sawannathat-phian, 'Kankhian prawatisat baep chatniyom: phicharana Luang Wichit Wathakan' [Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Writing of Nationalist History], *Warasan Thammasat*, Vol.6, no.1, June-Sept.1976: 149-180. Atcharaphon Kamutphitsamai, 'Naeo kankhian prawatisat khong Luang Wichit Wathakan' [Luang Wichit Wathakan's Approach to the Writing of History], in *Prawatisat lae nak prawatisat* [History and Historians], Charnvit Kasetsiri and Suchat Sawatsri [eds.], Praphansan, Bangkok, 1976: 262-290.

6 Pra'onrat Buranamat, *Luang Wichit Wathakan kap bot lakhon prawatisat* [The Historical Plays of Luang Wichit Wathakan], Thammasat University Press, Bangkok, 1985.

7 Pisanu Sunthraraks, *Luang Wichit Wathakan: Hegemony and Literature*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986: 1.

examine the way in which specific works were related to a broader socio-political context.

A number of other studies, while not concentrating on Wichit specifically, discuss various aspects of his work in passing. One of these is Thak Chaloemtiarana's work on the Sarit era, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. Thak presents some interesting data on the relationship between Wichit and Sarit and the influence the former had on the latter's political thinking.⁸ In general, however, Thak's discussion is less effective than it could be due to the fact he does not fully appreciate the diverse nature of Wichit's work in the pre-World War II period. For example, Thak claims a unique feature of the Sarit regime was that its 'social programs were designed to make society conform to a conservative...ethic loosely defined as proper Thai...conduct.'⁹ As will be shown in Chapter Six, this so-called 'Thai conduct' (i.e. *khwam riaproi* — orderliness) was formalized and inculcated on a mass level in the 1930s-1940s with Wichit playing an important role in the process.

Another study which includes some discussion of Wichit is 'The Plot of Thai History', a recent paper by Reynolds concerned with the writing of Thai history.¹⁰ In comparison with the previously mentioned writers, Reynolds has a greater understanding of Wichit's significance. He contends that Wichit was instrumental in linking the dynastic era to the post-1932 nation-state conceptually and in doing so created the official conception of Thailand's past which remains in place to this day. Wichit is also seen as the intellectual heir to Vajiravudh, in that, like that king, he was responsible 'for transmitting a specific form of nationalism learned from Europe.'¹¹ In addition, Reynolds argues that it was Wichit who 'made Pali-Buddhist-Thai the idiom of membership in the [Thai] national community.'¹²

Such observations, which underline the crucial role Wichit came to play in Thai national life during the 1930s are perceptive, but Reynolds does not explore them in detail. It should be asked: how did Wichit link the Thai past to the changing social and political environment following the overthrow of the monarchy; what parallels were there between Wichit and Vajiravudh as disseminators of nationalism, and how did Wichit go about creating the notion of a Thai national identity?

⁸ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, Social Science Association of Thailand, Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1979: 179-186.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 144-145.

¹⁰ Reynolds, C.J., 'The Plot of Thai History', in *Historical Documents and Literary Evidence*, collected papers from the International Conference on Thai Studies, Bangkok, August 22-24, 1984.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 16-17.

¹² *Ibid.*: 21.

The present study seeks to answer these questions in the hope that it will provide further understanding of *Luang Wichit's* significance and a greater insight into the development of Thai nationalism during this period.

1.2 Nationalism

Reynolds, in his review of the late Walter Vella's work, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, writes, 'the term [nationalism] is so protean and ubiquitous that it serves as an unreliable theme for a book.'¹³ Indeed, with regard to *Chaiyo* such criticism is well-founded since Vella assumed that nationalism was a self-evident, unproblematic concept and therefore made no attempt to furnish the reader with an idea of what he meant when he used the term. And he is not the only historian writing on Thailand to take such an uncritical stance, as it has been a common practice among both foreign and Thai scholars to eschew any definitions or explanations of nationalism in their work.¹⁴ This failure to define nationalism, as Reynolds rightly implies, undermines its usefulness as a concept for historical analysis and description. It also reflects a strongly parochial approach, since the wider, long-standing debate on nationalism carried out amongst social scientists elsewhere has been ignored. Moreover, such insularity only tends to confirm Hewison's proposition that the area of Thai studies is a 'theoretical backwater'.¹⁵ The following discussion, which draws on the debate on nationalism, is aimed at meeting Reynold's objections and provides the conceptual basis for the present work as a whole.

Any writer who has made a serious effort to study nationalism would almost certainly agree that it is indeed the protean, ubiquitous term which Reynolds suggests. The multiplicity of contexts in which it is used make the definition of nationalism exceedingly difficult. This view is put forward by Orridge who writes, 'it is pointless to expect more than a limited relationship between all the various kinds of nationalism or to hope that some clear-cut classification will encompass all...situations.'¹⁶ While recognizing this difficulty however, nationalism should not be seen as an unworkable

¹³ Reynolds, C.J., Book review of Walter Vella's *Chaiyo: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, no. 1, March 1982: 192.

¹⁴ Vella, W.F., *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1978. Wyatt, D.K., 1984: 223-234, 252-255. Terwiel, B.J., *A History of Modern Thailand: 1767-1942*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983: 299-315. Thamsook Numnonda, 'Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-45', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, no. 2, September 1978: 234-47.

¹⁵ Hewison, K.J., *The Development of Capital, Public Policy and the Role of the State in Thailand*, PhD. Thesis, Murdoch University, Western Australia, 1983: 23.

¹⁶ Orridge, A.W., 'Varieties of Nationalism', in *The Nation-State: the Formation of Modern Politics*, L. Tivey [ed.], Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981: 53.

concept, but rather one which needs to be qualified or made explicit before it is used in reference to specific historical phenomena.

In order to proceed with the above task it is useful to consider the work of Anthony Smith, one of the most thoughtful writers on the topic of nationalism. According to Smith, the term, as generally conceived, has 'two fairly clear groups of meanings'.¹⁷ On the one hand it is used to refer to doctrines or ideologies about the character, interests, rights and duties of nations and political programmes or movements which propagate such ideas or attempt to realize them. The other group of meanings, by contrast, refer to sentiments, or emotions in which individuals identify with, and express a devotion to their own nation. Of these two groupings, Smith reserves the meaning of nationalism for the first category, and suggests that the second category should be called what he terms 'national sentiment'.¹⁸ Having limited the field of inquiry somewhat, Smith proposes the following general definition of nationalism, one which is germane to this study. For him nationalism is:

an ideological movement, for the attainment and the maintenance of self-government and independence on behalf of a group, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential nation like others.¹⁹

In other words, nationalism as conceptualized here is fundamentally concerned with the attempts by different groups of people to establish or maintain political legitimacy, that is, to secure popular consent to rule. This general perspective is also put forward by Orridge, who, like Smith sees nationalism as a quintessentially modern development which first became manifest towards the end of the eighteenth century. According to Orridge its emergence was essentially in 'response to the prestige and success' of united, purposeful nation-states, particularly those in England and France. Further, the forms nationalism took varied considerably from country to country as it was:

adopted and adapted by political leaders in a wide range of situations who emphasize very different elements of the original models. In this way the different kinds of nationalism multiply and

¹⁷ Smith, A.D., *Theories of Nationalism*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971: 168.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* One scholar working on Thai history who is actually cognizant of the problem of definition, describes 'nationalism' as a sentiment or feeling. Her comments on the subject, while earnest, are not particularly illuminating, and ultimately she does little more than serve up the standard 'nationalist' rhetoric frequently encountered in Thailand. Thus, in conclusion to her introductory section she writes: 'nationalism [*chat niyom*]...means the love of one's country and fellow nationals [*prachachat*]...pride in one's forebears, culture, history and other symbols of one's nation...This is the essence of nationalism in Thailand.' Atcharapon Kamutphitsami, *Udomkan chat niyom khong phu nam Thai* [The Nationalist Ideology of Thai Leaders], Thai Khadi Institute (in association with various other Institutes), Bangkok, 1981: 5.

¹⁹ Smith, 1971: 171.

each in turn can become the model for other kinds..., which in their turn also borrow and modify the idea.²⁰

For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Germans and Italians who possessed large, fragmentary cultures, developed their own popular ideological movements, or 'nationalisms' to push for the creation of distinct, unified German and Italian states. In territories occupied by Western powers, such as India, subject peoples formulated anti-colonialist 'nationalisms' aimed at securing independence from foreign rule and the establishment of their own states. Elsewhere, quite different developments took place. In Russia and a number of other European dynastic realms a phenomenon which has been called 'official nationalism' emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the 'popular' forms of nationalism cited above, this development was strongly associated with royal ruling elites who were 'threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.'²¹ Given this threat:

The leaders [czars, kings]...considered it their task...to impose their nationality on all their subjects—of whatever religion, language or culture...[By this means] they were strengthening their state by creating within it a single homogeneous nation.²²

As Anderson has argued it was this particular form or model of nationalism which emerged in Thailand.²³ In response to the increasingly close political and economic contact between the Thais and the British and French towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new political configuration, not unlike a cross between the colonial administrations of these two powers in the neighbouring countries and the absolutist states of Europe, was created.²⁴ Through a series of 'modern', that is to say rational, technical reforms between 1892-1905, the Thai monarchy was able to centralize power as never before. A functionally specialized bureaucracy was established, military conscription introduced, slavery was formally abolished, as was *corvée* labour service. Henceforth, both the freed slaves and the general peasantry were required to pay a monetary head tax to the state. As a result of these reforms local, particularistic loyalties and relationships were undermined, and transferred towards the absolute monarchy which sought to create a new wider affiliation for its subjects by promoting the idea of nation. This process, as shown by Kullada Kesboonchoo, began during the reign of

²⁰ Orridge, 1981: 53.

²¹ Anderson, B. R. O'G., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso Editions and New Left Books, London, 1983: 95.

²² Seton-Watson, H., *Nations and States*, Westwood Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1977: 148.

²³ Anderson, B. R. O'G., 1983: 93.

²⁴ Anderson, P., *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, New Left Books, London, 1974: 17.

King Chulalongkorn (r.1868-1910).²⁵ For a number of reasons, which will be considered later, it intensified considerably with accession to the throne of Vajiravudh (r.1910-1925) who 'began moving all the policy levers of official nationalism: compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, [an ersatz] militarism...and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation.'²⁶

The basic form of nationalist discourse that Vajiravudh set in place to give legitimacy to the royalist state (see Chapter 2) was to prove highly durable. As will be shown, Wichit drew on the King's nationalism and combined it with elements from the chauvinistic models provided by Germany, Italy and Japan to create a new, more mass-oriented variety which was deployed on behalf of the new commoner elite that came to power in 1932.

While nationalism has been defined in general, and briefly discussed in terms of the specific form in which it became manifest in Thailand, it remains necessary to clarify the idea of nation. In addition, the Western-derived concepts of 'progress' and 'civilization', which were closely related to the development of nationalism in Thailand must also be considered.

1.3 *The Nation*

The nation, like nationalism, is another concept that is not as self-evident as it may seem. A variety of theorists on nationalism have attested to this difficulty. Seton-Watson for example, goes so far as to express the view that 'many attempts have been made to define nations, and none have been successful.'²⁷ This may well be so, yet for the purposes of this study it is necessary to get some idea of how the nation is to be conceived. Gellner's work in this area is particularly illuminating. His approach is, however, rather circuitous. He begins by proposing two 'provisional' definitions of the nation. In the first of these, he suggests that individuals are of the same nation if they share the same culture, a term he uses in the anthropological sense to mean a 'system of ideas,...signs and associations'.²⁸ This cultural view of the nation, it should be noted, is historically related to an ethnic concept of nation expressed in the Latin word *natio*, meaning breed or race occupying an identifiable territory. The term nation which was derived from Latin and retained the same meaning came into wide usage in English during the thirteenth century.²⁹

²⁵ Kullada Kesboonchoo, 'Official Nationalism under King Chulalongkorn', Paper presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies, 22-24 August 1984, Bangkok.

²⁶ Anderson, B. R. O'G., 1983: 95.

²⁷ Seton-Watson, 1977: 3.

²⁸ Gellner, E., *Nations and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983: 7.

²⁹ Williams, R., *Keywords*, Fontana Paperbacks, Flamingo Edition, London, 1983: 213.

The second definition Gellner offers is that people are of the same nation when they recognize or consider themselves members of a collective entity in which they have 'certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it.'³⁰ After proposing his two 'provisional' definitions, Gellner admits that neither of them is satisfactory. However, he does not reject the place of culture and willed association in conceptualizing the nation. In fact he argues that the nation must be defined in terms of these two elements but only in the context of specific social conditions. His position is most coherently expressed in the following passage:

when general social conditions make for standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit which men willingly and often ardently identify. The cultures now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy...

In these conditions, men will be politically united with all those, and only those who share their culture. Politics then will to extend their boundaries to the limits of their cultures, and to protect and impose their culture with the boundaries of their power. The fusion of will, culture and polity becomes the norm [i.e. the nation]...³¹

The nation as conceived of in this account is therefore a modern, collective entity which is actively brought into being. In Thailand, as has been indicated above, the first tentative moves to create a nation as such began with the 'official nationalism' of the monarchy as it sought to impose a 'standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high culture' [i.e. Bangkok, Central Thai culture] on its subjects. However, as it will be suggested, this project to fuse will, culture and polity to form a nation only began to be fully realized in the decade after the overthrow of the monarchy when the state began to create a notion of Thai identity on a mass scale.

1.4 'Progress' and 'Civilization'

During the nineteenth century as the British and French extended their influence into Southeast Asia they presented the image of successful, purposeful nations to the Thais and at the same time also exposed them to concepts that were central to Western social discourse. The most notable and influential of these ideas were the closely related notions of progress and civilization, both of which became irrevocably bound up with the development of Thai nationalism.

³⁰ Gellner, 1983: 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 55.

In the broadest of terms, the notion of progress is 'a theory which...regards men as slowly advancing...in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this...will continue indefinitely.'³² This view was rooted in a rational apprehension of the past embodied in the Universal Histories of the Enlightenment. In place of the previous religious-based, static, 'timeless', histories, Universal History portrayed past events as part of a continuous, global process of human self-development. This conception was then related to the present and extrapolated into the future and the general notion of progress formed.³³ Progress as such was manifested in various ways: on one level it could be used to refer to the objects of material culture, while on another it meant an increasing degree of political and social liberty.

The second key Western concept, civilization, has two basic meanings. On the one hand it refers to 'an achieved state of development ' which implies 'historical process and progress', at the same time it also means 'an achieved state, which could be contrasted with "barbarism"'.³⁴ Civilization is thus a rather ambiguous concept, a point underlined by Williams: while the first meaning carries a sense of enlightenment and modernity, the latter meaning suggests 'an achieved and threatened state,...often...identified with the received glories of the past.'³⁵

In the following sections it will be shown that these notions in their various forms first began to take on significance in defining and directing Thai social reality during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It will be further shown that in the post-1932 era the concepts of civilization and progress became even more important, as the state, through its most prominent thinker *Luang Wichit*, articulated these ideas to create a new national identity and contribute towards greater political legitimacy.

1.5 Outline of the Present Study

Although *Luang Wichit* worked until well after World War II, this study focusses on his thought and involvement in the development of Thai nationalism up to the early 1940s. Before proceeding with this investigation, however, it has been necessary to provide some historical background. Chapter Two looks at the emergence of official nationalism under the monarchy with particular attention given to the discourse of Nation, Religion and King articulated by Vajiravudh. In addition, the growing importance of the notions progress and civilization in Thai social-political discourse prior to 1932 is discussed. Chapter Three traces the career of *Luang Wichit* up until 1932 and examines some of his important writings during this period.

³² Bury, J.B., *The Idea of Progress*, Macmillan, New York, 1932: 5.

³³ Williams, 1983: 224.

³⁴ Williams, R., *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1977: 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 15.

Chapter Four focusses on the volatile period of national struggle from the 1932 revolution until the abortive royalist rebellion led by Prince Boworadet in 1933, and looks at Wichit's activities during this time. Chapter Five, which covers the period of the Phahon administration (1933-1938), examines Wichit's role as Director General of the Department of Fine Arts. His more influential early nationalistic historical plays are discussed, and related to the broader context in which they were produced. Chapter Six, a examines at length the central role Wichit played in the 'nation building' programme of the Phibun government prior to the outbreak of World War II (1938-1941). The final chapter provides an evaluation of Wichit's pre-war work and its continuing relevance to Thai society.

Some mention should be made about the basis for periodization found in Chapters Four, Five and Six. With regard to the time scale in Chapter Four (1932-1933), it can be argued that the overthrow of the monarchy was not a single event that took place on 24 June 1932, but rather a more lengthy process that was not consummated until the defeat of the Boworadet rebellion in October 1933. During this time Wichit altered his political position quite significantly, changing his stance from being a critic of the new regime to becoming an avid supporter of it. The years from late 1933 until late 1938 (Chapter Five), are considered as a specific historical unit of time since they mark a period of transition from the total eclipse of royal power to Phibun becoming Prime Minister. During this period, Wichit as a consequence of becoming Director General of the Department of Fine Arts, emerged as the pre-eminent force in Thai cultural life. The period from late 1938 until the latter part of 1941 (Chapter Six), may be seen for our purposes to form another historical unit. It was during this time that the Phibun government rose to the zenith of its prestige and authority, and Wichit became most active as a nationalist ideologue. After the outbreak of World War II in 1941, Wichit ceased to play this particular role as he became immersed in diplomatic matters and Thailand's relations with the Japanese.

This thesis is based on information collected during a fieldtrip to Thailand from November 1985 to August 1986. The primary method of data collection employed was extensive documentary research carried out at the Thai National Archives, the Thai National Library, the Thai Khadi Library at Thammasat University, the main Chulalongkorn University Library and the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute. Of these various institutions the National Archives, the National Library and the Thai Khadi Library yielded particularly valuable material. Official documents held in the archives provided a good deal of insight into Wichit's activities both as Director General of the Department of Fine Arts, and as a member of various government committees. Another source from the archives which proved useful in developing a

broad historical overview were the British Annual Reports on Siam (1925-1938). These reports discuss and comment on general political, social and economic matters. The collection of Thai and English language newspapers held in the National Library provided additional information about Wichit and his work, and also afforded a greater understanding of the Thai social-political environment during the 1930s and early 1940s. The British and American diplomatic dispatches kept at the Thai Khadi Library were also extremely helpful, containing as they do a large amount of data about the period under investigation not available elsewhere.

Apart from the text-based research mentioned above I had the opportunity to interview *Khunying* Praphaphan Wathakan, Wichit's wife, his daughter Wichitra, and his cousin Witun Watanapruda, a former Thai ambassador to Brazil and South Vietnam. *Khunying* Praphaphan also allowed me access to her collection of original copies of *Duang prathip*, a magazine published by Wichit during the early 1930s.

General secondary research was carried out in Canberra using a range of Thai and English language materials from the collections at the Menzies Library at the Australian National University and the Australian National Library.

Since much of the present study is based on Thai language materials it has been necessary to romanize the titles of various works, the names of individuals, titles and technical terms. In doing this, the system developed by the Library of Congress has been used. However, for technical reasons the diacritical marks used in this system have been omitted which means that distinctions between long and short vowels are not indicated, nor is the difference between the vowel sounds 'oo' and 'or'.

In certain cases, the romanization of a particular Thai names differs from the Library of Congress system and follows that which is commonly used by the individual in question. Thus, for example 'Sulak Sivaraksa' instead of 'Sulak Siwarak'. In addition unusual spellings from English primary source material have, for the most part been unaltered. Finally, while Siam, the official name of the country until 1939, is used in the main body of the text, the people, in accordance with indigenous usage are referred to as Thai rather than Siamese.

Chapter 2

Nation, Civilization, Progress, Official Nationalism

In place of the old local ... seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property.¹

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to examine, in broad historical terms, the development of official Thai nationalism, and the the notions of civilization and progress in Siam prior to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932. It is argued that during this period the domains of nationalism, civilization and progress coalesced to form an overarching discourse which became the conceptual basis of Thai socio-political reality. As will be shown, however, this reality was not universally agreed upon as different social groups struggled to control, define, redefine this discourse in order to assert their own particular political/economic interests.

For the sake of clarity the following discussion is divided into a number of sections. First, the emergence of the concept of nation in Siam up until the beginning of the twentieth century will be traced. Second, the growing importance of the ideas of civilization and progress in Thai society during the same period will be discussed. The third, and final section of the chapter, which is further divided into sub-sections, focusses on the content of Vajiravudh's official nationalism, the socio-political environment in which it appeared and which helped to shape it, and the development of alternative, oppositional nationalist perspectives.

2.2 The Concept of Nation

The emergence of the idea of nation in Siam has not previously been studied by scholars. In official conceptions of the past, a Thai nation has existed at least since the

¹ Marx, K. and Engels, F., *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin Books, London, 1967: 84.

Sukhothai period of the latter thirteenth century.² However, as the following European account written towards the end of the seventeenth century indicates, the idea of the nation [i.e a singular political entity with which the populace at large identified] was unknown:

The people which possess nothing in property, and which do reckon only upon what they have buried in the ground, as they have no solid establishment in their country, so they have no obligation thereto.... A Siamese, a Chinese, an Indian, will easily die to exert a particular hatred, or to avoid a miserable life, or a too cruel Death: but to die for their Prince and their country is not a Virtue in their practice ... The Siamese which the King of Pegu has taken in War, will live peaceable in Pegu, at twenty miles distant from the Frontiers of Siam, and they will cultivate the Lands which the King of Pegu has given them, no remembrance of their country making them to hate their new Servitude³

When, then did the idea of nation become a part of Thai political consciousness? It is difficult to provide a precise answer to this question. However, using linguistic evidence it will be shown that the idea of nation [*chat*] had developed within elite/educated circles by the last years of Chulalongkorn's reign.

As revealed in a number of early Western dictionaries, *chat*, a term of Pali-Sanskrit derivation, had originally carried a number of meanings: birth, race, lineage, and origin.⁴ This began to change during the nineteenth century as contacts between Thais and Europeans increased and *chat* started to take on an additional meaning similar to that of the Western idea of nation.⁵ Early indications of this linguistic change are found in the royal chronicles of the mid-nineteenth century which refer to Western diplomatic/economic missions to the Thai court. In an account from the last year of the Third Reign (1850), such phrases as *kampan chat amerikan* (literally ship+race/lineage/nation+America, i.e. 'American ships') do not merely suggest an American race or lineage, but rather a specific political entity.⁶ Elsewhere, in a passage from 1855, the chronicler writes: "In Europe during the First Reign, the Napoleonic wars broke out and the '*farang tang chat*' (literally Westerners/Europeans + various +

² See *Thailand into the 80's*, Office of the Prime Minister, Royal Thai Government, Bangkok, 1979: 17.

³ de la Loubère, S., *The Kingdom of Siam*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1969: 107.

⁴ See, Pallegoix, Jean Baptiste, *Dictionarium Linguae Thai Sive Siamensis Interpretatione Latina, Gallica et Anglica Illustratum*, Imperatoris Impressums, Paris, 1854: 883. Bradley, D.B. *Dictionary of the Siamese Language*, Bangkok, 1873: 179. Note: During the early Bangkok period *chat*, meaning race was widely used and appears to have been virtually interchangeable with the term *phasa* (language). S. Phlai Noi, 'Wat Pho' in Kanchanakhaphan, *Phumisat Wat Pho* [The Geography of Wat Pho], Sansawan, Bangkok, 1966: 109-110.

⁵ There are curious parallels between the etymological development of the word '*chat*' and 'nation'. The Latin root of 'nation', *natio*, also means origin or race.

⁶ 'Ru'ang thut farang samai krung Ratanakosin', *Prachum Phongsawadan*, [Collected Royal Chronicles], Vol. 35, part 62., Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1969: 29.

race/lineage/nation) were embroiled in a state of conflict until the French were defeated in 1810.⁷ Here, again, the term *chat* suggests not so much racial groupings, as Europeans were more than likely to appear as one 'race' or lineage to the Thais, but distinct social/political units.

Interestingly, *chat* in this sense appears to have been used only in relation to Europeans. While a range of terms were officially employed to denote the Thai polity such as *prathet sayam*, or *mu'ang thai*, nowhere in the above mentioned sources do we find *chat thai* or *chat sayam* to signify Thai or Siamese nation.⁸ By the latter part of the century, however, a further broadening of the meaning of *chat* in this direction became evident. This change took place in the context of increasing British and French control over Burmese and Vietnamese territory in the mid 1880s, developments which led to a heightened degree of apprehension among Siam's ruling elite as to the future of their country.⁹ In January 1885, a group of eleven young officials, most of whom had recently returned from Europe submitted a 'strongly worded petition' to Chulalongkorn suggesting the need for radical political reform to avert a foreign takeover.¹⁰ When referring to the Thai political-territorial unit, these individuals used both traditional signifiers as well as the terms *chat* and *chatbanmu'ang*.¹¹

Less than ten years later, in 1893, when tensions between Siam and France over territorial interests intensified, the political concept of *chat* became more familiar to the educated public through the writings of local intellectuals. In April 1893, as Franco-Siamese relations reached a crisis point, the weekly newspaper *Thamasat Winitchai*, published by a British educated official *Luang Ratanayati*, ran an editorial calling for unity against the French in order to show gratitude to the king, to defend Buddhism, 'and maintain the freedom and independence of the Thai race/nation [*Chat Thai*].¹² In July of the same year, with the crisis still unresolved, Thianwan (T.W.S. Wannapho) another Thai who considered himself a reformist intellectual, made a similar appeal for Siamese unity and struggle. He expressed these sentiments in a text that included a slogan echoing the British nationalist catchcry to serve 'God, King/Queen and Country' which urged Thais to love their *chat*, their country [*prathet*], their religion and the king.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 215.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Terwiel, B.J., *A History of Modern Thailand, 1767-1942*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 1983: 249.

¹⁰ Wyatt, D.K., *Thailand: A Short History*, Yale University Press in conjunction with Thai Wathana Panich, London and Bangkok, 1984: 199.

¹¹ Fine Arts Department, *Chaonai lae kharatchakan krapbangkhomthun khwamhen chat kanplianplaeng ratchakan phaendin r.s. 103* [The Opinions of Royal Princes and State Officials About Government Reforms Presented to the King in 1885], Bangkok, 1967: 21-25.

¹² *Thamasat Winitchai*, 23 April 1893. Note: The first reliable map showing the extent of Thai territory was produced by British surveyors and had only appeared in 1887. Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892-1915: The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1977: 2.

In this particular phrase, *chat* was clearly used in the sense of race rather than nation, but elsewhere in the same work, the political meaning of the word is suggested a number of times in the compound *chatprathetsayam* (literally race/nation, country, Siam).¹³ Although this expression did not catch on, the term *chat*, while retaining its racial overtones became increasingly identified with a national political community. This extension of meaning is found in Vey's revised edition of Pallegoix' dictionary of 1896, which translates *chat* as 'race, nation, origin, generation, sex',¹⁴ and by the early years of the twentieth century was being taught to school children in the *Thammachariya* series of civics texts produced by the well-known Thai educationalist *Chaophraya* Thammasakmontri [*Khru Thep*].¹⁵ Clearly, despite Vella's assertion that Vajiravudh 'coined a word [*chat*], heretofore lacking in Thai, for nation' the present day meaning of the term was already being developed prior to his reign, although the nation as a tangible reality had yet to come into being.¹⁶

2.3 Civilization and Progress

From the turn of the nineteenth century as Europeans expanded their influence in Southeast Asia social intercourse between Siamese and Westerners intensified. In the process, members of the Thai elite became increasingly familiar with not only Western technology but also Western thought and ideas. As a result of an openness and curiosity on the part of elements within this elite, indigenous views of the world and natural phenomena embodied in the metaphysical treatise *Traiphumikhata* [The Three Worlds Cosmography of Phra Ruang] started to break down in the face of scientific explanations brought to the kingdom by Westerners, especially visiting Protestant missionaries.¹⁷ This exposure to foreign rationalist concepts begun during the 1830s was to influence two long term developments within Thai society. First, the religious reform being undertaken by the prince-monk Mongkut at the time was given further impetus, and the supernatural accretions which had crept into Thai Buddhist practice were downplayed, at least in official terms.¹⁸ Second, by adopting a more rational,

¹³ Sangnop Suriyin, *Thianwan*, Ruam San, Bangkok, 1952: 7/1-7/7.

¹⁴ Pallegoix, D.J.B., *Siamese, French, English Dictionary*, Printing Office of the Catholic Mission [revised by J.L. Vey], Bangkok, 1896: 1144. *Note:* In a Thai English dictionary which appeared four years earlier, *chat*, was still being glossed as 'race, origin, existence, to be born and native.' Michell, E.B., *Siamese English Dictionary*, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport N.Y., [first published 1892], 1973: 75.

¹⁵ Thammasakmontri, *Chaophraya*, *Thammachariya*, Vol. 4, Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1984: 113-117.

¹⁶ Vella, 1978: 177.

¹⁷ Terwiel, B.J., 'Mu'ang Thai and the World: Changing Perspectives During the Third Reign', *Occasional Papers of the Thai Historical Association*, Samakhom Prawatisat, Bangkok, 1986: 13-17.

¹⁸ See Kirsch, A.Thomas., 'Modernizing Implications of Nineteenth Century Reforms in the Thai Sangha', in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, Bardwell Smith (ed.), Anima Books, Chambersberg, Pennsylvania, 1978 [52-65]: 58-59. Reynolds, C.J., *The*

secular outlook the elite also began to absorb the Western concepts of civilization and progress.

With the continuing expansion of Western power and influence in Asia and Africa during the nineteenth century, civilization, in the sense of 'an achieved state' as opposed to 'barbarism', became an important term in defining relations between Western and non-Western societies.¹⁹ Generally speaking Europeans saw other peoples as being 'uncivilized' or 'inferior':

... and their inferiority was proved because the 'superior race' was superior by the criteria of its own society: technologically more advanced, militarily more powerful, richer and more 'successful'²⁰

The martial superiority of the West had been clearly demonstrated to the Thais by the British when they annexed Lower Burma during the 1820s and, more significantly, by their crushing victory over the Chinese in the first Opium War (1839-42). As a result of these events, elements within the Thai elite begun to re-adjust their perceptions of Siam's position vis-à-vis the West,²¹ and came to the realization that their country was now entering a period in which its sovereignty was under serious threat. By the mid-nineteenth century this growing apprehension about foreign objectives in the region had reached such a point that even the strongly anti-European King Nangklao recognized the need for change and some form of accomodation with the West. This was made clear in remarks he reportedly made not long before his death:

There will be troubles ... with the *farangs* [Europeans]. Take good care; do not fall into their traps. Whatever they have invented, or done, which we should know and do, we can imitate and learn from them...²²

Such an approach was followed by the new king Mongkut who had long shown a keen interest in various aspects of Western life, technology, science and culture. On his accession to the throne in 1851 this awareness of the West was made manifest when Mongkut told his officials of the need for the Thais to become more

Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand, PhD. Thesis, Cornell University, 1973: 125-126. *Note:* At the same time, however, the fundamental principles of the doctrine of karma, merit and rebirth which could not be effectively refuted by science continued to be accepted and thus their ideological role in explaining social inequalities and confirming the dominant position of the ruling class was maintained.

¹⁹ Williams, 1977: 13.

²⁰ Hobsbawm, E.J., *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*, Meridan Classic, Canada, 1984: 295.

²¹ Terwiel, 1986: 19.

²² Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873*, Data paper no. 74, Southeast Asian Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., 1969: 125.

'civilized' [*siwilai/rung ru'ang*]. In an initiative that was clearly influenced by increased Western contact with the court he told his officials:

People who wear no upper garments seem naked; the upper torso looks unclean, especially if the person has a skin disease, or if he is sweating. Other peoples of civilized countries wear upper garments with the exception of the *lawaa* and the Laos people who are forest dwellers and uncivilized and do not use clothing (sic). But since Siam is a civilized country and understands civilized ways, we should not cling to the ancient ways of our forefathers who were forest people. Let everyone, therefore, wear upper garments when coming to royal audience.²³

In this statement, Mongkut's formulation of civilization incorporated both notions contained in the original Western concept: an achieved state versus barbarism, and a continuing process of development. Thus we find a distinction between the Bangkok Thais from the 'uncivilized' Lao and *lawa* people, and the suggestion of a need to develop new practices. In the following years, the latter conception of civilization which carried with it the linear notion of progress [*khwaam charoen*], came to form the basis of a reformist ideological discourse which was strongly identified with the monarchy.²⁴ This process of reform begun under Mongkut was continued and expanded during the reign of his son Chulalongkorn.²⁵ Symbolic changes, such as doing away with prostration before royalty, and the implementation of a Western form of royal succession, together with more substantial institutional reform including the gradual abolition of slavery, the transformation of the bureaucracy and the creation of a modern style military were part of this 'civilized', 'progressive' discourse.²⁶ This type of Western-induced change was also taking place elsewhere in Asia at the time, most notably in Japan.

... the first decade of so of the Meiji era (1868-1912) was characterized by frantic efforts to adopt Western concepts, practices, and products in order to become 'civilized'....both the

²³ Thiphakorawong, *Chaophraya, The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era the Fourth Reign*, Vol. I, Translated by Chadin Flood, The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, 1965: 5.

²⁴ The relationship between royalty and civilization/progress was emphasized in foreign newspapers such as the *Straits Times* where, on 31 August 1861, it was noted that: 'Siam though comparatively small in territory, and but new in the race of civilization, has yet advanced in some respects beyond the larger kingdoms of Asia, and is unequalled in having a sovereign who is accessible to all and who is a lover and promoter of literature, science and the fine arts.' Cited in Terwiel, 1983: 208 (n.110).

²⁵ Siffin, W.J., *The Thai Bureaucracy (Institutional Change and Development)*, East-West Center Press, Honolulu, 1966: 46-63.

²⁶ See Tej Bunnag, 1977. Batty, N. A., *The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868-1910: Politics and Military Reform During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*,. PhD. Thesis, Cornell University 1974. Wyatt, D.K., *The Politics of Reform in Thailand (Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn)*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1969.

government and private leaders agreed upon the necessity of 'civilizing and enlightening' the nation, which meant, in essence, the adoption of the utilitarian, rational, scientific, and technical aspects of Western civilization.²⁷

However, whereas the process of becoming *civilized* in Japan led to the emergence of a representative political system, the drive towards *civilization* and progress in Siam had the effect of concentrating royal power to an unprecedented degree. Even before this development had been fully realized a degree of opposition began to be voiced giving the first indication that *civilization* and *progress* meant quite different things to different people. In the petition to Chulalongkorn, mentioned above, it was argued that if Siam was to remain a sovereign power it had to present itself to the West as a modern *civilized* nation. And the only way of accomplishing this, the petitioners felt, was to establish a unified ministerial system of government headed by a constitutional monarch.²⁸ While the king gave the proposal a good deal of consideration, he rejected its recommendation to limit the power of the monarch as premature and proceeded to initiate reforms as he saw fit.²⁹

During the latter years of Chulalongkorn's reign the general concepts of *civilization* and *progress* continued became more familiar to the public, and were even promoted in *Thammachariya* texts developed by *Chaophaya* Thammasakmontri for use in the fledgling school system. In these texts, societies were categorized as being either *civilized* or *uncivilized* depending on the nature of the economic system on which they were based. Using such criteria, African tribes who lived by hunting and gathering were regarded as *uncivilized* or inferior, while those societies which had 'moved from a closed economic system into a money economy and the capitalist world system' were more *civilized* and *progressive*.³⁰ Given this particular formulation, such developments as the expansion in commodity production and increased trade with the West following the Bowring Treaty represented Siam's gradual progress along the path to *civilization*.

As has been pointed out above, the civilizing process had, from the beginning, been strongly associated with the monarchy, and this was re-affirmed in Thammasakmontri's writing.³¹ However, the broad notions of *civilization* and *progress* did not simply act as modern conceptual forms which could be articulated with indigenous religious ideology in legitimizing the dominant position of the king. They also had a political dimension which we have seen was taken by up certain Western influenced members of Thai society during the early years of Chulalongkorn's reign.

²⁷ Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*, Westview Press, Boulder and London, 1986: 105.

²⁸ Fine Arts Department, 1967: 21-25.

²⁹ Wyatt, 1969: 90.

³⁰ Kullada Kesboonchoo, 'Official Nationalism under King Chulalongkorn', Paper presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies, Bangkok, 22-24 August, 1984: 3-5.

³¹ Kullada, 1984: 20-21.

Later on, as the bureaucracy and educational system expanded, interest in *civilized* institutions such as parliament and political parties began to emerge. Compared to such Western political forms the absolute monarchy appeared to some as 'unprogressive', an anachronism. In 1903 this dissatisfaction had reached such a degree that it was formally recognized by Chulalongkorn in his well-known address on unity. He argued that the slavish imitation of these foreign institutions would not prove successful in Siam,³² and that for the country to experience continuing progress and maintain its independence, unity under the existing system must prevail.³³

Nevertheless the calls for the implementation of a more *civilized, progressive* political form continued, and just prior to his death in 1910 Chulalongkorn moved to reverse his hardline position when he told his assembled ministers:

I entrust onto my son Vajiravudh a gift for the people and that upon his accession to the throne he will give to them a parliament and constitution.³⁴

It seemed that Siam was moving towards a political change from above that would mark an orderly transition from absolutist rule to a more popularly based type of regime.

2.4 Vajiravudh and the Development of Official Nationalism

As a consequence of the social and economic changes set in train during the nineteenth century, the position of the absolute monarchy had become deeply problematic by the time Vajiravudh ascended the throne. Critical elements within the expanding bureaucracy and that section of the general population which had received a general education presented serious challenges to Vajiravudh's authority. In addition, he had to contend with Siam's burgeoning Chinese community which was becoming increasingly restive and separate from the broader society. The king's position was further complicated by sharp personal divisions within the royal elite itself. These internal forces together with Vajiravudh's desire to foster a heightened sense of pride, unity and purpose among his countrymen to facilitate Siam's recognition and acceptance by the international community were the key factors which shaped his official nationalist

³² Chulalongkorn expressed his view that Western political concepts and forms were inappropriate for Siam by using an agricultural metaphor. He wrote 'The use of Western ideas as a basis of reform in Siam is mistaken. The prevailing conditions are completely different. It is as if one could take the European methods for growing wheat and apply them to rice growing in this country. There would be absolutely no benefit in this whatsoever.' Chulalongkorn, 'Phraboromratchathibai wa duai khwamsamakhi' [The Royal Discourse on Unity], *Prawatisat lae kanmu'ang*, Thammasat Press, Bangkok, 1975: 175.

³³ Chulalongkorn, 1975: 184-5.

³⁴ Cited in Brown, A.J., *Awakening the Wild Tigers* (An Annotated Translation with Introduction), B.A. Honours Thesis, Faculty of Asian Studies, A.N.U., Canberra, 1983: 32.

discourse.³⁵ The nature of this discourse will be discussed below, but first it is useful to look more closely at the specific local context in which it was developed and articulated.

2.4. 1 *The Emergent 'Middle' Class*

The expansion of the bureaucracy that took place following the reforms initiated by Chulalongkorn continued and intensified during Vajiravudh's reign. In a period of less than twenty years after the turn of the century there was a threefold increase in the number of state officials which rose from approximately 25,000 in 1900 to around 80,000 in 1918.³⁶ These individuals, together with members of the population who had been similarly exposed to modern education and the ideas of civilization and progress, formed what was essentially a new social grouping, a 'middle class' located between the royal/noble ruling elite and the peasantry. As it emerged, this new class developed a set of values that were quite distinct from those that formed the basis of the existing royalist order. The calls for a participatory form of politics, begun during Chulalongkorn's reign, were one such manifestation of this new set of values. Another, was in relation to the crucial area of career advancement. Members of the new middle class rejected the traditional notions of deference, gratitude and inherited superior/inferior status roles, believing that merit and achievement should be the primary criteria for determining an individual's position in society.³⁷

Vajiravudh, however, was primarily concerned with maintaining his inheritance, the absolute monarchy, and saw the crown as having sole responsibility for initiating change. Despite Chulalongkorn's professed hopes that a parliament would be established and constitution promulgated during the following reign, Vajiravudh was strongly opposed to such ideas. While still a prince this had been made abundantly clear in a biting satire he had written about a hypothetical Thai parliament. Sessions in this imaginary institution were 'marked by interminable and pointless speeches ... and ended in chaos.'³⁸ Consequently, when he acceded to the throne he quietly ignored his father's wishes and produced a series of articles and essays rejecting the idea of

³⁵ Vella tends to see Vajiravudh's nationalism as more of a positive enterprise to create a 'national will' than as a reaction to the oppositional forces he faced. Vella, 1978: 127-128.

³⁶ Siffin, 1966: 94.

³⁷ Kullada Kesboonchoo, 'Official Nationalism Under King Vajiravudh', in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Thai Studies*, Vol.3, Part One, Australian National University, Canberra, 3 - 6 July, 1987, [107-120]: 108.

³⁸ Vella, 1978: 64. *Note:* Since Vajiravudh was familiar with the writings of Thianwan it would seem that this satire was, in part, a response to the hopes for a parliament being expressed by the venerable intellectual at the time. See Vella, W.F., 'Thianwan of Siam' in *Anuson Walter Vella*, (Renard, R.D.[ed.]), University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1986: 90. Also see Chai-anan Samudvanija, *Chiwit lae ngan khong Thianwan lae K.S.R. Kulap* [The Life and Work of Thianwan and K.S.R. Kulap], Bannakit, Bangkok, 1981: 104.

constitutionalism and parliament for Siam, noting that 'things of benefit to Europeans might be evils to us'.³⁹

Vajiravudh was similarly unresponsive to the criticism that career/social advancement under the absolute monarchy was not based on individual merit and achievement. Instead he defended the notion of hierarchy and the traditional form of paternal relationships (see Section 2.5 below).

Apart from their opposition to Vajiravudh on political and ideological grounds, sections of the middle class were also highly dissatisfied with the king on a more personal level. As Batson notes, Vajiravudh 'was certainly not "an ordinary monarch."' ⁴⁰ For one thing, he was a homosexual, a detail that is often passed over by scholars discussing the Sixth Reign.⁴¹ Anderson, however, has recognized the significance of the king's sexual orientation in the following passage:

The policies, style, mistakes, and problems of Rama VI's reign cannot be understood without acknowledging the ruler's homosexuality ... When rulers spent time and money on female sexual partners, these women — however powerful they might become behind the scenes — were nonetheless barred from holding public office and thus offered no political competition to the usual princely and noble candidates. Male sexual partners, on the other hand, were eligible for public office.⁴²

These individuals, described in a British Consular report as 'youthful and unworthy favourites drawn from the lower ranks of society', exerted a powerful influence on the king who was 'prone to follow [their] advice' and accede to their whims.⁴³ This state of affairs caused a good deal of resentment towards the monarch.

Another cause of disenchantment was the frivolity perceived to surround the court and the king's extravagance. Vajiravudh spent a good deal of time writing and directing a series of plays as well as translating a number of Shakespeare's works into Thai.⁴⁴ He was also an avid performer, and even appeared on stage dressed as a

³⁹ Vella, 1978: 66.

⁴⁰ Batson, 1984: 14.

⁴¹ For example see Vella, 1978: 8. *Note:* During his lifetime Vajiravudh's homosexuality was alluded to in a brief portrait in which he was said to inherit 'all the worse feminine nature of his mother, who only simulates patriotism, generosity and philanthropy. At heart she is a wily, revengeful, envious and jealous, but very clever woman.' *Great Britain*, Foreign Office, Dispatches from Siam, F.O. 371/2462, 6 March 1912.

⁴² Anderson, B. R. O'G., 'Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies in *The Study of Thailand*, E.B. Ayal [ed.], Southeast Asia Series, no. 54, Ohio University Center for International Studies, Athens, Ohio, 1978 [193-247]:208.

⁴³ *G.B.*, F.O. 371/1473, 6 March 1912.

⁴⁴ Vajiravudh's long years in Britain had made him a keen Anglophile. This was not only reflected during the prime of his life, such as in his taste for English living (see ft. 51) and interest in Shakespeare, but also during his last days before death when it was reported 'that ... in his occasional intervals of consciousness, the King spoke English and not Siamese.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/10973, 26 November 1925.

woman.⁴⁵ In addition, he exhibited a love of games, in particular war games and police games which were staged for his benefit by his all-male coterie.⁴⁶ Similarly, it was also reported the king took 'pleasure in the puerile amusement of hide and seek.'⁴⁷

From the very beginning of his reign, Vajiravudh was to show a proclivity for lavish expenditure. Not satisfied with a traditional coronation, he organized a second European-style ceremony largely to impress foreign visitors, the cost of the event amounting to almost eight percent of Siam's annual national budget.⁴⁸ Critics claimed that the celebrations were an extravagant waste of money, a charge which the king rebutted in the following manner: 'We Thai ...are...shortsighted in state affairs...My purpose...is to lead Thai thought into broader and larger paths. And this ceremony was part of that policy.'⁴⁹ In the following years additional large sums of money were spent on other controversial, non-productive ventures such as the establishment and administration of a sophisticated life-size model city known as Dusit Thani.⁵⁰ Another smaller, yet telling example of royal profligacy was the palace electric light bill which was reliably reported to have cost seventy five thousand pounds sterling per annum.⁵¹

Growing middle-class hostility to Vajiravudh, based on a combination of these ideological and personal factors was made manifest in a conspiracy uncovered at the beginning of 1912. According to the British, the plotters, a group of junior military officers together with some civilians were originally divided into three parties. Of these;

two wished to invest Siam with a constitutional monarchy, without having any definite idea as to what that form of government exactly meant, and were only separated in the opinion as to whether Prince Boriphat [Prince Nakon Sawan] or Prince Chakrabongs should be elected King ... finally [however] both [these groups] accepted the propositions of the more considerable faction which aimed at establishing a republic with Prince Rabi as President.⁵²

⁴⁵ See the inside back cover of *Silapawathanatham*, 4, 9, July 1983, for a photograph of the king in drag.

⁴⁶ Vella, 1978: 5-6.

⁴⁷ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/2462, 14 January 1915.

⁴⁸ Vella, 1978: 75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 75-76.

⁵¹ *Great Britain*, F.O.371/10973, 26 November 1925. *Note*: In later years, the opulent lifestyle of the king was recorded in the diary of the visiting British aristocrat Lord Northcliffe who wrote: 'Here is the greatest royal style I have seen anywhere ... Etiquette here is kept very strictly Edward VIIth, though our late monarch had not the loose cash that this King has - nine hundred thousand pounds a year. I don't remember living before with so many flunkys and so much luxury, and personally, I don't think it is good for anybody.' He went on to note that the accomodation provided reminded him of an English country house, and that he had 'innumerable servants' and five cars at his disposal (*Note*: At this time the king had a total of some thirty seven automobiles in his personal possession.). *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* (hereafter *B.T.W.M.*), 18 June 1923.

⁵² *Great Britain*, F.O.371/1473, 13 March 1912.

In the investigations carried out by the government following the discovery of the plot it was claimed that members of the republican faction were 'Siamese subjects of Chinese descent' who wished to topple the king and emulate the nationalist revolution of Sun Yat-sen.⁵³ This revelation, no doubt must have served to confirm Vajiravudh's concerns about the Chinese community in Siam. An equal, if not more worrying piece of information revealed by the investigators was that the plotters were said to have the support over 3,000 individuals, 'comprising many men in responsible positions.'⁵⁴ Clearly, the position of the absolute monarchy was becoming increasingly vulnerable.

2.4. 2 *The Chinese Community*

By the beginning of Vajiravudh's reign, the Chinese population in Siam, which accounted for approximately ten per cent of the country's estimated 8.3 million inhabitants, were emerging as a distinct, ethnically aware community.⁵⁵ As a part of the nationalist struggles in the mainland, Chinese royalist and republican groups had set up newspapers, schools, and clandestine political associations in Siam to promote their respective causes.⁵⁶ In the process, local Chinese became increasingly attuned to important changes in China such as the promulgation in 1909 of a Chinese Nationality Act, 'which provided that offspring of a Chinese parent were Chinese nationals, and the formal abolition in 1910 of the emigration ban which had been 'a source of constant friction between returning emigrants and government officials.' With the establishment of the nationalist Republican administration in 1911, the Chinese in Siam began to regard the new 'regime as their home government.'⁵⁷

As the Chinese were the dominant force in the Siamese economy, their growing sense of identity and community presented a threat to the state.⁵⁸ This fact was powerfully brought home during mid-1910, when Chinese in Bangkok launched a series of strikes against changes in the government's tax policy throwing the capital into turmoil.⁵⁹ The strikes were to leave an indelible impression on Vajiravudh, who, following his accession to the throne at the end of the year came to devote a good deal of his time to what Skinner calls the 'Chinese problem'.⁶⁰

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7 March 1912.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1912.

⁵⁵ Skinner, G.W., *Chinese Society in Thailand (An Analytical History)*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1957: 79, 88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 155-159.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 159.

⁵⁸ As early as 1876 one Western observer had noted: 'While elsewhere they [the Chinese] make their living mainly as merchants and only secondarily as miners and fishermen, in Siam they control the *entire* economic life and leave to the natives only the cruder ... aspects of agriculture. *Ibid.*: 118.

⁵⁹ *B.T.W.M.*, 31 May 1910, 1, 3, 4, June 1910.

⁶⁰ Skinner, 1957: 159, 164.

In addressing this problem, the king's most concrete initiative was to implement a Thai nationality law in 1913. This law was similar to the Chinese Nationality Act, and provided that any child born to a Thai parent, either in Siam or abroad was a Thai citizen subject to Thai law. Further, as a move to counter provisions in the Chinese code, the document stated that everyone born in Siam, regardless of parentage, was Thai.⁶¹

In addition, Vajiravudh produced a series of polemical texts outlining his fears regarding the Chinese to his countrymen. In such works as *The Jews of the Orient* and *Wake Up Siam [A Reminder to the Thai]*, he claimed, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, that the wave of immigrants from China was threatening to overwhelm the indigenous Thai, and at the same time, that the Chinese came to Siam to enrich themselves before returning to China.⁶² Significantly, however, while Vajiravudh directed his most savage criticism at the lower classes, the most volatile, troublesome element in the Chinese community, he made no attempt to implement specific policies against them.⁶³ After all, these individuals played a fundamental role in Siam's economic development. Rice milling, sawmilling, rubber plantations, and tin mining were the mainstays of the country's economy and required an uninterrupted supply of wage labour which was most readily available from China.⁶⁴ As a result, rhetoric rather than legislation was favoured by the king in promoting Thai interests vis-à-vis the Chinese.

2.4.3 The Royal Elite

Tensions between the king and the royal elite were evident from the very beginning of his reign. As much was indicated by Prince Devawong, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who remarked that, on coming to power, Vajiravudh was 'exceedingly imperious, and never displayed any wish to ascertain the opinions or seek the [advice of] far more

⁶¹ 'Phraratchabanyat Sanchat' [Royal Nationality Law] in *Prakat Phraratchabanyat Lae Phraratchakamnot Tangtang Ratchakan Thi 6*, [Various Royal Laws and Proclamations of the Sixth Reign], Bamrunnukunkit, Bangkok, 1913: 279-286.

⁶² Vajiravudh, King [pseud. Asvabahu], *Phuak yiw haeng buraphathit lae mu'ang Thai jong tu'n thoet* [Jews of the Orient and Wake Up Siam!] (in both Thai and English), Mulanithi Phraboromratchanuson Phrabatsomdetphramongkutklawchaoyuhua [The King Vajiravudh Foundation], Bangkok, 1985.

⁶³ The fact that both of the texts mentioned above were written in English as well as Thai, and reiterated views previously articulated by Europeans regarding the Chinese was also of a good deal of significance. As Hewison points out: 'In their anti-Chinese attitudes...Westerners were reflecting on rebelliousness and anti-foreignism in China, their experience with Chinese labour, and trade competition. Thai rulers reflected these attitudes, and Vajiravudh attempted to demonstrate, to Westerners, that the Thai were not Orientals of the rough, rebellious Chinese coolie mode, but civilized, rather like Westerners.' Hewison, K., 'Industry Prior to Industrialisation: Thailand', Paper presented at the Conference on 'Industrializing Elites' in Southeast Asia, Sukhothai, Thailand, 8-12 December 1986: 19. Note: 'After the essay [*The Jews of the Orient*] appeared, the King noted with particular pleasure its good reception by Europeans.' Vella, 1978: 194.

⁶⁴ Skinner, 1957: 213-216.

experienced minds than his own.⁶⁵ The reasons for the king's behaviour are open to speculation, but it is more than likely that his much-criticized play acting and his homosexual lifestyle were the main factors in creating a gap between him and his relatives.⁶⁶ This situation presented Vajiravudh with some difficulty, since the government he inherited was dominated by his uncles and brothers.⁶⁷

Nevertheless there were those well-disposed towards Vajiravudh at the beginning of the reign. Prince Damrong was one such individual. In the previous reign the prince had had a falling out with Chulalongkorn over some questionable dealings in connection with the railway leading to the British Malay States.⁶⁸ But, as a British consular official reported, 'since the accession of the present King, the Prince has, by...a general disposition to fall in with the King's whims, managed to shake off to a great extent the...unpopularity which was upon him at the time of the late King's death.'⁶⁹ Damrong's improved position under Vajiravudh, however, proved to be short-lived and he soon began to incur the king's wrath. The reasons for this were various. First, 'by having expressed opinions unfavourable to the collection throughout the kingdom of subscriptions towards the scout cruiser ... which is the King's latest 'craze'.⁷⁰ Second, he made an ill-conceived attempt 'to throw his daughter in the King's way, in the hope that a Royal alliance might secure him a permanent influence with His Majesty.' Third, it was felt that Damrong, as Interior Minister was, 'usurping powers which fell more fittingly within the sphere of other Ministries'. As a result in January 1915 he was relieved of his position, ostensibly for health reasons.⁷¹

By this time, the composition of Vajiravudh's government had altered quite significantly from the one he had presided over earlier in his reign. The dismissal of Damrong was the last in a series of cabinet changes which saw a number of men favoured by the king supplant individuals who had held office since the Chulalongkorn era.⁷² Not long after Damrong's ouster, growing bitterness among senior members of

⁶⁵ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/1473, 13 March 1912.

⁶⁶ Even his own mother, Queen Saowapha, was described as an 'outstanding critic' of his behaviour. Vella, 1978: 7.

⁶⁷ Wyatt, 1984: 225.

⁶⁸ *Great Britain*, 'Annual Report' (1911), F.O. 371/1474.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Note*: For more details of this particular royal project see Vella, 1978: 95-101.

⁷¹ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/2462, 14 January 1915. *Note*: Interestingly, while it may appear this was simply a face-saving way of removing him from office a British official noted that Damrong was indeed experiencing some health problems 'primarily due to his inability to withstand the seductions of the morphia needle' which, it was added, 'he uses frequently'. *Ibid.* 10 August 1915.

⁷² Terwiel, 1983: 302. *Note*: From the time of his dismissal until the accession of King Prachatiok Damrong remained in disfavour. Vajiravudh, in a set of recommendations left for his successors shortly before his death, argued in the strongest terms that Damrong should not be permitted to hold any position of authority in the new government, denouncing the prince as a disloyal and corrupt individual totally bereft of moral values. Bunyok Tamthai, 'Huang haeng chiwit lae ngan bang sieo khong Somdet Phrachaobaronwongthoe Kromphraya

the royal family was rumoured. Information passed on to the British alleged that the Prince of Phitsanuloke in concert with certain sections of the bureaucracy was planning to remove 'the King to make way for [his] half-brother, Boriphat.' The reason being cited for this initiative was that the prince was 'sick of the King's favouritism and the elevating of unknowns to trusted positions around him.'⁷³

While no moves were made to unseat Vajiravudh, the rumour that a royal instigated coup d'état was in the air must have unnerved the monarch and placed him further at odds with members of the royal family.

2.5 Vajiravudh's Official Nationalist Discourse

The official nationalist discourse that Vajiravudh articulated, and set in place in the context described above can be seen as a particular expression of what Williams calls a 'selective tradition'. Such a 'tradition' is conceived of as 'an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification.'⁷⁴ In short, it is model of the past which, when applied to a contemporary situation, serves to support or legitimize the interests of a particular social group or class.

In the case of Vajiravudh, the 'selective tradition' involved a delineation of the nature of *'Thai'* identity, together with an explication of the slogan 'Nation, Religion and King' which had first been articulated at the end of the nineteenth century. These ideas were first made public in a series of speeches the king made to the Wild Tigers Corps, the controversial para-military organization he established at the beginning of his reign.⁷⁵

In these speeches Vajiravudh told his listeners that the word *'Thai'* had a dual meaning. On the one hand it was used in a general sense to mean 'free'. More specifically the term was used to refer to long standing, culturally similar groupings of individuals who, through their military capability and social cohesion, were able to maintain their independence in the face of more powerful and expansive groups. Eventually these independent communities merged and consolidated becoming a single political unit, the Thai nation [*Chat Thai*] which had survived for many centuries to the present day.⁷⁶ The durability and independence of the nation, the king argued, had

Damrongratchanuphap' [Some Aspects of the Life and Work of Prince Damrongratchanuphap], *Sinlapawathanatham*, 6, 8, June 1985: 42.

⁷³ *Great Britain*, F.O.371/2467, 1 September 1915.

⁷⁴ Williams, 1977: 115.

⁷⁵ Vajiravudh's creation of the Wild Tigers had a strong parallel with the *Mahatlek* formed by Chulalongkorn. Both organizations served as a crucial basis of support for each of the kings on their coming to power.

⁷⁶ Brown, 1983: 47-48 (King's speech to the Wild Tigers entitled 'What are the Wild Tigers?', 26 May 1911).

been, and continued to be, dependent on two closely interrelated institutions, the monarchy and the Buddhist religion.

In a recent study of Vajiravudh's nationalism, Kullada Kesboonchoo has claimed that the king's 'explanation of the importance of the monarchy owed little to...Hinduism or Buddhism ... rather it reflected Western philosophy.'⁷⁷ While the king was indeed influenced by Western notions in many ways, this is clearly not the case in regard to his conception of kingship which was unequivocally located within a traditional framework. His view on the centrality of the monarchy was based on the ancient Buddhist theory of kingship. According to this particular conception, social harmony could only be attained if the members of a society chose the most intelligent and capable amongst themselves as the leader or king to act on their behalf.⁷⁸ Vajiravudh put this in the following way:

Like animals, humans collected themselves together into groups for protection ... Those who lived together would probably have been related to each other. Thus there would be love and mutual understanding. But no matter to what extent relations love and understand one another, they cannot always be in complete agreement. ... Therefore, there must be planning so that there is either complete agreement or a majority of agreement. When an important situation arises, such as the group having to defend itself, there is only one way that [divergent] thoughts can be reconciled ... [that is] to select one person in the group to be spokesman. Others must accept ... his ideas completely.

Apart from protecting the group from outside danger, there is also the need of preserving peace within one's group. The very fact that people's thoughts differ ... endangers this peace. If everybody is allowed to think and act as they like,... nobody will be able to live in harmony with anyone else...Thus, it is necessary to agree to designate one person within the group to be the arbitrator.... At first the person who held this power ... did not do so on a permanent basis ... However, later there arose the feeling that changing this person often was likely to be a hindrance ... As a consequence a tradition was established by which an individual was elected to hold this position of arbitrator on a permanent basis ... This individual was the king.⁷⁹

Having set out the origins of kingship, Vajiravudh continued:

The king is the one who possesses the power of the group and he uses this power for the benefit and happiness of everyone. Therefore respecting or admiring the king is respecting and admiring the power of the group. Everyone who is a part of a

⁷⁷ Kullada, 1987: 114.

⁷⁸ Rhys Davids, T.W. (ed.), *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol.4. Luzac and Co., London, 1957: 88-94.

⁷⁹ Brown, 1983: 84-85. (King's speech to the Wild Tigers entitled 'What are the Wild Tigers', 26 May 1911).

group is the owner of a portion of that group's power which has been collected together and entrusted to the king to hold ... respecting that power is the same as respecting oneself. One who insults the king is insulting the power which the king holds for him ... Being loyal to the king is the same as loving oneself because the king has the duty of protecting the nation.⁸⁰

Here the king —as the people's 'representative' —and the nation became virtually synonymous, with the implication that anything which threatened the monarch threatened the nation. Vajiravudh used a simple metaphor to give added emphasis to this argument:

On a ship, power is in the hands of the captain. All others on board must follow his orders to the letter. If this is not done the ship will be at risk...and the lives of the passengers thrown into jeopardy ... The nation may be compared to such a ship, the king is the captain and the people are the passengers.⁸¹

Elsewhere, Vajiravudh took up the idea of the king as protector of the nation, and characterized the monarch as an essentially martial figure. He pointed out that one of the traditional words used to refer to the king, *Mahakasat*, literally meant the 'chief warrior', an appropriate term for the leader of the Thai, whom Vajiravudh consistently portrayed as a martial race.⁸² The king also drew on episodes from the Thai past to illustrate his point. For him, monarchs such as Naresuan (r.1590-1605) and Taksin (r.1768-1782), were of particular significance, in that they embodied the royal ideal by leading the Thais to victory against the Burmese and maintaining Siam's national independence.⁸³

The second element fundamental to the survival of the nation in Vajiravudh's discourse was the Buddhist religion. He stressed the centuries-old relationship between the monarch and Buddhism in a modern form by linking the king, as nation, to religion. In one of his important speeches to the Wild Tigers, he reaffirmed comments made in an earlier address to the same body by the Prince Patriarch, Wachirayanawarorot, who said that a nation 'which is complete with moral principles will prosper, but one which is without them will deteriorate until it is finally destroyed.'⁸⁴ Vajiravudh described

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 85-86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 86.

⁸² *Ibid.*: 60. (King's speech to the Wild Tigers entitled 'The Purpose for Establishing the Wild Tigers', 6 June 1911]. In this speech the king defined the Thai as a martial race in the following terms: 'We have been born into the Thai nation, we have been born Thai, we must die as Thais. If we have to be servants it is the same as dying because we can no longer call ourselves free. Therefore, if and when danger threatens our country, if anyone is unwilling to sacrifice their lives for the protection of the nation, then that person is no longer Thai. He must not take the name Thai and use it for himself and thus cause embarrassment for his neighbours.' : 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*: 47-48. ('What are the Wild Tigers?', 26 May 1911).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 96. (King's speech to the Wild Tigers entitled 'Protect the Nation and Religion', 27 June 1911).

religion as an essential and necessary form of discipline and went so far as to suggest that those members of Thai society who abandoned the Buddhist faith were not really Thai. His argument was that individuals who rejected Buddhism, or at least those who did not give the doctrine unqualified support, were selfish and thought only of themselves. As a result they brought about disunity which would inevitably undermine the nation's independence. On the other hand a true Thai, or one who loved freedom above all else, would do nothing to cause the nation to lose its 'Thainess' (i.e. independence).⁸⁵

Religion, like kingship itself was also closely identified with the military sphere in Vajiravudh's thought. He asserted that Buddhism was:

a means for giving people courage. By possessing a faith in religion one is without fear of any danger ... in the past, those who were going to fight the enemy were led to do so for the protection of Buddhism ... Thai warriors were satisfied to bind to their bodies various medallions and amulets inscribed with dharma. Wearing these amulets acted as a reminder that one possessed a religion and was protected by the triple gems so danger could be overcome.⁸⁶

The king sought to legitimize this link between religion and martial activity by claiming that the Buddha believed that the military was essential for protecting the nation, and that the strength and vitality of the religion was dependent on national security. Vajiravudh went further and claimed that if instability developed, Buddhism would be doomed, thereby precipitating the total collapse of the Thai nation which would then become the 'slave' of other more unified powers.⁸⁷

In order to avert such an eventuality from occurring he reminded his countrymen of the notion of duty [*nathi*]:

The best way to demonstrate that one loves the nation more than oneself and that one cares for the nation's interests more than for one's own is to carry out one's duties in the best possible way.⁸⁸

Vajiravudh emphasized that while he, as king, possessed great power and wealth he had a duty to use this for the benefit of all his subjects rather than for the purpose of indulging himself.⁸⁹ He also stressed that all other Thais had specific duties, these being determined by their social position. Overall, Thai society was described as having two classes, the *Phuyai* and the *Phunoi*, literally the big people and the little

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* : 101.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* : 100.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* : 101.

⁸⁸ Kullada, 1987: 112.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* : 88 (King's speech to the Wild Tigers entitled 'Loyalty to the King' 23 June 1911).

people. The former group included royalty, noble officials and the leading figures from the business class, the latter group comprising the remainder of the population. While the duty of the *Phuyai* was to supervise and direct their underlings in a just and fair manner, the *Phunoi* had the duty of complying with the demands of their superiors.⁹⁰ In Vajiravudh's mind, those individuals who understood their place and who carried out their duties were deemed to be good citizens, and to be a good citizen for him meant being civilized.⁹¹ Clearly, this interpretation of the concept of civilization was radically at odds with the way the idea was being articulated by the king's opponents.

In broad terms, the discourse of Nation, Religion and King developed by Vajiravudh was a well-conceived rejoinder to such critics. The interrelationship he drew between these three elements was based on a simple form of logical argument with the emphasis, naturally enough, focussing on the centrality and necessity of the monarchy. On the one hand the king was identified as the embodiment of the nation (as the people's 'representative'), and also as 'chief warrior' whose task it was to defend 'Thainess' or independence, and Buddhism, the moral basis of the nation.

Not only was the internal logic of Vajiravudh's discourse compelling, but so was the way in which it was presented to the public. In expressing his ideas, the king portrayed himself as a populist, telling his listeners that he was speaking to each and every one personally. He used simple, easily comprehensible language that was in marked contrast to the complex prose style employed by Chulalongkorn in his nationalist discourse 'On Unity'.⁹² Further, in order to reach out to a wider audience, Vajiravudh's speeches to the Wild Tigers were made available in published form and his nationalist ideas were disseminated in the press, as well as being incorporated in dramatic works such as his Western-style stage play *Huachai nakrop* [Heart of a Warrior],⁹³ and deployed throughout the small, but growing education system in texts produced by such intellectuals as *Phraya Wisutsuriyasak*.⁹⁴

2.6 Popular Nationalism

As a result of Vajiravudh's keen abilities as a propagandist and his dominant social position, official, or state nationalism became established as the dominant form in Siam rather than the more popular type of mass nationalism that was developing in the

⁹⁰ Vajiravudh, King, *Lak ratchakan*, [Principles of the Public Service], Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1985 [originally published 1913]: 10-11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 118.

⁹² *Ibid.*: 31 (Introduction).

⁹³ Vajiravudh, King, *Huachai nakrop*, [Heart of a Warrior], Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1985, [originally published 1913].

⁹⁴ See Wisutsuriyasak, *Phraya, Phonlamu'ang di*, (The Good Citizen), Aksonnithi, Bangkok, 1912.

neighbouring colonial states. However, while the king had been the driving force in promoting nationalism, it was a discourse that he could neither monopolize nor totally control. This became increasingly clear during the latter part of his reign, when members from other social groups became more active in expressing alternative conceptions of nationalism, and what it meant to be Thai.

One of the most striking examples of this development occurred during the violent tramways strike of 1922-23. The Siam Electric Company, in charge of Bangkok's tramway services, was funded by Western and Thai, mainly royal, capital with Europeans providing the managerial expertise. When conflict erupted between the company and its employees over working conditions, labour's representatives at the *Kamakon* newspaper launched an attack on both the companies' foreign bosses and members of the Thai elite involved in its activities. Ironically, the nature of much of the criticism directed at these individuals drew on Vajiravudh's concept of Thai meaning free. In confronting the European management the tramwaymen proudly called themselves *Thai workers* (i.e. freemen), and said they would not tolerate being oppressed by foreigners. At the same time, they pointed out that although slavery had been formally abolished, and all men were now theoretically free, the Thai elite still treated those who laboured physically as if they were 'dogs' or 'slaves'. Such a state of affairs was described as 'impeding the progress of the nation'. In addition to this criticism, the tramwaymen also sought positive change and embraced the progressive notion of civilization which had first been taken up by members of the bureaucracy during Chulalongkorn's reign. It was argued that since Siam was moving irrevocably towards becoming a civilized nation it was now a suitable time for the creation of a labour union to further the tramwaymen's interests.⁹⁵ However, as was mentioned above, Vajiravudh took civilization to mean an orderly society in which good Thais obeyed their superiors and performed the duties expected of them. Consequently the worker's demands were dismissed out of hand, the strike was broken and the state continued to ignore the voice of labour.⁹⁶

This paternalistic attitude towards the populace which was at the heart of Vajiravudh's nationalist discourse came under increasing criticism from the press during the early 1920s with even the rather conservative English language newspaper

⁹⁵ *Kamakon*, 27 January 1923.

⁹⁶ Not long before the strike broke out the government's attitude towards labour was clearly revealed when it turned down an invitation from the League of Nations in its global campaign to protect workers. Despite the fact that the tramwaymen (who were mostly Thai) had been involved in labour disputes in 1921 (*B.T.W.M.*, 14 February 1921, 21 May 1921), the government claimed: 'There are no strikes and lockouts among the Siamese. These favourable conditions form one of the great sources of happiness of the country, and the Government should go slowly in the introduction of proposals which ... might serve to upset their habits and customs without advantage to anyone.' *B.T.W.M.*, 27 November 1922.

The Bangkok Times joining the fray. In an editorial of 28 January 1924 the paper was to write:

There is no institution that in these days may hope to escape questioning. In Siam we have lived long contentedly under authority tempered with a smile but unquestioned. Today eager spirits are asking for justification of the dictates of authority.⁹⁷

Expressions of what may be termed popular nationalism were also articulated in the local press. For example, 'Hermit',⁹⁸ a social political commentator, whose work regularly appeared in *The Bangkok Times* argued:

For the progress and development of a country, it is essential that the public should take an interest in national affairs, and that strong political parties should thereby be evolved.⁹⁹

A writer for the Japanese owned Thai vernacular paper *Yamato*¹⁰⁰ also put forward a similar, though more critical popular view stating that :

In this country there are only two parties.....the officials , or Government party,.....and the party of the people.....Some members of the Government, living in luxury, sneer at the Siamese newspapers. That merely shows their immaturity....But if Siam cannot have political parties, let the members of the Government see to it that the voice of the administration is also the voice of the people.

To do this, it was argued the members of the Government should 'read and ponder the views of the Siamese people as expressed in the Siamese newspapers.'¹⁰¹

In addition to this discussion of popular political hopes and aspirations, there was also a greater interest in questions regarding economic development which reflected both the growing importance of the economy in national life and a concern about the ability of the country's rulers to manage it.¹⁰² Strong views were expressed encouraging the state to restructure the education system and give specific emphasis to

⁹⁷ *B.T.W.M.*, 28 January 1924.

⁹⁸ 'Hermit' was a Thai judge in Songkhla. Batson, 1984: 110.

⁹⁹ *B.T.W.M.*, 25 February 1924, Also see 'Hermit' *B.T.W. M.*, 20 June 1925.

¹⁰⁰ The *Yamato* which promoted a strong pro-Japanese line was also believed by some to be involved in espionage activity in Thailand. This led a retired Thai judge to found a new oppositional paper the *Wayamo* which took a firm anti-Japanese stance. The paper was also highly critical of Vajiravudh's administration and this ultimately resulted in its editor, Sathit Samanin, being arrested and gaoled for *lese majeste*, the first Thai newspaperman to suffer such a fate. 'Sathit Semanin bannathikan nangsuh'phim khon raek thi tit khuk' (Sathit Semanin : The First Newspaper Editor to Be Gaoled), by Sathian Phantharangi, *Sinlapawathanatham*, 2,19 May 1981: 36-37.

¹⁰¹ Reported in *B.T.W.M.*, 17 March 1924.

¹⁰² Wyatt, 1984: 233. *B.T.W.M.*, 24 November 1919, 5 January 1920.

subjects related to industry and commerce.¹⁰³ The government was also urged to concentrate on infrastructural development to increase production.¹⁰⁴ 'Hermit' also entered this debate and put forward the idea that fundamental changes in the structure of economic management were essential for national survival. Adopting a social Darwinian perspective he argued that:

In this competitive world it is an inexorable law that only the fittest shall survive ... that applies equally to individuals as well as nations. It follows therefore that an administration conducted on other than business-like and systematic lines must in the end collapse ... The desire to accumulate wealth and achieve greatness is inherent in human beings, and it is to that desire perhaps that civilization as we know it today owes its origin and progress. Still, such a desire on the part of public men should be checked when it becomes inconsistent with the interests of the State.¹⁰⁵

Such expressions of public opinion, albeit confined to a rather small segment of the population, were significant in that they indicated the growth of a political/social consciousness (a proto-nation), the basis for the emergence of a genuine, full-fledged nation (i.e. a fusion of will, culture and polity). It is also clear from this ferment, that in spite of the king's determined effort to link the well-being of Siam to the throne, dissatisfaction with the existing order was intensifying, a fact which presaged an uncertain future for the absolute monarchy. Nevertheless Vajiravudh managed to stay on the throne until his early death in 1925, and the ideological formulation of Nation, Religion and King remained in place, coming to exert a powerful influence on a number of individuals from the young generation of non-royal Thais, the 'new men' who had been exposed to both the traditional and modern world.¹⁰⁶ Of these individuals, none was to play a more important role than *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, who grew to adulthood during Vajiravudh's reign and rose to become the major figure in elaborating official nationalist ideology following the overthrow of monarchy in 1932. In the following chapter, Wichit's life and work prior to the change in administration will be examined in detail. Before proceeding however, it is useful to provide a brief summary of the points discussed thus far.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter it has been shown that :

¹⁰³ 'Simplicitas' in *B.T.W.M.*, 4 July 1925.

¹⁰⁴ 'Junius' *B.T.W.M.*, 10 January 1921, 'Perspectiva' *B.T.W.M.*, 27 June 1925.

¹⁰⁵ *B.T.W.M.*, 30 June 1924, also see 'Hermit' *B.T.W.M.*, 20 June 1925.

¹⁰⁶ The term 'new men' in this sense is taken from Smith, 1971: 87.

- 1) The Western ideas of *nation*, *civilization*, and *progress* had become a central part of Thai social and political discourse by the latter period of the absolute monarchy.
- 2) The ideas of *civilization* and *progress* came to signify quite different things to different groups within Siam. For the monarchy, these notions meant such things as technical modernization, the adoption of various Western social customs and forms, and the maintenance of a hierarchical, ordered, society. To other groups they signified more fundamental social transformations: a representative political system to the emergent middle class, and labour unions to the working class.
- 3) The dominant type of nationalism in Siam was developed and set in place by the monarchy as a form of legitimation in the context of growing social division and disunity. As a part of this process, an idea of national identity was articulated in which the Thai were characterized as a martial race who had a strong sense of duty and self-sacrifice.
- 4) While a 'nation' in the full sense of the word could not be said to exist, a social/political consciousness, on which the emergence of such a community depended, was intensifying.

Chapter 3

*Luang Wichit Wathakan: His Early Life and Work**3.1 Introduction*

As the result of a combination of ambition, talent, and a degree of patronage, *Luang Wichit Wathakan* rose from a humble background to become one of Siam's leading intellectual figures during the last years of the absolute monarchy. The first section of this chapter presents a general description of this transformation by tracing Wichit's life and career prior to the change in government in 1932. The remainder of the chapter is primarily concerned with examining specific areas of his thought up to this time. Wichit's Western-influenced conception of history is discussed in detail, as are his ideas regarding civilization, progress and personal development. In looking at these latter aspects of his work, it will be shown that although Wichit was supportive of the royalist administration, the support he offered was not without a degree of criticism.

3.2 Life, Career and Work

Luang Wichit Wathakan was born into a family of petty traders in the central Thai province Uthaitхани on 11 August 1898. At birth he was given the name *Kimliang* which reflected his Chinese ancestry.¹ This heritage, however, was apparently not a significant factor in his family's life, and he, together with his seven brothers and sisters were brought up as Thai.²

Wichit spent his early years in Uthaitхани where he received a rudimentary education at a local temple school. During this time his ability as a student was recognized, and in 1910 he travelled to Bangkok at the suggestion of *Somdet*

¹ Note: Surnames were only formally introduced in 1913 and not long after this Wichit took it upon himself to coin the name Watanaprada, meaning 'happiness in progress' [*yindi nai khwam charoen*] for his family. Wichit, 1962 (a): 11.

² Wichit's paternal grandfather was Chinese (personal interview with Wichit's cousin Witun Watanaprada, a former Thai ambassador to South Vietnam and Brazil, Bangkok, 20 March 1986). Interestingly, in later life, after he had become a renowned Thai nationalist figure, Wichit denied this part of his heritage and was adamant that he had come from pure Thai stock. The name *Kimliang*, he ingenuously argued, did not reflect any Chinese ancestry, but rather was the result of a local custom whereby parents commonly gave their children Chinese names. Wichit 1962(a): 9.

Phrawanat (Heng Khemchari), a distant relative who was highly placed in the religious hierarchy at *Wat Mahathat*. With *Somdet* Phrawanat's help, Wichit became one of the first students to receive an education at the temple under the new, modern-style curriculum which concentrated on the study of Pali, Thai and mathematics. Of these three subjects Wichit excelled in the first two and, in 1916, received the highest mark in the grade 5 *Parian* /Pali course examinations.³ Subsequently he was recruited to work as a teacher in the temple, and spent the remainder of his period in the monkhood lecturing students and playing an active role in developing courses of instruction.

In addition to becoming well-versed in Pali, he worked with a number of other novices to produce a clandestine broadsheet known as the *Samphahula* which was disseminated in the temple grounds and other nearby areas of the city. This short handwritten paper, which carried articles on history, current affairs and religious matters as well as poetry, appeared on a regular basis for six months before it was stopped by the religious authorities.⁴ At the same time, Wichit was also at work on his first literary creation, *Khwam rak khong khu rak* [The Lover's Love], a contemporary romance set in what was then known as the Lao kingdom of Chiangmai. The first section of this prose narrative was accepted for publication and appeared in the magazine *Sayam muay* (Siamese Boxing) in 1914.⁵

While he was involved in these writing activities Wichit began to develop an interest in learning English and French, despite the fact that foreign language study was proscribed by the temple administration.⁶ Disregarding such prohibitions he somehow managed to obtain copies of various Western books and newspapers, and proceeded to teach himself. He was a ready learner, and soon started writing letters to the local English press putting forth his opinions on various subjects, although none of these appeared in print.⁷ At the same time, he also used his newly acquired linguistic skills to begin a translation of a short history of Germany contained in *Outlines of General History*, a popular English-language work by V.A. Renouf.⁸ When the translation was finally completed in 1918, Wichit sold it to a Chinese printer/merchant for twenty *baht* on the understanding that if there was a popular demand for the work they would share

³ In the *Parian* system, first introduced in 1893, students studied Pali was at a number of levels ranging from grade 3 to grade 7. A three-grade preliminary course in religious education known as *Nak Tham* (student of the Buddhist doctrine) was introduced in 1910. Bunnag, J., *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman (A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand)*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1973: 26.

⁴ Wichit, 1962 (a): 18-19.

⁵ *Duang prathip*, 11 December 1931.

⁶ It was feared that if a novice developed a knowledge of a foreign language there would be added temptation for him to forsake the religious life in favour of the attractions of the secular world. Wichit, 1962(a): 15.

⁷ *Duang prathip*, 21 December 1931.

⁸ *Ibid.* *Outlines of General History* was originally published by the Macmillan Company, N.Y., in 1909.

any profits from sales. However, the project met with little success and he temporarily abandoned his interest in writing.

By this time Wichit had left the monkhood with the hope of broadening his horizons and seeking advancement in the secular world. In order to do this he joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he was employed as a base-grade clerk earning 20 *baht* a month. Shortly after taking up this position he decided to try to improve his career opportunities in the bureaucracy by enrolling in the Law School as a part-time student. For almost two years he pursued his legal studies and had successfully completed the first part of his course when he gained one of the top passes in the Thai foreign service examinations and was sent to Paris as an assistant to the secretary of the Thai legation.

Wichit arrived in France at the beginning of 1921 and soon had the opportunity to travel extensively in Europe as part of his work. This included being appointed as the junior member of the Thai delegation attending meetings of the League of Nations in Geneva. He took part in seven full deliberations of the League over a five year period,⁹ and was later to describe the experience as akin to attending the most prestigious university in the world.¹⁰

Apart from being involved in these international meetings, Wichit was responsible for drafting much of the Legation's official correspondence, and writing letters on behalf of Thai students requesting financial assistance from Bangkok. As a result of this latter role he developed a cordial relationship with various students, including Pridi Phanomyong, the central intellectual figure in the revolutionary group which overthrew the monarchy in 1932. Wichit also became directly involved in the activities of the students' locally based organization the *Association Siamoise d'Intellectualité et d'Assistance Mutuelle* (S.I.A.M.). Not long after he became Third Councillor at the Legation in 1926, this involvement brought him into conflict with Prince Charun, the Thai minister, who wrote to king Prajadhipok and told him that Wichit:

has destroyed the result of 13 years work amongst the students by creating discontent, for he gave them everything they asked for... even increasing their allowances whether they deserved it or not. This shows his thoughts are far reaching and he intends to court favour from the students whether it be for their good or not.

In the same letter the prince continued,

When I formed the S.I.A.M. I did not intend it to become a political club and have tried to safeguard it from being such, by forbidding any officials to take part in its deliberations. But Vichitr

⁹ B.T.W.M., 26 August 1929: 38.

¹⁰ Wichit, 1962 (a): 37.

[Wichit] broke this rule of mine and took a very active part in it. In fact he with Pridi [Phanomyong], Chom Charuratana and some other private students were running it as they liked. I consider Vichit a dangerous man and [he] ought to be kept under observation. He is very ambitious.¹¹

In addition to establishing a friendship with Pridi, who was already considering ways to change the form of government in Siam,¹² Wichit also became acquainted with a young military student, Phibun Songkhram, and a number of other figures who were to become important in the post-1932 period, including *Phra* Sarasat Praban and Prince Wan Waithayakon.¹³ These associations were to be of great significance, particularly those with Pridi and Phibun, who more than anyone else helped facilitate Wichit's emergence as the dominant figure in Thai cultural life during the 1930s.

Apart from forging these important political connections, Wichit also sought to broaden his knowledge and further his education. Not long after arriving in France he began taking formal French lessons with one Madame Lucienne Laffitte [Madame Guillaume], a teacher recommended to him by the Thai minister.¹⁴ Over a period of time the relationship between teacher and student developed into a romance which finally led to marriage. Unfortunately, little is known about their relationship and details about Lucienne Laffitte are sketchy. What is known is that she was a well-read, cultivated woman who was also a gifted musician. Like Wichit, she was also interested in writing, and after they returned to Siam in 1927, collaborated with him to produce some of his most important early works including the famous *Prawatisat Sakon* (Universal History). However, despite this creative association and the birth of a son and daughter, the marriage ended in divorce; in early 1933 his ex-wife and their two children returned to Europe.¹⁵

¹¹ Batson, 1984: 80. Italics added.

¹² Chaloemkiat Phiunuan, *Khwaam khit kanmu'ang khong Pridi Phanomyong* (The Political Thought of Pridi Phanomyong), Mulanithi Komonkhimthong, Bangkok, 1986: 119.

¹³ Wichit, 1962 (a): 36.

¹⁴ In Wichit's cremation volume his wife is referred to as Madame Guillaume [Wichit, 1962 (a): 33]. However, an official file containing his personal details and employment history, presumably a more reliable source, gives her name as Lucienne Laffitte (Liwsian Lafit), N.A. S.T. 0701.1/8.

¹⁵ The information about Wichit's relationship with Lucienne Laffitte is taken from Wichit 1962 (a): 33,43,44. *B.T.W.M.* 2 April 1928, and *Duang Prathip* 12 March 1933. *Note.* As Wichit became better known as a writer, or more specifically as a writer concerned with national questions his marriage to a non-Thai became the object of mounting criticism. Even Prajadhipok had something to say on the matter and asked Wichit that if he was such a great nationalist, as he often claimed, why had he married a foreigner? Wichit's reply to this question however, is unknown. When the marriage eventually broke down the king went so far as to provide Wichit with a loan for his wife and children's passage back to Europe. Personal interview with Witun Watanaprada, Bangkok, 20 March 1986.

Apart from his French studies, Wichit also had an opportunity to study law and political science at Paris University as a part-time student,¹⁶ and attend the Pelman Institute which offered a range of courses in psychology, personal development and the power of positive thinking.¹⁷ While there are no details of his studies at Paris University in the available sources, Wichit's decision to enrol at the Pelman Institute was apparently influenced by a desire to overcome a speech impediment that had long caused him difficulty in public life.¹⁸ As a student in the Institute, he was introduced to the thoughts and ideas of a number of Western writers concerned with 'self-improvement' including Greville Kleiser, and the English moralist and bourgeois ideologist Samuel Smiles.¹⁹ These studies were to influence him greatly, and when he returned to Siam the knowledge he gained was expressed in many of his writings and public addresses.

Following his difficulties with Prince Charun, Wichit was transferred to the Thai Legation in London, with the result that his legal studies were cut short once again. Arriving in Britain he was made Secretary to the Legation, a position he held for a period of less than a year before being recalled home in mid-1927. On his return to Siam, Wichit continued to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Prince Devawong. He was known to be a favourite of the prince, a fact which no doubt greatly enhanced his career prospects.²⁰ Early in 1929 he was given a supervisory position in the Consular Division, and subsequently worked in a similar capacity in the Diplomatic Division (1930), before being transferred to the Political Division (1931). In 1931 he also became Secretary to the Thai representatives on the Permanent Franco-Siamese Commission on the Mekhong, a body involved in territorial demarcation issues, and in the following year became Assistant to the Director General of the Foreign Ministry's Political Department.²¹

Apart from his work in the bureaucracy, Wichit began to take a renewed interest in developing a writing career.²² This, in part, can be related to the general socio-

¹⁶ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Chiwit to su khong Wichit Wathakan* [Wichit Wathakan's Life of Struggle], Bangkok, 1962(b): 551-552.

¹⁷ Wichit, 1962 (a): 40.

¹⁸ Interview Witun Watanaprada, 20 March 1986.

¹⁹ Kleiser was the author of the books *How to Speak in Public* and *How to Develop Self - Confidence in Speech and Manner*, Wichit, 1962(a): 108-109. Smiles (1812-1904), the one time editor of the *Leeds Times* has been described by Talcott Parsons as 'an exponent of middle class, individualistic radicalism ... [whose] writings comprise not merely a series of precepts for success but a definite ethical doctrine.' See *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, E. Seligman [ed.], vol. 14, Macmillan, New York, 1934: 111-112.

²⁰ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Lok khrap sangkhom Thai* [Unmasking Thai Society], Komon Khimthong, Bangkok, 1984: 159.

²¹ Wichit, 1962(a): 2.

²² In a 1930 radio talk about 'The Life of the Writer', Wichit expressed his keen interest in becoming an author telling his listeners, 'if you are writers already or would like to become writers and are not prepared to starve to death [in order to succeed] it would be better to give up your ambitions ... I'm personally ready to die like Cervantes.' Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'The

economic changes that were taking place in Siam during the late 1920s, such as the increasing commoditization of publishing and the expansion of the reading market.²³ According to Batson 'in the early years of the Seventh Reign there was a quantum increase in the numbers of newspapers and journals printed in Siam', with some '136 new publications of less than daily frequency' and '35 new daily newspapers' appearing prior to 1932.²⁴

Wichit became involved in this movement of capital into the publishing business after he solicited a series of private loans and established the Wiriyanuphap Printing Company in October 1927.²⁵ The creation of this enterprise put him in a position to ensure the texts he produced would be published, and that he would receive guaranteed payment for their sale. It also gave him an opportunity to promote writers with whom he was friendly and shared similar views. While it is not clear which writers received Wichit's support during the first few years of the company's operations, there is no doubt that most of the publications coming off the Wiriyanuphap presses at the time were those of the proprietor himself. Wichit proved to be one of the most prolific writers in the history of the Thai print industry with his first major work, *Wicha paet prakan* [Eight Kinds of Knowledge], an odd fusion of Thai Buddhism, French popular psychology and Indian yoga being published in August 1928.²⁶ In the following twelve months a spate of books found their way onto the market including his celebration of historical, non-Thai military and political figures in *Mahaburut* [Great Men], published in October 1928, *Phuthanuphap* [The Power of the Buddha], an expression of his supernaturalistic religious views, in January 1929, and *Chitanuphap* [The Power of Mind], which was little more than a translation of one of the works of Paul Jacquot, a French psychology professor, in June 1929.²⁷ Towards the end of 1929 the company published the first part of *Prawatisat Sakon* [Universal History], and this was shortly followed by the appearance of further volumes.²⁸ In all there were twelve books in the

Life of the Writer' radio talk 10 December 1930, *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], Vol. 2, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973 (98-114): 114.

23 At this time Kulap Saipradit, who was later to become one of Thailand's best known critical journalists and novelists, was suggesting that writing should be organized along more commercial lines in order to develop it as a professional occupation. Sukanya Tirawanat, *Nangsu' phim thai chak patiwat 2475 su patiwat 2516* [Thai Newspapers in the Period Between the 1932 Revolution and and 1973 Revolution] Thai Watana Panich, Bangkok, 1982: 58-59.

24 Batson, 1984: 72.

25 Wichit, 1962(a): 45-46.

26 Ibid.: 106.

27 Wichit Wathakan, *Luang. Mahaburut* [Great Men], Soemwit Banakhan, Bangkok, 1970. Wichit Wathakan *Phuthanuphap kap Chitanuphap* [The Power of the Buddha. The Power of Mind], Soemwit Bannakan, Bangkok, 1961. For further details regarding *Phutanuphap* in English see, K.P. Landon, *Siam in Transition*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1968: 211-212.

28 Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Chiwit kan to su khong Luang Wichit Wathakan* [Luang Wichit Wathakan's Life of Struggle], Bangkok, 1962: 555.

first edition which went on to become one of the best selling publications of the era.²⁹ Despite the fact that he had no formal academic training, this work established his reputation as an historian, and at the beginning of 1932 he took up a part-time lecturing position at Chulalongkorn University teaching history.³⁰

Somewhat earlier he celebrated his thirty third birthday [11 August 1931] by launching his own tri-monthly journal *Duang prathip* [The Lantern].³¹ This publication, which ran to an average of one hundred pages an issue, featured articles by Wichit and a number of other writers such as Sathian Phantharangsi and Chanya Bunnak on subjects ranging from religion and history, to free market economics, nationalism and current affairs. In addition, the journal, like other papers of the time, also published works of fiction in serial form. Not long after *Duang prathip* appeared, however, Wichit transferred the responsibility for its publication together with the operations of the *Wiriyanuphap* printing house to Lek Komet's *Thai mai* newspaper for whom he was working as an editor.³² The reason for this development is not clear. Wichit himself claimed that it was because 'writers could not own [such enterprises]', although a more likely explanation is that the company was experiencing financial difficulties caused by the Great Depression, and could no longer survive as an independent entity.³³ Whatever the reason, Wichit continued to produce books and write articles as if nothing had changed.

Apart from writing books, journal and newspaper articles Wichit also presented his ideas to the public via talks and lectures on Siam's fledgling broadcasting system. Local radio transmission had begun in 1925 when an experimental shortwave broadcast of music and news was made from the Bangsue army base to a number of receiving points both in Bangkok and the provinces [Khorat, Hua Hin, and Ayuthaya]. Further experimental transmissions took place from 1927 with a regular service being inaugurated on the 25 February 1931. The introduction of radio was to prove highly popular, and by the end of the year almost 13,000 receivers were registered, with some 80 percent of these being crystal sets.³⁴

²⁹ Wichit, 1962(a): 107. His other writings also met with a good deal of popular success and by 1931 he had some 21 separate titles to his credit, with sales in excess of 43,000 copies, valued at over 108,000 *baht*. *B.T.W.M.*, 10 August 1931.

³⁰ Wichit, 1962(a): 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 47. Note: At the beginning of 1932 the government approved *Duang prathip* to be read in schools. *Duang prathip*, 14 February 1932.

³² *Ibid.*: 48.

³³ *Ibid.* The financially tenuous nature of the print industry during Prajadhipok's reign is noted by Batson, 1984: 72.

³⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, 7 July 1925, *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/22207, *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1931], F.O. 371/16260, *B.T.W.M.* 8 September 1930.

Wichit's involvement with radio began during the latter experimental stage in 1930, when he gave a series of addresses on the role of women.³⁵ After the system became fully operational the following year, he was to be heard with increasing frequency discussing such subjects as religious belief, the history of newspapers, and the importance of the monarchy.³⁶ Thus, in addition to being a writer and bureaucrat, Wichit became one of the first Siamese radio personalities, an individual whose ideas were given an immediacy that had not previously been possible.

This brings to an end the brief description of Wichit's life prior to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. We may now turn to look more closely at some of his work and the influences which helped shape it.

3.3 *The Incorporation of Western Ideas in Thai Writing*

A key factor in the development of the new social discourses of nationalism, civilization and progress, which accompanied Siam's gradual incorporation into the international capitalist economic order, was the translation and adaptation of Western texts and literary forms by local intellectuals. As has been discussed earlier, this general process of cultural appropriation began during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was marked by the publication of various books, newspapers and magazines which introduced readers to a range of foreign ideas, and provided translations of Western fiction, most particularly Victorian novels and short stories of the 'penny dreadful' genre.³⁷

In addition to the many translations of 'literary' texts, a number of more serious, practical works of Western origin also began to appear. During the early part of the twentieth century some of Herbert Spencer's writings on education were translated by a *Phraya* Medha, and an unnamed, socialist-style work on political economy was translated and adapted by *Phraya* Suriyanuwat (Koet Bunnak), though its publication was suppressed.³⁸

³⁵ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'Phuying' [Women], radio address 3 November 1930, *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], vol. 1, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973 (84-95).

³⁶ See Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*. *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], vol. 1 and 2, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973.

³⁷ See Wipha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, Thai Wattana Panich, Bangkok, 1975: 32-35. Wyatt, 1969: 129, 134. Reynolds, 1976: 134. Sathian Chanthimathon, *Saithan wannakam phu'a chiwit khong Thai*, [The Course of Critical Thai Literature], Chaophraya, Bangkok, 1982: 68-70. *Note*: Under Damrong as Education Minister, a new elitist school system was created in which 'the mechanics of reading, writing, and translation into and from English' was taught. Wyatt 1969: 134. This, no doubt further aided the Thais in process of appropriating Western ideas.

³⁸ *B.T.W.M.*, 12 August 1918. *Note*: The fact that *Phraya* Suriyanuwat's work, *Suppayasat* (Economics), was largely a translation has not been recognized by Thai scholars. Chatthip Nartsupha for one, seems to infer that the text was a wholly original work. See Chatthip Nartsupha, 'The Economic Thought of Phraya Suriyanuwat', in *Readings in Thailand's Political*

Elsewhere, in the field of Thai historical writing, major changes were ushered in with the work of Prince Damrong, who was said to have been strongly influenced by the work of the nineteenth century German historian Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886).³⁹ Ranke advocated the critical study of sources, and emphasized that history should only be based on the 'purest, most immediate documents'.⁴⁰ He was also particularly interested with the notion of historical units of time, or epochs, which in his view possessed a 'unique essence'. These periods he asserted could be 'linked together' to produce a 'universal history from the beginning to the present day'. Having said this he went on to argue that the purpose of historical research was not simply to satisfy academic interest, but was something which 'should above all benefit [one's] own nation'.⁴¹

These conceptions and prescriptions were absorbed by Damrong who went on to map out the dimensions of official Thai historical discourse. The basic categories he used in his work, those of the Sukhothai, Ayuthayan and Bangkok periods and their various royal rulers, came to exert, in one way or another, the most powerful and pervasive influence on subsequent Thai historical writing.⁴²

As Damrong was setting out to create a more modern, rational conception of the past, the young Wichit, who was living and studying at *Wat Mahathat*, also became involved in this process of cultural appropriation, or modelling when he began translating the German history mentioned above. Broadly speaking, the work was concerned with the history of the Germanic peoples from the pre-Christian era until the early twentieth century. In common with Western history of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it featured a linear, evolutionary view of progress in which a series of events (i.e. wars, movements of people, legal changes) culminated with the emergence of modern independent nations.⁴³ Progress was also strongly identified with particular cultural groups, in this case the Prussians, who as a result of hard work and frugality came to dominate other German speaking communities and play the leading role in bringing the German nation into being.

The concepts of progress and nation at the heart of this work had, as we have seen, become central to Thai socio-political discourse. In producing his translation,

Economy, Vichitvong na Pombhejara [ed.], Bangkok Printing Enterprise Co., Bangkok, 1978: 402-413.

³⁹ Kopkua Suwannathat cited in Charnvit Kasetsiri's 'Thai Historiography from Ancient Times to the Modern Period', in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, A. Reid and D. Marr [eds.], Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. (Asia), Singapore 1979: 165.

⁴⁰ Stern, Fritz [ed.], *The Varieties of History From Voltaire to the Present*, Meridan Books, New York, 1956 : 54. *Note* : Ranke is widely regarded as 'the father of modern historical scholarship'. *Ibid.* : 54.

⁴¹ Stern, 1956: 61-62, word in italics added.

⁴² Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984: 161.

⁴³ Carr, E.H., *What is History?*, Penguin Books, Great Britain, 1985: 43.

these ideas were reinforced in Wichit's thought. Subsequently, they were further impressed upon him through his first hand experience of Western society and international relations during the 1920s, and became central to his work on history and motivation/personal development following his return to Siam.

3.4 History

It is useful to begin the discussion of Wichit's mature historical work by examining a theoretically oriented text he originally prepared for his students at Chulalongkorn University, entitled *Khwaam ru bu'ang ton nai prawatisat* [Fundamental Historical Knowledge].⁴⁴ In this text, Wichit explained that history [*prawatisat*] was a new way of apprehending the past which was quite different than the old chronicle tradition [*phongsawadan*]. The essential difference, he pointed out, was that the latter type of writing was concerned solely with making a chronological record of major events and the activities of kings; while 'history' was more complex and far reaching in that its object was to describe the way of life and progress (i.e. increasing material, technical sophistication) of societies in general. In other words, the concept of history offered a new cosmology of the world, quite unlike the narrow, individual focus of the chronicles, since it recognized the dynamic existence of a broader community (i.e the nation).

The sources of descriptive history, in Wichit's view, consisted of an eclectic range of written and unwritten materials, including the records of astrologers (seen to be particularly important for establishing dates), the eye-witness accounts of writers or influential figures who were involved in important events in the past, official reports, inscriptions, old coins (useful for determining the dates and names of kings), works of art, weapons, household utensils and so on.

In addition to these materials, Wichit, drawing on the work of the French narrative historian René Grousset (1885-1952), stressed that in order to have a firm historical understanding it was also necessary to have a good knowledge of world geography, since geographical factors had an important affect on societies *per se* and their material development.⁴⁵ Wichit saw peoples living in the arctic regions, deserts, and thick tropical jungles, such as the Eskimoes and blacks, whom he regarded as undifferentiated groups, as having a rudimentary, self-perpetuating and static existence. This view paralleled that put forward by Thammasakmontri in his school texts

⁴⁴ The text later appeared in *Duang prathip* (21 May 1932) and it is from this source that the following section is drawn.

⁴⁵ Wichit freely acknowledged that he greatly admired and respected Grousset's work. See *Duang prathip*, 30 April 1933.

mentioned earlier. Similarly, the peoples of the Caucasian and Mongol races (i.e. Thai, Chinese, Japanese, etc.), who lived under less extreme physical conditions were able to create dynamic economies that allowed them to progress and develop into indentifiable nations. By virtue of the fact that progress was fundamental to Wichit's concept of history, it followed that the description of these Caucasian and Mongol societies or nations was the historian's goal.

He further pointed out that a knowledge of history had particular uses, the most important of these being related to the fact that in the modern era when civilized peoples (*arayachon*) could no longer exist independently, there was a need for various nations to gain a greater understanding of one another.

By studying history we can know the character [*nisai*] of other people and thereby improve our relations with them. Conversely, if foreigners are familiar with our history we will respect them and relations will improve for our mutual benefit.⁴⁶

Thus history not only described the progress of nations, but was also seen to be a crucial means of facilitating this process of material development.

Wichit's general theoretical, methodological approach was embodied in his multi-volume study *Prawatisat sakon* [Universal History]. In this text he took the history of Siam, as developed in the earlier work of Damrong added a few of his own ideas on the political motivation and policies of the Thai kings and set this into a comparative, world historical framework. He saw this conceptualization of the Thai past in international terms as a necessary development, since:

If we only study one thing we will not be able to understand that thing well. But when we study that thing from a comparative perspective we will have a much clearer understanding of it.⁴⁷

The significance of this comparative historical framework has been remarked on by Reynolds who noted that through such means Wichit was, 'responsible, with Wachirawut having paved the way, for transmitting a specific form of nationalism learned from Europe'.⁴⁸ By presenting the history of Siam in relation to that of other countries Wichit tried to indicate the importance of the country in world terms and thereby instill a sense of pride in his readers. He did this by incorporating information from works which portrayed the Thai in highly favourable terms. Among these sources was *Lak Thai* (The Essence of the Thai), an historical overview of the Thai produced by

⁴⁶ *Duang prathip*, 21 May 1932.

⁴⁷ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Prawatisat sakon* [Universal History], [Vol.6] Wiranuphap Press, Bangkok, 1930: 9.

⁴⁸ Reynolds, 1984: 17.

Khun Wichitmatra (Sa'nga Kanchanakhaphan) in 1926.⁴⁹ Wichit also drew on League of Nations reports from the early 1920s which classified Siam as being more advanced than a number of European nations such as Austria, Bulgaria and Greece.⁵⁰

In addition to these comparative references, another element of the nationalist discourse Wichit was projecting focussed on a perceived relationship between Siam's geographical boundaries and the country's history of independence. According to Wichit, the shape of the Thai nation [*Chat Thai*] resembled an axe, a weapon of war, which was personified in the martial nature of the Thai people. As Vajiravudh had done earlier, he stressed that the Thais, under the leadership of warrior kings had fought and defeated enemies from both within and without their territory, maintaining national independence and bringing happiness to the people.

Apart from presenting the Thais in martial terms with a strong sense of identity like Vajiravudh, Wichit also expressed his ideas in simple, easy to understand language aimed at appealing to as wide an audience as possible. It was little wonder then, that such an affirmative and entertaining expression of the past as *Prawatisat sakon* was so well received by the reading public. In 1931 the history was officially acknowledged by the state when it was chosen by the Royal Institute to be presented to the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation in Paris as a work of distinction.⁵¹ Thus, although Wichit was essentially a popularizer, this recognition was a clear indication that he had established himself as an historian whose opinions and judgements were to be taken seriously.

3.5 Civilization, Progress

At the same time as producing this historical work, Wichit also devoted a great deal of energy to disseminating [his] ideas of civilization, progress, motivation and personal development to the public. As will be shown, these concepts were seen not as discrete entities, but rather as closely related to one another.

The concept of civilization held by Wichit was perhaps most cogently expressed in a talk he gave at his old school, *Wat Mahathat*, on 21 August 1930.⁵² He told his

⁴⁹ Wichitmatra, *Khun, Lak Thai*, Odeon Store, Bangkok, 1963. At the time of its publication *Lak Thai* won a prize in a literary competition organized by Prajadhipok. *Duang prathip*, 21 December 1931. Wichitmatra's study, in turn took a good deal of its material from *The Tai Race: Elder Brother to the Chinese*, the work of the American missionary W.C. Dodd, who claimed the Thais had an older civilization than the Chinese and other Asian societies.

⁵⁰ Wichit, 1930: 19, 42.

⁵¹ *B.T.W.M.*, 10 August 1931.

⁵² Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'Arayatham' [Civilization] in *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], vol. 1, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973: 54-64. Note: Wichit's use of the new Pali-derived word *arayatham* rather than *siwilai* the more familiar term borrowed from English can be seen as a reflection of increasing nationalist consciousness.

listeners that while many people in Siam had heard about civilization, few actually understood what it meant. He claimed that the widely held belief that the term signified material and technological sophistication was incorrect, arguing instead that civilization was essentially concerned with human qualities. In his view, only countries that had a population of 'good people' (*khon di*) could be seen as truly civilized.⁵³ Wichit saw these 'good people', on whom civilization was based, as having four essential attributes: a high degree of knowledge, a strong sense of morality, good behaviour, and a willingness to be helpful to one's fellows.⁵⁴ He pointed out that although people in Siam lacked sufficient [modern] knowledge, they possessed these other qualities in abundance, thus, 'even though we do not have ten-story buildings, ten-thousand-ton battleships, or underground railways ... we can still be considered as being civilized.'⁵⁵ Continuing to develop this line of thought, Wichit asserted:

the result of our civilization is to be seen in the fact that we have twice lost our country to the Burmese and then regained it within the space of two or three years. It appears that there is no other country in the world which has lost and regained its freedom two times. We still have our independence while our neighbours do not ... and we have the respect of other countries. If that's not civilization what is?⁵⁶

In broad terms Wichit's concept of civilization, which stressed such things as good behaviour, morality, and unified action for independence, can be seen to parallel that held by Vajiravudh (i.e. civilization = good citizens). Thus, like the king, Wichit revealed himself to have an essentially conservative worldview, which contrasted markedly to that of other members of bureaucratic middle class who saw civilization largely in terms of democratic political reform.

Related to Wichit's conception of civilization was his notion of progress. For him progress was expressed in particular attitudes and forms of behaviour, as well as being embodied in technology and material objects. This view was expounded at length in an address he gave to a group of provincial officials in his home province of Uthaitani during April 1931.⁵⁷ He told his audience that progress meant to grow or develop, and hence was a natural part of life. In order to achieve progress, Wichit believed, it was necessary for individuals to increase their knowledge. To illustrate this point he asserted that:

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 56.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 59.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 62.

⁵⁷ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'Khwaam charoen' [Progress], in *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], vol. 1, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973 [116-148]: 129.

in the past a person who could read and write would be an aristocrat, nowadays, however, even a lowly clerk needs a reasonable degree of education ... [By contrast] If a person had my level of knowledge three hundred years ago, they would have been a *Phraya* [the second highest rank of conferred nobility], but now it is only enough to be a *Luang* [the fourth highest rank of conferred nobility]. If I was born in two hundred years time with the same amount of knowledge I would probably only be a village headman.⁵⁸

On a more specific level, Wichit suggested that progress meant particular forms of knowledge and technology, and claimed that these were essential to Siam's future.

In the past we could take care of our individual needs such as milling our own rice. That time is past and we now need mechanized rice mills and trucks to transport the rice.... farmers need to know some mathematics so they can trade effectively and avoid being cheated. Merchants must consider their timing and be careful in their dealings. ... We need a greater awareness, for if we can't compete with other countries [in the international marketplace] then we are finished.⁵⁹

Wichit further maintained that in order to progress, individuals were required to conduct themselves in 'a modern manner' which he described in the following terms:

Fifty years ago people would have probably walked from Uthai [Uthaithani province] to Bangkok. ... but if I told you I had walked here from the capital you would probably think I was mad. We have trains so why not use them? Similarly, ... if I wore a loin cloth (*phakhawma*) you would say I was most definitely insane. I have to wear shoes and socks, a shirt and coat. It's the same for all of you ... we are all hot, but we have to deport ourselves in a modern way.⁶⁰

In summation, Wichit stated that Chulalongkorn, by initiating his modern reforms had brought much progress to the country, and this in turn allowed the Thais to remain an independent, sovereign people. The administration of King Prajadhipok was portrayed as being similarly committed to progress and the freedom it implied. As such, Wichit argued, it was vital that members of the bureaucracy support the monarch's commitment by acting in accordance with the orders of their superiors — 'like a child heeding the words of his father'.⁶¹

To restate the above, Wichit's idea of progress stressed the need for Siam to continue its adjustment to the wider world by developing its educational and technical capacity. This, in turn, would allow Siam to develop economically and strengthen itself

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 134. Note: There were five levels of conferred nobility. In descending order these were: *Chaophraya*, *Phraya*, *Phra*, *Luang*, and *Khun*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 136.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 137-138.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: 140, 147.

and earn continuing recognition as an sovereign state within the international community. At the same time, Wichit sought to identify progress with the monarchy, thereby further legitimizing the existing order in the face of its critics.

3.6 Motivation and Personal Development

The notions of human endeavour and development implicit to Wichit's view of civilization and progress were inspired by the writings of Samuel Smiles, most notably his famous book *Self Help*.⁶² In this work, Smiles provided short biographical accounts of various inventors, scientists, and business figures whose achievements were of national importance. Smiles was to write that:

National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness and vice.⁶³

Wichit's second major publication *Mahaburut* [Great Men, 1928], which was closely modeled on *Self Help*, affirmed the same type of positive relation between specific individuals and national progress, but did this by describing the lives of important statesmen and military leaders. It is reasonable to assume that Wichit chose to focus on political figures, as opposed to the scientists and entrepreneurs in Smiles' work, because they provided useful models for stimulating local nationalist consciousness.

A parallel development was taking place in Vietnam at the same time. As nationalist opposition to the French increased, local writers began publishing a range of inspirational biographies which focussed on :

not just any heroes, but activists, men and women who had seen a need and proceeded to do something about it. Most prized of all were those individuals who had demonstrated great courage against seemingly insurmountable odds.⁶⁴

⁶² Smiles, Samuel, *Self Help*, John Murray, London, 1969 [First published 1859, and reprinted over seventy times]. Note: Translations of Smiles work were widely read in Japan during the 1880s. Hane, 1986: 106.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 36.

⁶⁴ Marr, D., 'Vietnamese Historical Re-assessment, 1900-1944', in Reid, A. and Marr, D. [eds.], *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, Heinemann Educational Books, Singapore, 1979 (pp.313-339): 326. Some thirty-five biographies of non-Vietnamese were produced, and another seventy-seven were devoted to indigenous figures, the majority being 'leaders of anti-foreign struggles, dynastic founders, and military figures.' Of the non-Vietnamese 'heroes', Sun Yat-sen was the most written about with a total of six works devoted to his life while other popular figures included Columbus and Washington who were the subject of three biographies each. *Ibid.*: 323.

In contrast to the Vietnamese accounts, however, *Mahaburut* did not include any indigenous 'great men', Wichit claiming that there was not sufficient information about such figures in Siam.⁶⁵ The personalities he did choose, included Napoleon, Bismark, Disraeli, Gladstone, Okubo Toshimichi [one of the architects of Japan's modernization during the Meiji Restoration], and Mussolini.⁶⁶

In addition to providing a series of biographical profiles, *Mahaburut* also included a discussion of the similarities in the backgrounds of 'great men' as well as outlining the essential qualities of such individuals, and how these qualities could be developed.

A feature common to a majority of the characters in the text was the poverty or hardship they had experienced early in their lives [i.e, Mussolini had been forced to beg during the time he spent in Switzerland; Napoleon went to school in ragged clothes].⁶⁷ These difficult circumstances were seen to be a central factor in developing character and resourcefulness. Furthermore, a single-minded desire to acquire a broad education despite all types of obstacles, was regarded as another crucial element in the makeup of 'great men'.

Following the biographical section of the text, forty general attributes commonly possessed by great men were listed. Of these different characteristics, Wichit emphasized five that were of particular importance:

- 1) Having an aim [*Khwaam mung mai*], which meant that one should set a specific goal and then aim higher in order to achieve it. According to the author, the principle involved here was the same as firing a gun at a target. That is, if one wished to hit a particular spot, one had to raise the gun sight above the target to compensate for the diminishing velocity of the bullet over the distance it travelled.
- 2) Strongmindedness [*Khwaam pen phu mi hua chai khem khaeng*], which referred to inner strength plus the ability to withstand hardship and keep secrets to oneself.
- 3) Concentration [*Samathi*], or the ability to focus on just one thing at a time.
- 4) Self-Confidence [*Khwaam chu'a nai tua eng*], which required that one should develop a belief in oneself despite any obstacles that may present themselves.

⁶⁵ Wichit, 1970: 25.

⁶⁶ Of these individuals, Wichit noted that the fascist leader was the most controversial from a Thai perspective since he was held by some to be a revolutionary who had undermined the Italian king's authority. As such, writing about him could be construed as a form of support for this type of activity. *Ibid.*: 71. Given this fact, it was not suprising that Sun Yat-sen, who was so popular with Vietnamese biographers, did not feature in Wichit's book, and when a text devoted to the life and work of the Chinese revolutionary appeared during the late 1920s, the royalist authorities acted quickly to have it banned. Sathian 1982: 134. *Note*. During the latter 1920s the growing politization of the expanding Chinese community led the state to enact a number of anti-Chinese measures such as forbidding the establishment of a local Kuomintang association, and promulgating a stringent immigration law. *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 12 September 1929, *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1927], F.O. 371/13264.

⁶⁷ Wichit, 1970: 89.

- 5) Will-power [*Manomyithi*], a quality very similar to strong-mindedness, but unlike the former in that it was externally oriented.⁶⁸

For Wichit 'great people' were 'good people'. He argued that the time had arrived when it was necessary for individual Thai to develop these qualities in order to create a bright future for Siam.

We want to see our country progress as elsewhere, but most people think that progress comes from extensive territory or many colonies ... as is the case with the British Empire. While this is not really incorrect it is not perfectly true either because the real significance of a country is not ... measured in territory, but rather in terms of having good people.⁶⁹

Apart from writing and giving public lectures Wichit was also to present his ideas on motivation and personal development to the general populace in a series of inspirational radio talks at the height of the Depression in 1931. The influence of Samuel Smiles' work was again very much in evidence in these talks, with some emphasis being given to the English writer's views on personality development, particularly the inculcation of punctuality and self-reliance.⁷⁰ Smiles' ideas on the value and importance of work were given even more prominence. In one of Wichit's more strident addresses he argued:

Work makes people conduct themselves according to rules and regulations. Work makes people exercise self-restraint and discipline....Without people working a country will always remain uncivilized (*pa thuan*)...An individual who works, even if he/she young in age, is a real person. As for those who have lived for a long time and done nothing, they are no different than a useless stalk of grass.⁷¹

In short, what Wichit was doing in his writings and radio lectures was to transmit a bourgeois individualistic concept of self to a Thai audience. As such, Wichit, can be seen as playing an early contributory role in developing a social ethos fundamental to the growth of an indigenous capitalism.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 112-171.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 181. It should be pointed out that Wichit was not the only writer emphasizing motivation and hard work at the time, for this was the central theme of one of Siam's first 'genuine' novels, *Luk phu chai* [A Real Man] by Kulap Saipradit. Reflecting the hopes for change and increased opportunity during the early years of Prajadhipok's reign, *Luk phu chai* was the story of a poor young carpenter's son whose single-minded efforts allowed him to rise from his humble origins to become a high ranking judge. See Kulap Saipradit, *Luk phu chai* [A Real Man], Khlangwithaya, Bangkok, 1975.

⁷⁰ *Duang prathip*, 21 October 1931.

⁷¹ *Duang prathip*, 11 December 1931.

3.7 Wichit the Critic

Interestingly, while Wichit generally cast himself as an avid and enthusiastic supporter of the monarchy and royalist rule in his various works, it may also be seen that this commitment was, at times, less than total. For example, in the radio lecture cited above he talked about the demise of royal power in other countries;

History acts as our witness, that, for the most part kings who have fallen from power have done so as a result of a lack of effort on their part.....the hard working, purposeful king is not likely to do so.⁷²

Given the fact that not long before this broadcast was made, Prajadhipok had made a well publicized admission of his inability to cope with the economic crisis brought about by the Depression,⁷³ Wichit's comment, made in the context of a talk about desirable or necessary human qualities, was equivocal and could be interpreted as a criticism of the monarchy. Similarly, in Wichit's earlier work, *Mahaburut*, a critique of the existing order can also be discerned. By equating the national progress of various countries with hard working individuals from humble backgrounds, Wichit was, in effect, suggesting Siamese national progress could be more readily achieved by similar types of ambitious, motivated Thai commoners (such as himself) rather than members of the hereditary royal ruling elite.

Another small, but telling example of Wichit's criticism of the existing order, and by implication the throne, appeared in his editorial column in *Thai mai* following the government's controversial decision to implement a salary tax during mid-April 1932. Like many other press commentators Wichit voiced strong opposition to the tax (which had the greatest impact on the middle level bureaucracy of which he was a member),⁷⁴ and argued that such a drastic measure could have been avoided if the authorities had been more adept at handling the nation's economic difficulties when they first became apparent in 1930. By way of conclusion he ironically remarked;

The year of the 150th anniversary of the Chakri dynasty will not be the only thing that will be remembered, since the new tax laws are with us as well.⁷⁵

Shortly afterwards however, in another broadcast in his radio series on personal motivation and development, Wichit did not voice the slightest trace of this sort of

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Batson, 1984: 205.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 220-221.

⁷⁵ *Thai mai*, 25 April 1932.

criticism. Instead he sought to promote his basic ideas on the significance of work and in the process re-affirmed the notion of duty [*nathi*] that had been so keenly articulated by Vajiravudh years earlier:

We have duties from the day we are born until the day we die. We have a duty to our parents that comes from all that they have done for us. When we grow up we have a duty to sacrifice our life for the nation if need be. We have a duty towards those who have supported us, the king in particular. Man's right [*sir*] to exist in this world is based on one thing — the ability to perform his duty. Whoever does not perform their duty has no right to exist.⁷⁶

This ambiguity in Wichit's thought may appear puzzling; at one and the same time both supportive and critical of the absolute monarchy. Such equivocation, however, can perhaps best be understood in light of the fact that although Wichit was on good terms with Pridi and other intellectuals desirous of political change, either covertly sharing their views or at least being sympathetic towards them, he was also favourably inclined towards a number of aristocratic officials such as Prince Devawongse and *Phraya Siwisanwacha* who had furthered his career.⁷⁷ Clearly, he was an individual whose loyalties were strongly divided, though these tended towards the latter group until their eclipse during the turbulent political struggle which took place during the first eighteen months after the absolute monarchy was overthrown on 24 June 1932. The changing nature of Wichit's political affiliations during this period will be examined at length in the following chapter.

3.8 Conclusion

Wichit represented a new type of individual in Thai society, a commoner who had been exposed to a 'modern' education as well as a period of travel, study and service in the Europe. In his writing and talks over the newly established radio broadcast network he introduced the Thai public to the ideas and knowledge he gained from these experiences. He promoted a Western notion of history conceived of in terms of nations and progress. At the same time, he also helped promote and popularize nationalist ideas that had previously been articulated by Vajiravudh. Finally, he helped promote bourgeois ideas and concepts about work and effort that were fundamental to the development of a capitalist economic order. As social commentator Sulak Sivaraksa has accurately noted, Wichit was 'Thailand's Dale Carnegie'.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Duang prathip*, 1 June 1932.

⁷⁷ Wichit dedicated one of his earliest books *Chitanuphap*, to *Phraya Siwisanwacha*. Wichit Wathankan, *Luang, Chiwit kan to su khong Luang Wichit Wathakan* [Luang Wichit Wathakan's Life of Struggle], Phan Fa Phithaya, Bangkok, 1962: 554.

⁷⁸ Sulak, 1984: 161.

Chapter 4

The Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy and *Luang Wichit's Changing Political Allegiance 1932-1933*

4.1 Introduction

The overthrow of the King Prajadhipok government on 24 June 1932 saw the world's last surviving absolute monarchy pass into history.¹ In general, most writers have suggested that this event brought royal political power and influence to an abrupt and sudden end.² However, as will be argued in this chapter, such a view is quite misleading. From the very beginning, a bitter struggle developed between members of the old order with those of the new, a struggle that was only decided in favour of the latter group in October 1933 when a royalist counter-revolution led by the king's cousin Prince Boworadet was crushed by the constitutional administration of *Phaya Phahon Phonphayuhasena*. In this chapter a broad overview of this sixteen month period of political division and rancour is examined with particular emphasis being given to *Wichit's* activities during this time. The period as such is not treated as a whole but divided into two phases: the first of these from 24 June 1932 until 20 June 1933, the second from 20 June until the defeat of the Boworadet rebellion. The reason for making such a division is as follows: during the first phase the group that originally mounted the revolution were unable to fully establish political authority vis-à-vis their opponents from the old regime and launched a second coup on 20 June in an attempt to do so; the second phase by contrast, was one in which the revolutionaries gained the political ascendancy over their royal rivals. In this chapter general developments during these phases are discussed in two sections which are each followed by a more specific section focussing on *Wichit's* activities during both of these phases. Before proceeding with this task however, it is first useful to look, albeit briefly, at the factors which led up to the overthrow of the monarchy on 24 June 1932.

¹ Batson, 1984: 263.

² For example, see Wilson who writes: 'On June 24, 1932, ... the coup group moved to seize certain key positions in the city of Bangkok and various high officials of the government. The end of the absolute monarchy was proclaimed, and the king was invited to rule under a constitution. Within a few days the matter was settled.' D.A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1962: 13. Another similar view is expressed by Thawatt Mokarapong: 'The 1932 Revolution transformed the People's Party at one stroke from a small and unknown conspiratorial group to a ruling party with its legal authority unquestionably recognized by the docile bureaucracy throughout the realm.' Thawatt Mokarapong, *History of the Thai Revolution*, Chalermit, Bangkok, 1972: 105.

4.2 Background to 24 June 1932

Not long after coming to power, King Prajadhipok, the seventh monarch in the Chakri dynasty, was to make the following prophetic statement:

The position of the King has become one of great difficulty. The movements of opinion in this country give a sure sign that the days of Autocratic Rule are numbered.³

This assessment was based on two factors: rising political expectations among the emergent middle class, and the rapid erosion of royal prestige among the educated and informed sections of the populace during the previous reign. As we have seen, calls for some type of constitution had been made since the latter part of the nineteenth century. With regard to Vajiravudh's reign, it has been shown that rumour and favouritism characterized the court winning the king many enemies. More serious, was Vajiravudh's profligate spending and disregard for economic matters which finally led the country towards a financial crisis towards the end of 1925.⁴ In the view of the British Minister, the situation became so serious that had' Rama VI [Vajiravudh] not,... died on the 26th November 1925, of his accumulated diseases' it 'might have stimulated the discontented princes into bringing about a coup d'état.'⁵ However, even Vajiravudh's passing, according to the British, did not signify a great improvement in Siam's prospects for the future:

The Chakri dynasty is not ... likely to be fertile in the future in individuals of outstanding force and character; in spite of considerable infusions of Chinese blood the Siamese Royal Family shows unmistakable signs of debilitation through inbreeding ... The most sympathetic analysis fails to detect any healthy principle at work, either internally or externally which would be likely to counteract that rapid cyclic process of growth and decay to which Asiatic Administrations seem subject.⁶

In marked contrast to this view was that expressed by the *Bangkok Times*, which saw the assumption of King Prajadhipok to power as heralding a 'new era ...

³ Batson. 1984: 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 18, 26. The parlous state of Siam's finances was made public in the months after the king's death. Treasury reserves were said to be seriously depleted and it was claimed that 'insolvency was a real threat' It was also revealed that the king's personal estate had outstanding liabilities totalling between five and six million *baht*. *B.T.W.M.*, 5 April 1926, 28 July 1926.

⁵ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1926], F.O. 371/12535. The king's death was described by Greg, the British Minister, as 'the best service [he] ever rendered his people.' *Great Britain*. F.O. 371/10973, 26 November 1925.

⁶ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1926], F.O. 371/12535.

full of hope and promise'.⁷ Indeed, at the very beginning of the reign there was some reason for optimism. In the economic sphere, the incoming government soon moved to avert a worsening of the financial situation by implementing substantial budget cuts and retrenching between nine and ten thousand officials, which effectively reduced the overall number of public employees by some ten percent.⁸ By the middle of 1926 these austerity measures '... seemed to be working, and the government account was no longer showing a deficit.'⁹

On the political front, there was a move away from one man rule with the establishment of the Supreme Council of State, a powerful advisory body to the king composed of five senior princes.¹⁰ This initiative was regarded in a generally favourable light, and it was widely expected that there would be further steps taken to broaden or transform the political system.¹¹ In Paris, the Prince of Songkhla even went so far as to tell a gathering of officials and students at the Thai legation:

The new king will do something that no Thai king has done before, he will give the people a constitution in the manner of other civilized countries.¹²

However, these hopes for political change proved to be illusory as there were no tangible indications that Prajadhipok would relinquish his supra-legal status and grant his subjects a constitution. Over the following year the lack of political reform in Siam was to become a growing preoccupation for the Paris-based student lawyer Pridi Phanomyong [who had been among the prince's audience], and in February 1927 he convened a series of meetings with six other Thai students, including the young military officers Phibun Songkhram, Thatsanai Mitraphakdi and Prayun Phamonmontri, to discuss the future of their country.¹³ The result of these deliberations was the formation of a clandestine association known as the *Khana ratsadon* [The People's Party], whose stated aim was to replace the absolute monarchy with a more representative political form.¹⁴

While this ambitious resolution was little more than an expression of wishful thinking at the time, the economic crisis engendered by the Great Depression was to

⁷ *B.T.W.M.*, 12 December 1925.

⁸ *B.T.W.M.*, 30 March 1926, 13 April 1926.

⁹ Batson, 1984: 34, 36-37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 130.

¹² Wichit, 1962[a]: 52. Note: The Prince of Songkhla was the father of the eighth Chakri king, Mahidon, and the current monarch, Phumiphon.

¹³ The three other individuals in the group were Tua Laphanukrom, *Luang* Sirirat Maitri and Naep Phahonyothin, all civilians. Chaloeokit, 1986: 120. Note: In Thawatt (1972: 7), Thatsanai's surname is given as Niyomsuek.

¹⁴ All the above information regarding Pridi's activities in Paris is drawn from Chaloeokit, 1986: 119-123.

provide the catalyst for turning the hopes of these Western-educated students into reality. The first sign of economic trouble in Siam became apparent when export earnings began to decline during 1929-30 as world demand contracted.¹⁵ Although this was to seriously affect the government's finances, those most immediately hit by the downturn were the peasants, particularly in the central and northern regions where the rice market economy was well developed.¹⁶ As a result of falling demand, income was reduced, loans could not be repaid, and many peasants became seriously indebted or forced off the land. As early as May 1930 farmers began to come to Bangkok pleading for government assistance,¹⁷ and in the following year a growing number of petitions were sent to the king asking for reductions in the land and capitation taxes.¹⁸ Urban dwellers were also suffering badly as a result of the economic decline and the number of unemployed increased, many of these being officials retrenched from the bureaucracy.¹⁹

Government measures to alleviate the economic hardship of its citizens were both slow in coming and limited in nature. More consideration was given to marketing Siam's agricultural products in 1931,²⁰ although it was not until the early part of 1932 that the farmers' immediate financial problems were given any consideration: the land tax was reduced by twenty percent, but the area taxed was increased considerably.²¹ Meanwhile, the problems of those in the capital were virtually ignored.²²

As the situation worsened, Prachadhipok made a series of well publicized speeches in which he virtually admitted the state's inability to cope with the crisis:

The financial war is a very hard one indeed. Even experts contradict one another until they become hoarse. Each offers a different suggestion. I myself do not profess to know much about the matter and all I can do is listen to the opinions of others and choose the best. I have never experienced such a hardship; therefore if I have made a mistake I really deserve to be excused by the officials and people of Siam.²³

¹⁵ See *Statistical Year Book of the Kingdom of Siam*, 1933-35: 11. Note: Export earnings continued to fall, and by the 1931-32 financial year the value of exports was less than half of the 1927-28 figure [i.e. from 276,226,363 in 1927-28 *baht* down to 134,206,804 *baht* in 1931-32].

¹⁶ Anan Ganjanaphan, *The Partial Commercialization of Rice Production in Northern Thailand (1900-81)*, PhD. Thesis, Cornell University, 1984: 153.

¹⁷ *B.T.W.M.*, 19 May 1930.

¹⁸ Nakharin Mekhtrairat, *Prawatisat phum panya khong kan plian rabob kan pok khong sayam rawang pho so 2470-2480*. [An Intellectual History of Siam's Political Transformation from 1927 to 1937] M.A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1985: 157-159.

¹⁹ *B.T.W.M.*, 14 March 1932, 21 March 1932.

²⁰ *Great Britain.*, [Annual Report 1931], F.O. 371/16260.

²¹ *B.T.W.M.*, 7 February 1932.

²² *B.T.W.M.*, 15 February 1932, 13 June 1932.

²³ Batson, 1984: 187.

Although this rather forthright expression of doubt and uncertainty was said to be intended 'to enlist the support and sympathy of the officers in the army and navy',²⁴ it actually had the opposite effect, and further undermined the prestige of the absolute monarchy in the capital.²⁵

In this context, the People's Party began to develop into a formidable coalition of forces. Since his return from Europe, Pridi had been successful in winning adherents to his ideas for political change among members of the civilian bureaucracy and students at the Law School. At the same time three of his associates from the Paris era, Phibun, Thatsanai and Prayun joined with junior naval officers and were able to convince a number of senior military figures, who themselves had allegedly been contemplating a coup against the state, that they must all join forces in order to change the administration so as to bring 'stability and progress to the country'.²⁶

As these behind-the-scenes activities continued into the early months of 1932, rumours of an impending coup to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Chakri dynasty began to surface, and 'a general spirit of unrest' and 'nervousness' gripped the capital.²⁷ The threat of a possible military uprising clearly worried Prajadhipok as evidenced by comments he made in a widely reported speech to an assembly of graduating cadets in mid-April:

The duties of the soldier lie in ... maintaining freedom from likely dangers; in guarding the property of the people; from being conquered by others;...[the soldier]...should not also try to interest himself in politics, which constitute the direct activity of the civil service official. In all countries the military officers on permanent service are taken to abstain from thinking or discussing about politics.²⁸

However, notwithstanding the continuing threat of a coup, the government decided to introduce a tax on salaried officials in the bureaucracy, including members of the military, as well as workers in the private sector. In addition, all officials earning over twenty *baht* a month were required to contribute another five percent of their salaries to a 'bureaucratic assistance tax' [*ngoen chuai ratchakan*].²⁹

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 205.

²⁵ Phibun Songkhram, for one, was said to have developed a 'full-blooded commitment to ... revolution as a response to hearing the first of these speeches, in November 1931.' Brailey, N., *Thailand and the Fall of Singapore: A Frustrated Asian Revolution*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1986: 49.

²⁶ Thawatt, 1972: 4-20. Quote from Prayun Phamonmontri, *Chiwit ha phaendin khong khaphachao* [My Life Through Five Reigns], Bannakit, Bangkok, 1975: 183.

²⁷ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 371/17178. *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, Despatches from Siam, 892.00/33, 2 January 1932.

²⁸ *B.T.W.M.*, 18 April 1932.

²⁹ *B.T.W.M.*, 25 April 1932.

Public dissatisfaction with these measures was reflected in an immediate outpouring of criticism in the press. Above all else it was argued that while wage earners would be seriously disadvantaged, the royal class, upper levels of nobility and Chinese businessmen, all of whom derived much of their income through other means (i.e. rents, company dividends and money lending), would escape largely unscathed.³⁰ As a means of placating the salaried groups who were to be affected, it was suggested that there should be no taxation without some form^{of} political representation.³¹ Apparently the government had been considering some real reform in this direction,³² but before any change could be implemented, the People's Party, in control of the country's most sophisticated weaponry, moved against the throne and seized state power on 24 June 1932.³³

4.3 Phase One: 24 June 1932 — 20 June 1933

While the initial change in government has been officially portrayed as a smooth, uncomplicated process, the transition from absolutism to constitutional rule was, in fact, fraught with a great deal of tension and conflict.³⁴ The bitter adversarial relationship which developed between the People's Party and members of the old regime was presaged in the announcement put out by the new government on taking power. By means of radio broadcast and leaflets the revolutionaries explained their actions to the public in populist nationalist terms:

When the present king came to the throne the people hoped that he would give an equitable administration. Their hopes were unfulfilled ... The king ruled unwisely and allowed the country to fall into decay, as the present depression proves. The government of the king, who is above all law, is unable to right these wrongs. The government cannot right the above wrongs because it does not rule for the good of the people ... The government regards the people as servants, as slaves, even as animals ... Instead of helping the people, the government oppresses them. The taxes collected are used personally by the king. In a year he receives many millions of the people's money. As for the people, for them

³⁰ *Ibid.* Note: In a British report from 1930 it was remarked that a number of princes were involved in money lending, the most conspicuous being Prince Boriphat ('the most powerful prince in the country' Batson, 1984: 31). The report also noted, "Their [the princes'] rate of interest was much less than that of the Chinese, but it was still in the region of 20%'. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/14776, 20 November 1930.

³¹ *Ibid.* 6 June 1932.

³² Batson, 1984: 151-152.

³³ As the British noted, 'The revolutionaries had ... secured the arsenal as well as the artillery and ammunition.' Shortly before 24 June, virtually the entire supply of munitions held in the various provincial military stations had been transferred to Bangkok. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 371/17178.

³⁴ For example, see *Prawatisat thai 2 s 392*, a history text Mathayom 3 students study in high school. *Prawatisat thai 2 s 392* [Thai History - 2], Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1980: 28.

to earn even a little money requires them ... to sweat blood. If the people cannot pay taxes their property is seized or they are forced to labour without pay. Royalty sleeps, eats, and is happy ... The king's government rules dishonestly ... It claims to help business and trade but does not actually do it. It despises the common people ... Let us have a clear understanding. This country belongs to the people. Where does the money come from that royalty uses? It comes from the people. The country is poor because of this custom of draining off the wealth of the people ... Money collected by taxation should be used on behalf of the nation and not for the enrichment of royalty. The savings of royalty are sent abroad to foreign banks to await the day when a bankrupt nation is abandoned by its rulers ... This is evil work.³⁵

This strongly worded condemnation of monarchical rule, said to be closely modelled on the proclamation used by the Westernized military officers who brought constitutionalism to Turkey in 1908, was unprecedented in Thai history, and reflected the bitter resentment towards royalty that had built up in certain sections of Thai society over the previous years.³⁶ According to a British report, distaste for royalist rule was so strong among some members of the People's Party that they had wanted to abolish the monarchy immediately and establish a republic in its place. The British account claims that the only reason that this did not happen was due to the action of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Prince Thewawong, who in negotiating with the revolutionaries, argued that, since Siam's treaties with foreign powers were all in the name of the king, his sudden removal would result in the cancellation of existing agreements and might even prompt intervention by the West.³⁷ This was apparently a very effective argument, as the coup leaders, fearful and unsure of themselves at the time, agreed to the continued existence of the monarchy.

The actual role envisaged for the throne, however, was to cause a great deal of friction between the two sides. On 26 June 1932 a constitution drafted by Pridi was presented to Prajadhipok for his approval. Under the provisions of this constitution the king was to be made the official head of state and thereby provide the government with political legitimacy. Real authority, however, was placed in the hands of a non-elected 70 member National Assembly and a 15 man Executive Committee. Furthermore, while the king was given formal power to veto the recommendations of the new administration, this was of little practical value since his objections could be overruled by a simple majority in the National Assembly.

Apart from marking a shift in state power from the royal class to the bureaucracy, the constitution also included a three-stage plan for introducing a 'democratic' political system to the country. During the first stage which began on 27

³⁵ Landon, K., *Siam in Transition*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1968: 11-12.

³⁶ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 24 June 1933.

³⁷ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17177, 14 February 1933.

June 1932, the appointed National Assembly was 'to exercise power on behalf of the people.'³⁸ In the second stage, to begin within 6 months or when 'order [was] definitely established in the country', it was planned that the National Assembly would be expanded to include an equal number of elected members. The third and final stage, in which political tutelage would end and the National Assembly become a fully elected body was to take place:

When more than half of the population ... passed the first section of the educational system, and not more than 10 years from the date of the enforcement of the Constitution.³⁹

Interestingly, while most studies claim that this was an interim or provisional document, a recent work, which includes Pridi's account of his meeting with the king presents quite a different picture:

Originally the constitution ... that I prepared on behalf of the People's Party did not contain the word 'provisional' (*chua khraw*). [However], when I presented it at Sukhothai Palace the king requested that the word 'provisional' be used and actually wrote it on the document himself.⁴⁰

In other words, the document Pridi presented to Prajadhipok was nothing less than a fully fledged constitution, but the king rejected it as such and a compromise was sought. After some discussion it was agreed that Pridi's constitution, with some modifications to the wording, would be used until such time as a permanent constitution was drafted. Thus, despite the successful military operation mounted by the People's Party on 24 June 1932, Prajadhipok ensured that the question of who held ultimate political power was still to be resolved.

The authority of the People's Party was also to be made problematic by its decision to allow many non-royal members of the old regime to play an active part in the new administration. While it carried out an immediate purge and reorganization of the armed forces,⁴¹ various high-ranking officials from the absolute monarchy were invited to join the National Assembly and put in charge of the different ministries, which, it should be mentioned, retained most of their old staff.⁴² In addition, *Phaya* Manopakon Nitithada, Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals, was appointed president

³⁸ Thawatt, 1972: 117.

³⁹ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00/80, 29 June 1932.

⁴⁰ Thipawan Chiamthirasakun, *Pathomthat thang kan mu'ang khong Pridi Phanomyong* [The Essential Political Views of Pridi Phanomyong], Aksonsang, Bangkok, 1988: 145.

⁴¹ The new administration retired a large number of senior military and naval officers and replaced the existing Council of Defence with a new Committee of National Defence made up of officers from the People's Party. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 37117178.

⁴² Thawatt, 1972: 132.

of the all-important People's Committee which also included three other figures from the previous order⁴³

Having discussed the compromise over the constitution, and noted the continued role of numerous officials from the absolute monarchy in the new administration, we can now move on to look more closely at the development of political tensions between members of the old regime and the People's Party.

As a result of the announcement attacking the absolute monarchy and the taking of princes as hostages, bitter resentment against the People's Party permeated the royalist class from the very first day of the revolution.⁴⁴ This feeling was exacerbated by stories in the Thai-language press attacking different members of the royal family, publishing details of their reported wealth, and suggesting that this would be appropriated by the state and redistributed to the people.⁴⁵ Although such measures were immediately disavowed by *Phaya Manopakon*,⁴⁶ press attacks on the royalty continued, and suspicion developed that elements within the new administration wished to impose some form of Soviet-style communism on Siam.

Over the following months there was considerable discussion in the press about Russia and the possible implications of developments in that country for Siam. Early in September for example, *Thai mai* published an article describing the horrors of the Russian system, with specific emphasis given to the destruction of religion, and it was implied that similar things may happen in Siam as communism was now being spread around the world by agents in the pay of Moscow.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, the *Bangkok Times* claimed that Russia and the Third International were at work in Siam.⁴⁸ *Sayam num*, reported a story that appeared in *Si krung*, one of its rivals, which talked of the 'wealth of new ideas' in Russia, and suggested that this view reflected government thinking.⁴⁹ Another newspaper, the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, while not specifically talking about communism, intimated that the government was conducting itself in a dictatorial manner and claimed that the public was kept in the dark about its intentions.⁵⁰

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Note: A number of princes were taken hostage on 24 June 1932 to prevent reprisals against the new regime. *B.T.W.M.*, 27 June 1932.

⁴⁵ *B.T.W.M.*, 18 July 1932. Note: Various members of the royal family feared that their wealth would be confiscated and began depositing valuables in safety deposit boxes. *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00/83, 3 August 1932.

⁴⁶ *B.T.W.M.*, 27 June 1932.

⁴⁷ *Thai mai*, 10 September 1932. A radically different perspective was put forward in the daily, *Satcha*, which argued that Buddhism and communism were not incompatible. It was claimed that 'although communism does not respect religions, its various laws are in accordance with the Dharma of Buddha. Both do not accept the idea of god.' *Satcha*, 27 September 1932

⁴⁸ *B.T.W.M.*, 10 October 1932.

⁴⁹ *Sayam num*, 22 September 1932.

⁵⁰ *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 24 September 1932, 27 September 1932, 30 September 1932.

During the same period, there was also a good deal of what was described in the press as communist activity.⁵¹ One such instance of this took place at the end of September, when a group calling itself the 'Communist Party of Siam and the Communist Young Party of Siam' [sic], denounced the government in a flood of roneoed leaflets, printed in Thai, English and Chinese that were distributed in the capital and a number of provincial centres:

Farmers! Workmen! Soldiers, and all the oppressed of Siam! The most tyrannical government of Prajadhipok has been overthrown overnight, and its place taken by the new constitutional government. But is this new government one of the people, by the people, or for the people? Let us consider the following facts:- All members of the new government are men of wealth and influence. Having been oppressed by the members of the Royal Household they seized power in the name of the people to further their own interests...

Formerly we were oppressed by one Prajadhipok, but now we are oppressed by a great number of tyrants such as Chao Phya Dharmasakti [*Chao Phraya* Thammasakmontri, the President of the National Assembly] and Luang Pradit [Pridi Phanomyong]...

Rise the oppressed of Siam! The People's Party, the false revolutionists, can never do us any good. The Russians are the only people in the world today who have real freedom and happiness... People of Siam! Follow the footsteps of our brethren in Russia. Unite to fight the King, the Princes, the People's Party, the false revolutionists... Set up the Soviet Government of Siam so that we may have real liberty and freedom.⁵²

Perhaps the most striking thing about these leaflets was not that they were printed in three languages, or that they were widely distributed around the country, but that their content was actually reported in the press.⁵³

Another notable feature of the immediate post-revolutionary period was the strong public response to the popular nationalist democratic rhetoric articulated by the People's Party.⁵⁴ Numerous individuals took the government at its word, and mounted demonstrations for change, while many others sent petitions to the new administration suggesting all manner of reform.⁵⁵ For example, some petitioners urged the government

⁵¹ *B.T.W.M.*, 15 August 1932.

⁵² *B.T.W.M.*, 10 October 1932.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ The essence of this rhetoric was embodied in the government's six-point platform included at the end of its public denunciation of the absolute monarchy. The six points were as follows: 1) The freedom and equality of the people in politics, in the law ... courts, and in business, must be maintained. 2) Peace and quiet, with no harm to anyone must be assured. 3) A national economic policy must be drawn up to provide remunerative work for everyone. 4) Equal privilege for everyone must be guaranteed. No one group shall enjoy special privilege[s] at the expense of others. 5) The people shall have freedom and liberty except in cases where freedom and liberty disagree with the above four points. 6) The people must be given the most complete education possible. Landon, 1968: 17.

⁵⁵ Chulalongkorn University students petitioned for the removal of the Rector, schoolboys at Assumption and St. Gabriel's Colleges organized a strike demanding lower fees and the

to abolish royal ranks and conferred titles, while others put forward the idea that only Buddhists be accepted as National Assembly members. It was also proposed that *Phraya* Phahon, the head of the army, be made king.⁵⁶ At the same time the working class became very active, with rickshaw pullers, tramway men and women employed in dyeing factories either launching strikes or planning work stoppages.⁵⁷

Various aspects of the discussion of communism in the press, communist pamphleteering and strike activity, mentioned above, were rather more complex than they may have appeared on the surface. Shortly after 24 June, elements in the People's Party, had set up an intelligence network to monitor the activities of the royalty and their supporters.⁵⁸ As a result of this initiative it was discovered that these individuals had not acquiesced to the new order, but were actively seeking to undermine its authority.

With regard to the press, one undercover agent, writing at the beginning of September 1932, reported that a number of newspapers were actively working against the government. Some type of alliance was alleged to have been formed between the *Bangkok Daily Mail Press* under Louis Girivat, the *Thai mai* under *Luang* Wichit and *Sayam num*. Other newspapers were being encouraged to join them. The initial aim of this group, according to the agent, was to create public distrust and antipathy towards the new regime while at the same time encouraging support for the royalty. It was further hoped that the king could regain a position similar to the one which he held in the past, with the major difference being that members of the nobility would be allowed to nominate political representatives and thereby have a greater say in the running of the country. The agent further claimed that there was high-level support for the movement, Girivat being assisted by the king's father-in-law, Prince Sawat [Svasti], and Wichit by his long-time patron, Prince Thewawong [Devawongse].⁵⁹

reinstatement of expelled boys, while monks in a number of Bangkok monasteries 'formed themselves into parties with the aim of doing away with the control of the Lord Abbots.' *B.T.W.M.*, 1 August 1932, 12 September 1932, 17 October 1932. Many citizens expressed grievances against their superiors and made urgent appeals to the new authorities to have them removed, such as the case of 700 labourers at the Makasan rail workshop who called on the government to dismiss their chief supervisor. *B.T.W.M.*, 15 August 1932. Other petitioners not only appealed to the government, but also made their complaints public via the many newspapers that appeared immediately after the change in administration (After the 24 of June 1932 new vernacular newspapers 'grew like mushrooms in the night' with some 20 new publications being put onto the market. With the exception of Prince Wan Waithayakon's pro-government *Prachachat* [The Nation] however, all of these papers had a short life span.). One desperate unemployed man even resorted to direct action and petitioned *Phraya* Manopakorn by throwing bricks at his car as it drove past. *B.T.W.M.*, 29 August 1932 See *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 371/17178 and Nakharin, 1985: 133. Meanwhile in the countryside, many farmers decided to assert themselves by refusing to pay the hated capitation tax. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 371/17178.

⁵⁶ Nakharin, 1985: 168.

⁵⁷ *B.T.W.M.*, 25 July 1932, 15 August 1932, 5 September 1932.

⁵⁸ N.A. S.R. Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [OPMC] 0201.16/21, Military orders.

⁵⁹ N.A. S.R. OCPM 0201.16/30 [Secret Government Reports], 9 September 1932. N.A. S.R. OCPM 0201.16/35, 22 November 1932. Details about these secret reports, and the above military orders were kindly provided to me by Matt Copeland.

In another secret report it was implied that Wichit may have had something to do with the communist pamphlet printed in Thai, English and Chinese which appeared at the end of September. The author of this report made mention of the quality of the pamphlet and then added the following remark to his superior 'I've heard it said that *Luang* Wichit's house was searched and he was arrested. Is this true?'⁶⁰ Admittedly, while this is not sufficient evidence to provide a clear link between the pamphlet and Wichit, it is not impossible that he was involved in its production.

Another secret report claimed that Athikon Prakat, chief of police under the absolute monarchy, was using his connections with the Chinese communists to help the royalist cause. He was said to have encouraged communist pamphleteering and agitation to create difficulties for the new administration.⁶¹ Bizarre as this may have seemed, it was later publicly confirmed in a round about way by the *Bangkok Times*, when it suggested that the leaflets of 'The Communist Party of Siam' appeared to have been issued with the intent of putting pressure on 'extremists' in the government.⁶²

Other reports by government agents also indicated that members of the old regime were responsible for provoking some of the labour unrest following 24 June. Again the key figure in this movement was Athikon Prakat. Athikon, who had apparently developed close links with various Chinese triads as well as the communists, was reported to have received large sums of money from Prince Purachat and the exiled Prince Boriphat.⁶³ These funds were used pay for the services of various Chinese groups including Bangkok's rickshaw pedlars.⁶⁴ During August this group was called on to strike and create disturbances in the capital so as to test the resolve of the administration. It was claimed that if the government was not able to bring the strike to an end, fires would be set up around the city and pro-royal forces seize control.⁶⁵

Meanwhile there were also direct attempts by various members of the royal family to influence foreign opinion against the People's Party. At the beginning of September, an interview Prince Sawat had given an American journalist was published by a number of newspapers in the United States.⁶⁶ The prince said the king was totally

⁶⁰ N.A. S.R. OPMC 0201.16/30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *B.T.W.M.*, 17 October 1932.

⁶³ N.A. S.R. OPMC 0201.16/30, 9 August 1932. Purachat was reported to have given Athikon 100,000 *baht* while Boriphat's contribution was 700,000 *baht*.

⁶⁴ The Chinese were paid a retainer of 10 *baht* a month. *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 10 August 1932. In response to these reports, *Phraya* Phahon, the army commander, summoned Athikon to his office and informed him that the People's Party was well aware of his anti-government activities. This was revealed much later in *B.T.W.M.*, 24 July 1933.

⁶⁶ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00/86, 26 October 1932. One of the papers in which the interview appeared was the *Los Angeles Examiner*, 8 September 1932. Prajadhipok was said to be strongly under the influence of his wife 'who again is much influenced by her father Prince Svasti [Sawatd], whose reputation in and outside Siam is not the best.' *Great Britain*, F.O.371/17175. Dormer to Simon. 20 April 1933. Prince Sawat had been

unsatisfied with the provisional constitution and claimed that he would abdicate if the permanent constitution, planned for the end of the year, continued to deny him any meaningful role in Siam's affairs. The prince intimated that, in the event of the king's abdication, one of two things might occur, 'either the new government [would] set up a Child Prince as a puppet on the throne, or declare a republic.' He further argued that 'either of these courses would be likely to bring a civil war and probably foreign intervention.'⁶⁷ At the same time, Prince Thewawong was telling the British much the same thing, while another highly placed, but unnamed source informed them that Prajadhipok was making clandestine preparations to go into exile if his position as monarch was not improved.⁶⁸

With the promulgation of the new permanent constitution on 10 December 1932, however, the concerns of the royalists were somewhat reduced. This constitution, which had been drafted by a nine-man committee under the close supervision of Prajadhipok himself, increased the power of the throne. Although such writers as Thawatt have argued the position of monarch did not improve, the fact that Prajadhipok was given the right to prorogue or dissolve the National Assembly meant that he now had increased potential to create political difficulties for the government.⁶⁹

Perhaps the first indication of the king's attempts to become more directly involved in political matters was in regard to the question of political parties, which became the subject of debate following the promulgation of the permanent constitution. By the latter months of 1932 the People's Party had set up a number of political associations around the country, and it was felt by some that with the permanent constitution in place other such organizations ought to be permitted so as to further Siam's political development.⁷⁰ Indeed, there was a good deal of support for the creation of a political party system by a majority in the government,⁷¹ and in early January 1933 a representation was made to the Ministry of the Interior by a group of officials led by *Phraya* Thonawanikmontri for permission to establish a political body known as the Nationalist Association [*Khana chat*].⁷² However, the creation of a political party system was not supported by Prajadhipok who felt the country was not ready for such a change, and he convinced *Phraya* Manopakon to veto the application. At the same time the king also urged that the People's Party Association should be

well known for corruption [i.e. taking bribes] since the Vajiravudh's reign. See *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/1752, 7 November 1913. F.O. 371/3363, 3 September 1918.

⁶⁷ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00/86, 26 October 1932.

⁶⁸ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932], F.O. 371/17178.

⁶⁹ Thawatt, 1972: 123-124.

⁷⁰ By early September it was reported that the People's Party already had approximately 10,000 members. *B.T.W.M.*, 5 September 1932.

⁷¹ Chai-anan Samudvanija, Sethaphon Cusripituck, Sawaeng Ratanamonkolmas (eds.), *Sat kan mu'ang* [Political Animal], Thai Wattana Panich, Bangkok, 1971: 91.

⁷² *B.T.W.M.*, 9 January 1933.

dissolved.⁷³ This action on the part of the king is highly significant, for it contradicts the view of certain writers who have asserted that Prajadhipok was essentially a 'liberal', 'democratic' figure.⁷⁴

The outcome of the political party issue marked a growing assertiveness on the part of the throne, an assertiveness which was to become even more apparent in relation to the question of economic policy. In an attempt to come to terms with the continuing effects of the Depression, Pridi drafted a comprehensive economic plan which was discussed in both the National Assembly and the State Council during March 1933. The plan, a curious mixture of socialism and Buddhist Utopianism, called for the nationalization of the entire Siamese economy. This proposal was particularly worrying to the more 'conservative' elements within the government not to mention the king, who, after reading the plan, was rumoured to have said, 'that if L. Pradit [*Luang Pradit Manutham*, Pridi's official name] was not copying Stalin, then Stalin must be copying L. Pradit.'⁷⁵ As a countermeasure, an alternative, pro-free market economic plan was put forward by *Phraya* Manopakon which Pridi described as a 'programme of...opportunism.'⁷⁶ At this point the long-standing divisions in the People's Party developed into an open split between Pridi's followers and those opposed to his views.⁷⁷ While the latter group, including *Phraya* Manopakon and *Phraya* Colonel Song Suradet, a key military figure in the overthrow of the monarchy, were a majority in the State council, Pridi's supporters were dominant in the National Assembly. Apparently, Pridi's group in the Assembly planned to pass a no-confidence motion against the State council and press for the adoption of his economic plan together with an estate duty tax that would have had a great effect on the royal class.⁷⁸ However, before this could take place *Phraya* Manopakon, with the king's approval, prorogued the National Assembly, suspended the constitution, and promulgated a formal Anti-Communist Act. At the same time, Pridi, who had all along denied that he was a communist, and expressed a willingness to modify his plan for the sake of political unity was removed from the

⁷³ Letter from Prajadhipok to Mano, 31 January 1933, cited in Wina Manophimok, *Khwam khat yaeng phai nai khana ratsadon* [Conflict in the People's Party], M. A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1977: 40. The decision to eliminate the People's Party Association was reported to have deeply angered Pridi and his supporters. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

⁷⁴ The two writers who have done most to portray Prajadhipok in liberal terms are Batson, 1984, and Chai-anan Samudvanija, for example see his *14 Tula khanaratsadon kap kabot Boworadet*, Chulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok, 1974.

⁷⁵ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 20 April 1933.

⁷⁶ Landon, 1968: 317.

⁷⁷ The atmosphere in the National Assembly during the debates on the economic question became so intense that sharpshooters were instructed to take up ... concealed positions in the building and ordered to 'shoot outright anyone ... whose gestures appeared menacing.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 3 April 1933.

⁷⁸ Thawatt, 1972: 157-158. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 4 April 1933.

State council together with four of his associates.⁷⁹ Without an immediate future in politics, Pridi was hastily sent into exile in Europe, a move that was disapproved of by his friend *Phraya* Phahon, the head of the army, and a number of other military officers.⁸⁰

The measures taken by *Phraya* Manopakorn with the king's connivance can perhaps best be described as a constitutional counter revolution since they had the effect of greatly reducing the influence of the People's Party while strengthening the political position of members from the old order. During June 1933 this development went one step further when further divisions appeared in the army regarding Pridi. Phahon had apparently urged three other leading military figures, Song Suradet, Colonel, *Phraya* Rit Akhane and Lieutenant-Colonel *Phra* Prasat, to allow Pridi to return home, but they rejected the idea. As a result of an earlier pact of unity they had made, the four officers, unable to come to an agreement on the matter, decided to tender their resignations from the State Council on the first anniversary of the revolution.⁸¹ As Thawatt noted 'it now appeared that the People's Party had completely disintegrated.'⁸² However, less than a week before the resignations were to go into force, *Phraya* Manopakorn obtained the king's permission to appoint Major General *Phraya* Phichai Songkhram and Colonel *Phraya* Sisithi Songkhram, described by the British as 'strong reactionaries and supporters of the old regime', to the positions Commander-in-Chief and Acting Director of Military Operations, posts formerly held by Phahon and Song.⁸³ This development aroused fears among lower level army officers that a major reorganization of the military would follow, thereby threatening their future advancement. In response to these concerns among his subordinates, Phahon mounted a successful coup d'état against the government on 20 June 1933.⁸⁴ As a result, the high degree of political power assumed by the royalists over the previous year was significantly diminished, and in the process the continued role of the monarchy as the primary source of legitimation for the government made problematic.

⁷⁹ N.A. S.R. OPMC (2) 0201.73/1 *Suan bukhon khon Thai L. Pradit. Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 3 April 1933. The four individuals expelled with Pridi were; *Luang* Det Sahakon, *Tua* Laphanukrom, *Naep* Phahonyothin and *Phraya* Pramuan Witchapun. *B.T.W.M.*, 3 April 1933. It was reported that almost immediately after these events Song Suradet went to the king who was on holiday at Hua Hin, and volunteered to shoot Pridi and his followers out of hand. The king however, declined the offer. *Great Britain*, F.O.371/17175, 20 April 1933.

⁸⁰ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Thawatt, 1972: 166.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00/101, 21 September 1933. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

4.4 Luang Wichit and the Period 24 June 1932 — 20 June 1933

Shortly after the change of government on 24 June, it was widely rumoured that Wichit had a good deal of foreknowledge about the event. According to one rumour, Pridi had approached him to join the People's Party, but Wichit was so terrified the plan to overthrow the monarchy would fail that he declined the offer. It was also claimed that Wichit had attended the clandestine meetings of the People's Party until May 1932, when he became worried they would be discovered and took no further part in the plot. Yet another rumour was to the effect that Wichit knew of the group's plans, but decided to wait and see how events unfolded before becoming actively involved. Although Wichit dismissed all of these rumours as groundless, it will be argued in the remainder of this chapter that last mentioned scenario was the most plausible explanation.⁸⁵

At the time of the overthrow of the monarchy, Wichit was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, teaching history part-time at Chulalongkorn University, producing articles for *Duang prathip*, and working as the editor of *Thai mai*. In his writings for these two publications, Wichit's initial response to the change in government was generally enthusiastic, but measured. He told his readers the king's loss of power to the People's Party marked a watershed in the country's history, and predicted that 24 June would become Siam's national day.⁸⁶ At the same time he made a number of recommendations to the People's Party and the royalty. With regard to the former group he advised that they do nothing to provoke foreign intervention by 'assuring the various diplomatic representatives that the type of policies followed by the previous government would continue.' He also suggested that care should be taken both in planning the new form of government and maintaining internal peace.⁸⁷ As for the royalty, he urged that they refrain from appealing to foreign powers for help, and called on them to cooperate with the new administration for the sake of Thai unity and progress. In addition, he proposed that members of the royal family use some of their wealth to help the country and prevent it from sinking any lower.⁸⁸

A week after the change in administration, Wichit seemed to move away from this somewhat conciliatory approach and adopt a strong pro-government stance. Despite the 'radical' tag applied to Pridi from within the royalist camp, Wichit gave his long-time associate a glowing endorsement in the editorial column of the *Thai mai*. Wichit

⁸⁵ These rumours and Wichit's denial are to be found in, Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Khana kan mu'ang* [Political Parties], *Thai mai* [Printing Company], Bangkok, August 1932 [a]: 2-4 [Introduction].

⁸⁶ *Thai mai*, 26 June 1932, 28 June 1932. Also see an article entitled 'Kan phok khong doi mi sapha' [Parliamentary Administration], in which he argued that the installation of a constitutional government had met the wishes of the [educated] people. *Duang prathip*, 1 July 1932.

⁸⁷ *Thai mai*, 26 June 1932.

⁸⁸ *Thai mai*, 26 June 1932, 29 June 1932.

said that he had known Pridi for many years, and judged him to be 'a lawyer who respects the law ... an individual who upholds the law for just purposes not for personal aggrandizement.' His concluding remarks were even more supportive: he called Pridi 'the hope of the nation' [*pen khwam wang khong chat*], and claimed his participation in the People's Party guaranteed that its policies could be trusted.⁸⁹

At the end of July, however, Wichit sounded a more critical note in a book entitled *Kan mu'ang kan pok khong khong krung sayam* [Siamese Politics and Administration].⁹⁰ In this wide ranging work, which included an historical overview of Thai administration together with a discussion of contemporary political changes and the prospects for the country's future, he berated the People's Party for failing to prevent criticism of the royal class by members of the public, and reiterated his earlier suggestion that the government adopt moderate, conciliatory policies in order to ensure national unity and progress.⁹¹

In early August, Wichit began to express concerns about the future direction of the Siamese economy. As has been shown earlier, Wichit was a fervent advocate of a free-market approach to economic matters and he stressed his commitment to this ideal in an editorial entitled 'The Citizenry Must Advance: The Economy and Independence'.⁹² He told his readers:

We should follow a liberal policy. The government should not establish factories by itself, but rather set down guidelines and let the private sector get on with things ... We only want the government to provide us with a stable, secure framework to work in, then we can do things for ourselves. This way is fully in accord with our assertion that we have become independent or Thai [*som kap thi rao rong kan wa rao dai itsaraphap ru' pen Thai tem thi*]. If, on the other hand we look to the government to find us work we are not really free.⁹³

In essence, Wichit was arguing against the view that socialist, state-centred measures were the most appropriate way of facilitating economic recovery and growth. According to him, this sort of approach was misguided. In his opinion, the answer to the country's current economic problems lay in laissez-faire private enterprise-type development since this was in accord with being Thai/free.⁹⁴ As we will see in Chapter

⁸⁹ *Thai mai*, 1 July 1932.

⁹⁰ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang. Kan mu'ang kan pok khong khong krung sayam*. [Siamese Politics and Administration], Thai Mai Press, Bangkok, July 1932 [b].

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 148-149, 169, 187.

⁹² *Thai mai*, 10 August 1932.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Note: From October 1932 until the end of the year, *Duang prathip*, whose content was determined by Wichit, gave particular emphasis to bourgeois economic ideas which were featured in a series of articles under the title *Talat kan kha* [The Market]. Such fundamental concepts as the variable relation between supply and demand were explained in detail, as were advertizing strategies and methods for keeping production costs to a profitable minimum.

Six, Wichit was to articulate this perceived economic — socio/cultural relationship in the following years.

Less than a month after this article appeared, Wichit's newspaper writing was reflecting a far more noticeable anti-government bias, a development which was linked to his clandestine involvement with the royalist opposition group reported in the government's secret reports. On 31 August, Wichit used his *Thai mai* editorial column to warn the government that if it did anything to reduce the honour and prestige of either the Buddhist religion or the monarchy, 'the whole country would be up in arms'.⁹⁵ Furthermore, he claimed that since the change in administration foreign diplomats had been paying close attention to the political situation in Siam to see whether the new government would try to emulate Russian communism or establish a fascist dictatorship. In his own view, these political systems were totally unsuited to Thai conditions and he urged that any attempts to establish a communist or fascist regime should be fiercely resisted. Like Prince Sawat, Wichit saw the position of the king as being crucial to Siam's future, and argued that the monarch had to be given a more significant role under the new constitution if the country was to remain independent [i.e. 'Thai'].⁹⁶

Support for these views came in the form of a number of letters published in the paper. Calling themselves 'Thai patriots', the authors of these letters claimed they would lay down their lives to protect the national religion and the king.⁹⁷ In an issue of *Thai mai* early in September, Wichit wrote about communism and religion, using the example of Russia to illustrate his argument. He described communism as 'a wicked and deceitful ideology' [*lathi*], which had led the Russians to turn their churches into factories, clubs and garages, and suggested similar things could happen in Siam under the present administration.⁹⁸

Within a matter of days, the authorities responded to Wichit's repeated criticisms and had the *Thai mai* temporarily closed down, the fourth paper to suffer such a fate since the People's Party seized power.⁹⁹ Shortly after this incident, he

This enthusiastic support for 'free market' enterprise went hand in hand with the journal's hostility toward any form of socialism. During the same period it published series of articles which focussed on the transformations in post-revolutionary Russian society. The view put forward was that Soviet communism had not only been responsible for the destruction of traditional Soviet culture, but also for the collapse of the national economy. See various issues of *Duang prathip* in the period October-December 1932.

⁹⁵ *Thai mai*, 31 August 1932.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Thai mai*, 7 September 1932.

⁹⁸ *Thai mai*, 10 September 1932.

⁹⁹ The other papers to be temporarily closed down were *Lak mu'ang*, for showing disrespect to the princes, the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, for inciting the people to mutiny, *Bangkok kan mu'ang*, and *24 Mithuna*, for inciting class hatred. Cited in a speech by Louis Girivat entitled 'The Newspaper Trade', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 20-24 September 1932.

decided to take leave from the bureaucracy and began concentrating his efforts on writing books and producing articles for *Duang prathip*.¹⁰⁰

Given Wichit's recent comments in the press, it is somewhat ironic that his first major work after leaving government service was a laudatory account about fascism and the Italian dictator, Mussolini.¹⁰¹ But such a choice of topic may be seen to reflect a particular logic. Wichit described Mussolini's fascism as a powerful anti-communist ideology, which was supportive of the monarchy, religion, and 'liberal' economic policy, while preserving indigenous customs and language.¹⁰² Thus, despite his previously stated reservations about fascism, Wichit recognized its usefulness in combating communism, an ideology which he, and others supported by the princes, were suggesting actually threatened to destroy Thai society. At the same time, however, Wichit also provided a caveat by claiming that fascism was only a transitional political form, which, in all likelihood, would ultimately be replaced by a more representative system. In conclusion, he argued:

The people must gradually be given a more [politically] responsible role if the goodness [Mussolini] created is to last and grow.¹⁰³

The issue of representative politics briefly mentioned here, was in fact of growing interest to Wichit at this time, and he was known to harbour some political aspirations of his own. Not long after 24 June he began thinking about establishing a political party, and revealed that Pridi had told him he would be allowed to do so after the permanent constitution had been promulgated.¹⁰⁴ In anticipation of this change, Wichit hastily produced a book entitled *Khana kan mu'ang* [Political Parties], which was aimed at promoting the idea of representative politics among educated Thais.

According to Wichit, political parties were voluntary public organizations established for the purpose of contesting state power. Each political party had its own specific policies, although the overriding concern of all such organizations in his view was the same: to facilitate national progress.¹⁰⁵ Using data from his days at the League of Nations, Wichit included a list of 16 major types of political parties found around the world. He asserted that of these, nationalist parties [*khana chat*] had the greatest number

¹⁰⁰ *B.T.W.M.*, 19 September 1932.

¹⁰¹ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Mussolini*, Thai Mai Press, Bangkok, October 1932 [c]. This text was not a wholly original work however, but an adaptation of a book entitled *Le Facisme c'est Mussolini*, by a French author, Louis Roya: 65, 68. Note: At the very end of absolute monarchy, Prajadhipok had discussed the possibility of introducing fascism in Siam as a means of dealing with the country's problems, remarking that, 'it might be desirable and the best way out.' Batson, 1984: 152-153.

¹⁰² Wichit, 1932 [c]: 42, 62-65, 128-131.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*: 134-135.

¹⁰⁴ Wichit, 1932 [a]: 2 [Introduction] Chai-anan Samudvanija et al., 1971: 91.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*: 1-2 [Text].

of elected parliamentary members and therefore were the most important contemporary form of political organization.¹⁰⁶ A fundamental policy of all these parties, he claimed, was their commitment to upholding national independence and maintaining internal unity; this was to be achieved by strengthening national defence forces and providing official support for the major national religion.¹⁰⁷

In the economic sphere, the policies advocated by nationalist parties were strongly in favour of private enterprise development. As far as the state was concerned, its role was simply to provide opportunities for private investment, or to establish projects that would ultimately be sold to the private sector. Nationalist parties were also supportive of private land ownership since it was believed that if the population had their own land they would be more likely to feel a love for their country and protect it from potential enemies.¹⁰⁸

The other major policy of nationalist political parties noted by Wichit, was their support and promotion of indigenous customs and traditions. This was said to be particularly important since:

The nations that are respected internationally are those which have their own genuine traditions ... A nation bereft of such traditions and a civilization of its own should not exist as a nation at all.¹⁰⁹

In the buoyant atmosphere following the promulgation of the permanent constitution in December, Wichit believed that his opportunity to take on an active political role had arrived. At the beginning of January 1933, he joined some high-ranking officials from the old regime and together with a number of businessmen formed a new political body known as the Nationalist Association (*samakhom chat*).¹¹⁰ Although the formal leader of the Association was one *Phraya* Thonawanikmontri (Wisut Thonawanik), the son of a well-known merchant who had studied law and commerce in the United States, Wichit was clearly the group's intellectual driving force and theorist.¹¹¹ The official policy of the Association was virtually the same as that of the nationalist parties he talked of in his book, and in fact, was little different than that put forward by the People's Party.¹¹² The stated objectives of the Nationalist Association were:

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*:19-22 [Text].

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*: 237-242 [Text].

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: 245-246 [Text].

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 246 [Text].

¹¹⁰ *B.T.W.M.*, 9 January 1933. Members of the Association included: *Phraya* Sena Songkhram, *Phraya* Saraphai Phiphat, *Khunying* Si Phichai Songkhram, *Phra* Saeng Sithikan, *Phra* Borihan Thanthaniti, *Luang* Surinthonseni, *Luang* Chanyakulabodi, Chawalit Aphaiwong, Thanan Phisanabut, and Phet Bunbumrung, *Duang prathip*, 15 January 1933.

¹¹¹ *Duang prathip*, 22 January 1933.

¹¹² *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

- (A) To preserve the independence of the country and the prosperity of the Nation.
- (B) To promote study in Political Sciences [sic].
- (C) To render to its members mutual assistance in political affairs.
- (D) To adopt and support the policy in conformity with seven principles.

These were as follows:

- i) To sustain democracy and the Constitution with the King as the head of the Nation for time eternal.
- ii) To strengthen the defence force ... of the country with the view to preserving the right and independence of the Nation.
- iii) To uphold the religion and elevate National education.
- iv) To preserve the traditions which are the marks of honour of the Nation.
- v) To try to encourage the production and the use of National goods.
- vi) To consider the interest of the people more than that of the Government and the interest of the Nation more important than that of the individual.
- vii) To support persons who undertake agriculture and National industry before the others [sic].¹¹³

According to the regulations put out by the group, there was no formal prohibition against anyone joining the Nationalist Association, although the proposed membership fee of thirty-six *baht*, and the requirement that new members must be nominated by existing members, ensured that it would be a highly elitist organization.¹¹⁴ Particular emphasis was to be given to education, and it was envisaged that members of the organization would attend classes devoted to the study of politics, government administration and 'free market' economic ideas. Various materials for these courses were developed, public lectures and debates were planned, and a tentative timetable for these activities was announced.¹¹⁵

As these efforts were being made, members of the Nationalist Association were making representations to the government in order to gain official recognition. However, the king decided that it was not advisable to permit political organizations to operate, and had Mano turn down the application.¹¹⁶ Wichit was apparently angered by this decision, and for the remainder of the Mano government's term in office appears to have remained rather subdued, doing little more than writing articles for *Duang prathip*,

¹¹³ *B.T.W.M.*, 9 January 1933.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* Note: It was planned to charge 300 *baht* for life membership.

¹¹⁵ *Duang prathip*, 15 January, 1933.

¹¹⁶ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

on such subjects as early Thai history, the Japanese warrior code [*Bushido*], and jealousy.¹¹⁷

4.5 Phase Two: 20 June 1933 — October 1933

With the assumption of power by Phahon on 20 June 1933, it was widely thought that Pridi would be allowed to come back to Siam and play a role in the country's affairs.¹¹⁸ Since Pridi had been successfully branded as a communist by the royalists earlier in the year, rumours of his return had the effect of generating uncertainty about the government's future direction. In response, Phahon hastily made a series of assurances to the palace, and the foreign business community, asserting that his administration 'had no Communistic leanings', and 'would carry on the same moderate policy of their predecessors'.¹¹⁹

In practical terms, the new government had some difficulty in establishing its authority. Rumours of 'impending changes in the Ministries' were rife, with the result that administrators, unsure of their future, stopped working. At the same time trade slumped, and doubts arose over the stability of the currency.¹²⁰ On the political front, supporters of the new government, petitioned Phahon and his subordinates, Lieutenant-Colonel *Luang* Phibun Songkhram and Naval Commander *Luang* Supha Chalasai, to impeach Mano and his colleagues for dissolving the National Assembly and other unconstitutional acts'. It was further suggested that the king should also be impeached for his role in the affair.¹²¹ While the calls for impeachment were not successful, the whole matter did nothing to improve the tense relations between members of the People's Party and those of the old regime.

Towards the end of July, the bitter enmity between these groups became even more public than it had in the past. Acting on information contained in secret government reports, Phibun and Supha produced a circular letter which was sent to a number of prominent individuals as well as being published in the press. It stated:

In acquiring control of the administrative powers on both occasions, the promoters ... have always abided by the principle of smoothness of action for the benefit of the public peace and independence of the Thai race. Now, however, it has been discovered by investigation that you have held meetings, and have in mind to bring about a state of unrest in the country, thus causing anxiety to the Government ... As we have accepted full responsibility for the maintenance of peace in the country, we

¹¹⁷ *Duang prathip*, 30 April 1933, 14 May 1933.

¹¹⁸ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175 23 June 1933.

¹¹⁹ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report. 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

¹²⁰ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

¹²¹ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 1 July 1933. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report. 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

wish to caution you to exercise peace of mind. If you still persist in your attitude this party will be forced to bring stringent measures to bear on you.¹²²

Among those to whom the cautionary letter were two men whose anti-government activities had long been known to the authorities: former police commissioner Athikon Prakat and *Phraya* Saraphai Phiphat of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* and the Nationalist Association. In addition, a number of members of the royal house also received the letter including Prince Boworadet, who was staying at Hua Hin with his cousin the king, Prince Dossiriwongs, Prince Khaisaeng Rabi, Prince Chatmongkon and Prince Wongnirachon, formerly Athikon's deputy in the police department.¹²³

Despite the warning, the voice of the pro-royalist opposition, the Siam Free Press, through its three daily newspapers, the English language *Bangkok Daily Mail*, together with the Thai language *Krungthep Daily Mail* and *Seriphap*, continued to adopt a critical stance, suggesting that the Phahon administration was undemocratic, inept and unable manage the affairs of the country.¹²⁴ At the beginning of August, the government responded by issuing a public communique charging the three papers with 'evil intent and malice', and subjected them to more stringent censorship.¹²⁵ However, even this did not deter the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, which ignored government strictures and published an editorial on 5 August deemed to be 'against the public peace and the good morals of the people'¹²⁶. As a result, the paper was subject to a temporary closure order and did not reappear until the latter part of August.¹²⁷

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Prajadhipok was trying to do what he could to turn British opinion against the leaders of the revolution and promote his own political interests. In a confidential letter to the financial adviser James Baxter, on 4 August, the king wrote:

The chief fight is against Communism. Perhaps you and other foreign advisers can still help by threatening to resign en bloc. They [the government] are still afraid of the bogey of foreign intervention. One must use that bogey to the last even if there is no chance of foreign intervention taking place.¹²⁸

¹²² *B.T.W.M.*, 20 July 1933.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ The three papers of the Siam Free Press group were all Thai owned. As far as the *Bangkok Daily Mail* was concerned, Prince Sawat, the father-in-law of Prajadhipok, was 'known to have a considerable, if not controlling interest in its management'. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210. Also see *B.T.W.M.*, 3 August 1933. For examples of anti-government comments see various issues of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* during late July 1933.

¹²⁵ *B.T.W.M.*, 3 August 1933.

¹²⁶ *Bangkok Times*, 9 August 1933.

¹²⁷ *Ibid. B.T.W.M.*, 24 August 1933.

¹²⁸ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17176, 4 August 1933.

Assessing the contemporary political situation Prajadhipok expressed considerable anxiety about about the intentions of Pridi and his supporters:

The section of the People's Party which stands by Luang Pradit is the only section which has a policy and leadership. Pradit has some idea of political manoeuvring and party organisation. His followers worship him and follow blindly. His aim is a Socialist republic. He realises that a Republic is not possible at the moment but wants it as soon as possible. His policy is highly to the taste of the lazy Siamese intellectual which wants to break the monopoly of the Chinese and other foreign commercial enterprises. They are too lazy and incapable of doing it themselves and appeal to the State to do it for them ... The Pradit faction has a well organised propaganda. They spread scabrous and scandalous stories about the Royal Family on sexual matters and hope by these means to bring the Royal Family into disrepute. Unless there is some organised counter-action they will succeed.¹²⁹

In conclusion to the letter, the king returned to the idea of 'organised counteraction' by giving a clear indication that, should the opportunity arise, he was willing to support an armed royalist challenge to the state:

His [the king's] strongest weapon is the threat to abdicate — effectively used several times already. To be really effective there must be some chance that he could put the threat into execution, that is, to be able to go away or to retire to some safe place and await events. To make the same threat while he is in Bangkok is not half so effective since he lacks liberty of action. The revolutionaries have only to get hold of his person effectively to stop any kind of movement on the part of the Royalists. With the King in their hands they can take measures to suppress any attempted revolt. With the King at large and free to lead a revolt they have to be more cautious.¹³⁰

At approximately the same time as Prajadhipok was expressing his fears and hopes to Baxter, the question of Pridi's future came to the forefront. Phibun Songkhram, who had quickly emerged as one of the most powerful figures in the country due to his role in the change of government on 20 June, was of the opinion that he did not possess sufficient political expertise and wanted Pridi to return home and give the administration a sense of direction and purpose.¹³¹ As a result the matter was discussed in the cabinet, and on 15 August it was decided that if Pridi agreed to

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Nakharin, 1985: 290. The lack of political vision noted by Phibun was also remarked upon by a British consular official at the time who wrote: 'Siamese playing at politics makes one think of 22 Eskimoes suddenly given bats, stumps and a ball, but no rules and no umpires, and told to play cricket. Until a coach or a leader materializes there must be confusion.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 2 August 1933.

abandon his more radical ideas he should be recalled.¹³² Pridi quickly acceded to the government's wishes, and on 1 September it was officially announced that he would leave France for Siam immediately.¹³³

As the British noted, the effect of the cabinet's decision was to further exacerbate royal anger and bitterness towards the government.¹³⁴ At the same time, the news of Pridi's return also seemed to embolden some of his followers. During mid-September, one such individual, Thawat Rithidet, a leading figure in the Thai labour movement, attempted to bring a defamation suit against Prajadhipok for comments the king made in his criticism of Pridi's economic plan. Thawat's claims, published in the *Lak mu'ang* newspaper on 17 September, further offended the royalists, and led to a police order to seize all copies of the offending issue. However, this did not stop discussion of the matter, and the case continued to receive a good deal of further coverage in the paper over the next three days.¹³⁵ While the furore over Thawat's allegations continued, the date of Pridi's arrival drew nearer and tension in the capital increased. At this time, the government, in an attempt to ease potential difficulties invited Pridi's arch-enemy Song Suradet, and one of Song's associates Lieutenant Colonel Phra Prasat Phithayayut, Director of the Military Cadet College, to leave the country.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, the *Bangkok Daily Mail* did nothing to lessen the general

¹³² Wina, 1977: 94. There is some reason to believe that the king may have used bribery in a crude attempt to prevent Pridi's recall. The evidence is as follows. Prajadhipok, in his letter to Baxter described Phahon as a 'man not blessed with brains', yet one who was nevertheless a 'convinced monarchist' (*Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17176, 4 August 1933). As such it was quite possible that the king regarded Phahon as someone whom he could be manipulate. Indeed, this much is claimed in a document from the special court set up by the government after the Boworadet rebellion. According to this document, Phahon had wished to relinquish his position as premier shortly after the ouster of the Mano government on 20 June, but was forbidden to do so by the king who hoped the new premier's perceived ineptitude would ultimately allow the royalists to remove him and re-establish themselves. It was further stated that at one point the king offered Phahon 200,000 *baht* for an unspecified favour (*Het kan mu'a koet korani kabot* 2476 [Events Surrounding the Revolt of 1933], N.A. S.T. 0701.1/4). One can hypothesize that this favour may have been to oppose the recall of Pridi. Curiously, on 15 August, the day the cabinet decided that Pridi would return, Prajadhipok's private secretary Wibun Sawatiwong sent a reply to an individual by the name of Nai Fa Fu'n who had petitioned the king to give Phahon 200,000 *baht* to organize 'defence against likely enemies for the benefit of the country.' In Wibun's reply, which appeared in a number of newspapers, it was noted that the king knew Phahon would not accept any money and could not be forced to do so (*B.T.W.M.*, 24 August 1933). This was a particularly noteworthy story, as news of petitions involving the monarch directly were unusual to say the least. In fact it may be contended that the story was designed to counteract rumours or suspicions that the king had made an attempt to bribe Phahon.

¹³³ *Bangkok Times*, 1 September 1933.

¹³⁴ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17175, 7 September 1933.

¹³⁵ See *Lak mu'ang*, 19 September 1933 for details of Thawat's charge. Note: The issues of *Lak mu'ang* for 17 and 18 September are not available in the National Library in Bangkok, most probably as a result of the police action at the time.

¹³⁶ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210. Note: Song had been living in semi-retirement in the north of the country since the 20 June coup, but still commanded a great deal of support among various sections of the army [*Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17176, 21 October 1933]. It is quite possible the reason for Song being requested to leave the country at this time was that he was planning to use his support in the army to move against the government. As much was hinted in remarks made by the king some time later in a conversation with Sir Robert Holland

atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, by issuing the Phahon administration with the following warning:

The Stormy Petrel,..., is rapidly nearing our shores. Steer carefully the newly launched Ship of State, lest it be dashed against the rocks and destroyed.¹³⁷

In response, the government increasingly anxious to avoid any trouble decided to keep Pridi's arrival as subdued as possible, and when he reached Bangkok on the morning of 29 September it was:

...without the fanfare of a single trumpet, without any of the many planned celebrations at the wharf, or throngs of enraptured and devoted followers trailing him through the streets in a triumphal return akin to that of an old time Roman conquering hero, such as had been discussed...ever since it was known that he was to return.¹³⁸

The following day, the government attempted to mollify their royal opponents by laying criminal charges against Thawat together with three other individuals, including the owner and editor of the *Lak mu'ang* newspaper, for attacking the king.¹³⁹ This initiative was to have little effect however, since the royalists were already planning to use military force to overthrow the government.¹⁴⁰

4.5. 1 The Boworadet Rebellion

During the second week of October 1933, the royalists' plans were put into action when a rebellion, reportedly bankrolled by the king, was launched under the leadership of Prince Boworadet.¹⁴¹ On 12 October rebel forces, comprising of troops from a number

about anti-government activity during late 1933. The king told Holland: 'You may not know that there were two movements in progress at the same moment; one within Bangkok, the other outside. The first which represented genuine discontent with the methods of *Phya* Phahon's party, would have won if it had not been forestalled and hampered by the effort of Prince Boworadej.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18206, 17 January 1934.

¹³⁷ *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 23 September 1933.

¹³⁸ *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 29 September 1933. Once Pridi had landed, additional precautions were made by preventing meetings with well wishers and forbidding all contacts with the press. *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 30 September 1933.

¹³⁹ *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 30 September 1933.

¹⁴⁰ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210. N.A. S.T. 0701.1/4 [3-6].

¹⁴¹ As we have seen, the king had indicated support for an anti-government revolt in his letter to Baxter at the beginning of August. The king also made it clear that for any action against the government to be 'effective', he would have 'to retire to some safe place and await events.' (*Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17176, 4 August 1933) Some time prior to the revolt the king and queen went to stay at the royal palace in Hua Hin, on the Gulf of Siam. Originally it was announced that they would return to the capital on 5 October. However, their departure date was subsequently postponed until 11 October, the beginning of the revolt. On the very same day, an announcement was made in the press that their return would be postponed indefinitely (*Bangkok Daily Mail*, 11 October 1933). While these changes in the royal travel plans do not provide any conclusive

of provincial garrisons, established themselves on the northern edge of the capital and issued an ultimatum calling on the government to resign immediately or be removed by force.¹⁴² Leaflets were distributed which claimed that Phahon, Phibun, Supha and Pridi were enemies of the people intent on establishing a communist dictatorship.¹⁴³ The government chose to ignore the ultimatum, and instead took steps to defend the capital. Meanwhile, it became apparent to the rebels that the support for their movement was not as great as had first been anticipated. The troops in Bangkok remained loyal to the government as did a number of key provincial garrisons. Faced with the prospect of a full-scale battle to remove the existing leadership, Boworadet, decided to adopt a more conciliatory approach by entering into negotiations in which he called on the government to allow the king a greater political role. The government, however, was less willing to compromise, and on 13 October ordered its troops into battle against the

evidence about the king's involvement with the rebellion, they do raise suspicions that he was being informed by the plotters as to their timetable of action. Far more damaging is material contained in the report of the special court which was convened to try the rebels. According to this document, Prajadhipok provided Boworadet with 200,000 *bah*t to finance the revolt. *N.A. S.T.* 0701.1/4 [2]

¹⁴² *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

¹⁴³ In essence, it was claimed that the influence of Pridi and his radical ideas were responsible for stirring them into action:

[After Pridi was expelled from the country his] faction implemented a plot to seize power and reopen the National Assembly, which was dominated by his followers. They ruled by the power of the military which was used as a tool for intimidating and oppressing innocent people, while arranging things so that King Prajadhipok was forced to permit Luang Pradit's return to government. They also violated the constitution by allowing members of their group to spread insulting talk of the monarch, causing people to lose their faith in the throne and come to hate the king. All of this makes it clear that this group seeks to remain in permanent control of the government. They hope to eliminate the king and thereby clear the way for a communist regime in the future.

The leaflet also announced the principles of government the group would follow when it took power. These principles were as follows:

1. To do everything to arrange for Siam to have a Monarch to reign under the Constitution for all time.
2. To abide...by the Constitution, and more especially that the appointment and withdrawal of the Government party should be carried out by a majority vote and not by the taking up of arms, as formerly. Because of this a political party should be allowed by law.
3. Those officials enjoying positions both in the military and civil services should be outside politics, with the exception of those whose duties are directly connected with politics.
4. The appointment of officials in the respective positions should be based on efficiency and not by taking into consideration their connection with politics.
5. The election of the people's representatives of the second category should be submitted to His Majesty to carry out.
6. The administration of the Army should contain mixed units according to military tactics and the division of important arms for applying to the various districts and in no wise [sic] should major strength be confined to any place whatever. (Chaiyawat Yonpiam, *Fan rai khong mu'ang Thai* [Thailand's Nightmare], Chaophraya, Bangkok, 1985: 41. *B.T.W.M.*, 17 October 1933).

rebels. Phibun's artillery forces, supported in a non-combat capacity by Boy Scouts, students, and labourers, were particularly effective, inflicting 'heavy casualties' on rebel troops at Bangkhen on the fringe of the capital forcing them to retreat along the northeastern railway line.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, southwest of Bangkok, royalist troops from Phetburi attempted to join the rebellion, but were halted by units loyal to the government. On 15 October the king and his retinue in Hua Hin received news about the worsening situation from the prince. As a result, they decided to flee southwards to Songkhla near the Malay border and await further developments. Shortly afterwards, following continued government successes, a number of the more senior members of the royal family, including Prince Damrong, Prince Sawat and the king's personal secretary Prince Wibun Sawatiwong, crossed into the Malay states to escape the likelihood of imprisonment. The king himself remained in the south, and entered into drawn-out negotiations with the government which ultimately resulted in his return to the capital. Boworadet, with a 10,000 *baht* reward being offered for his capture, fled to French Cambodia by aeroplane leaving behind an unspecified number of casualties including his principal commander, Sisit Songkhram.¹⁴⁵ While a few members of the prince's group also escaped to Cambodia, hundreds of other individuals thought to be involved in the plot were rounded up by the government including leading figures from the Nationalist Association, and the Siam Free press group.¹⁴⁶

Within a period of less than three weeks after hostilities had commenced the rebellion was effectively crushed by the government. As a consequence, royal political power was finally brought to an end, leaving the generation of 'new men' made up of Phibun, Pridi and their associates in a powerful position to influence the future form and direction of Thai society.

¹⁴⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, 17 October 1933. Note: The king was alerted to the fact these groups of individuals were supporting the government and wrote to Phahon commending the efforts of the Boy Scouts. At the same time he urged Phahon not to provide the workers with any weapons. He felt that if the workers were armed there would be a good deal of additional violence. This fear reflected the king's awareness of the long standing bitterness of the workers towards the royal class, who, in the absolute period had viewed labourers as little more than slaves and repeatedly ignored their calls for social justice. *N.A.* S.R.1201.1/22. Letter by Prince Wibun Sawatiwong, [Prajadhipok's Personal Secretary] to Phahon 22 October 1933.

¹⁴⁵ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/17176, 21 October 1933. Note: Casualties reported on the government side were 15 killed and 59 wounded.

¹⁴⁶ Phraya Thonawanik, Khunying Siphicahi Songkhram, Saraphai Phiphat and Louis Girivat. *N.A.* S.T. 0701.1/4. Note: So Sethabut, author of the well-known 'Thai-English', 'English-Thai' dictionaries was arrested for translating the anti-government leaflets into English and given a life sentence. Orasom Suthisakhon, 'So Sethabut: chak ratchsamnak su khuk kan mu'ang' [So Setabut: From the Royal Secretariat to Political Prison], *Thanon nangsue*, 3, 9, March 1986 (18-28): 23.

4.6 Wichit's Activities Between 20 June 1933 and the Suppression of the Boworadet Rebellion

With the removal of the Mano administration, and the corresponding strengthening of the authority of the Peoples' Party, Wichit's political loyalties, which had formerly been with the royalists, were to shift dramatically toward the new regime. Wichit was nothing if not a pragmatic, one may even say, opportunistic individual, and it seems clear that he wanted to side with whichever group was in the ascendent.

The first public indication that his political orientation was changing came shortly after the 20 June coup when he became a second category member of the reconvened National Assembly. At the same time, his writing began to take on a more political note than in the recent past. Significantly he no longer criticized the government, but sought to provide ideas for overcoming the political difficulties it faced.

As was indicated above, the overthrow of Mano made the question of political legitimacy based on the monarchy problematic. While the government continued to base its legitimacy on the throne after 20 June, the irreconcilable differences between members of the old and new order suggested that this form of support would be unworkable in the long term. Wichit tacitly acknowledged this problem in an article published in *Duang prathip* on 25 June entitled '*Lathi chu chat*' [Nationalism].¹⁴⁷ He argued that the time had come when it was crucial an ideology [*udomkhathi*] stressing the importance of the nation be developed and set in place. If such a course were followed, he claimed, Siam would progress like Japan and various European states, where nationalism had long been promoted among the people. With little sense of modesty, Wichit saw himself as the leading figure in mounting this ambitious project:

If Mussolini can boast that his Facism has brought prosperity to Italy at the present time, I would like to be able to boast that my nationalism will bring prosperity and progress to Siam in the future.¹⁴⁸

On the most general level, the type of nationalism Wichit expounded had four essential principles which were: 'The supremacy of the nation above all else, support of Buddhism as the national religion; respect for the constitution and king, total opposition to communism.'¹⁴⁹ While this basic nationalist formulation shared elements with that articulated by Vajiravudh, it was nevertheless markedly different in that it accorded pre-

¹⁴⁷ *Duang prathip*, 25 June 1933. Note: Wichit told his readers that he had been trying to find a suitable way for rendering the English word 'nationalism' in Thai. As a result he coined the term *lathi chu chat* [literally, belief system+boost/uplift+nation/race], a term, however, with which he was not entirely satisfied. He admitted he could think of nothing better at the time.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

eminence to the nation rather than the throne which was now seen to be of secondary importance. Clearly, this new emphasis reflected the changed political reality.

On a more practical level, Wichit argued it was vital that the nation be seen as a tangible entity which individuals could identify with and love. As such, he emphasized the importance of the cultural domain. He said that the glories of Siam's past must be fully documented and made known to the public in books and through the education system. Further, he suggested that ancient indigenous traditions, architecture, and literature, be preserved in order that they be used as national symbols. In putting these ideas forward, Wichit was following closely in the footsteps of Vajiravudh, who, as a part of his attempt to create political legitimacy, had tried hard to remind his countrymen of Siam's cultural heritage and thereby draw their attention away from the social and political allurements of the West. Like Vajiravudh, Wichit also recognized the value of art in promoting a nationalist cause, and said that contemporary writers should be encouraged 'to produce works to instill a love of country in the people.'¹⁵⁰

Another aspect of Wichit's nationalist vision concerned the realm of economic activity. This, however, was a subsidiary feature of his thought and not developed in any length. He simply suggested that the government should promote Thai business enterprise and urged consumers to use Thai products rather than imported goods.

In order for the 'people to love the nation', Wichit further asserted that particular human qualities were necessary, qualities which he felt were insufficiently developed among the Thai populace. These were: honesty, perseverance, daring and bravery, compassion, politeness and grace, a love of honour, a love of duty, and self-control. Interestingly, Wichit did not think of this list of requisite characteristics himself, but took seven of them from a book on the Japanese warrior code *Bushido* by Inazo Nitobe a Japanese professor he had met years earlier in Switzerland.¹⁵¹ The single characteristic not found in Nitobe's book was 'perseverance', a quality that was stressed in the work of one of Wichit's favourite authors, Samuel Smiles. Again we see Wichit, in articulating his nationalist statement, not as an original or inventive thinker, but as an individual who sought out different ideas from abroad and introduced them in various forms to a Thai audience.

Wichit continued to address the question of political legitimacy the following month [July] in another article he published in *Duang prathip* entitled '*Amnat khong rat*' [The Power of the State].¹⁵² He claimed there were two fundamental theories of the role of the state in facilitating national progress: on the one hand was the view that the state should be responsible for maintaining order, providing health care, and developing a countrywide communications network; the other view was to the effect that the state

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* Note: Nitobe's book, *Bushido, The Soul of Japan*, had been a best seller in the West.

¹⁵² *Duang prathip*, 23 July 1933.

should play the leading ^{role} in all areas of social, political and economic life. According to Wichit, political theorists had long debated among themselves as to which of these perspectives was superior. However, since different people saw the world in different ways, it had been impossible to ever reach a unanimous decision. Wichit said that in order to overcome this dilemma a compromise was needed, and believed that he had the answer: 'the good of the people [*ratsadon*] is to be more important than that of the government, but the good of the nation [*chat*] is to be more important than that of individuals.'¹⁵³ In effect what this proposition meant was that whoever could define or control the concept 'the good of the nation', would have legitimacy to rule.

4.6. 1 Wichit Gives His Full-fledged Support to the Government

On 1 August 1933, after ten months of self-imposed leave from the bureaucracy in protest against the censorship of *Thai mai*, Wichit took up a new governmental position as head of one of the departments in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁵⁴ Shortly afterwards his rapprochement with the new order became even more evident than it had previously. Either some time in late August or early September he was given a secret commission by the government to investigate the state of education, identify problem areas and make recommendations as to what type of changes should be implemented. The results of Wichit's brief was contained in a confidential report which was forwarded to Phahon on 24 September.

The document begins with the following observation:

The change in administration requires old ways being replaced by the new. Education is the most vital of all areas and must be made compatible with the new system as quickly as possible. If this does not take place the change in government will be meaningless and progress impossible.¹⁵⁵

The government, in fact, had already stated that a number of educational reforms were being implemented or planned. These were: to enforce the primary education act throughout the kingdom, to increase the number of vocational schools, to improve the standard of the curriculum at Chulalongkorn University, to increase the number of secondary schools and to improve teacher training. Although Wichit applauded these objectives, he noted that, with the exception of the primary sphere, no real progress had been achieved since 24 June. He also claimed that in the period since the change in government the quality of teaching had actually deteriorated.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ N.A. S.T. 0701.1/8.

¹⁵⁵ N.A. San. 3.13/16.

The reason for such a lack of progress, Wichit argued, was essentially the result of two factors. The first of these was inequality between the administrative and teaching staff in the Ministry of Education. Under a policy inherited from the absolute monarchy the former group had the opportunity to advance more rapidly within the bureaucracy and earn higher salaries. As a result, Wichit believed teachers had no real incentive to work hard or improve themselves. The second, and more immediate problem confronting the process of educational reform concerned officials who were in charge of implementing government policy. In this area, Wichit singled out *Chaophraya* Thammasakmontri, the Minister for Education for particularly harsh criticism. He claimed that Thammasakmontri, who had been a leading figure in education under the absolute monarchy, involved himself in every decision made within the ministry, no matter how trivial the matter.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, very little was accomplished. Wichit also accused Thammasakmontri of keeping many of his old cronies on in the ministry with scant regard for their qualifications. While not directly accusing the minister of disloyalty to the government, Wichit claimed many of his appointees were totally opposed to reform and confirmed enemies of the state.¹⁵⁷

The suggestions Wichit made for overcoming these problems were straightforward. With regard to the first, he recommended that ministerial regulations be changed to promote equality of opportunity and thereby raise the aspirations of teachers and give the profession hope for the future. He also said that funds should be redirected away from the administrative domain and used to provide pay rises for as many teachers as possible.¹⁵⁸ It was anticipated that if such change took place a superior quality of individual would choose teaching as a career. As for the latter problem, Wichit provided the government with a list of specific individuals whom he felt should be dismissed immediately. He also suggested that Thammasakamontri be required^{to} step down. In addition he said that all ministry officials who had served more than twenty-five years in the public service should be relieved of their duties, the only exceptions being individuals for whom suitable replacements could not be found. Furthermore, all

¹⁵⁶ During Chulalongkorn's time Thammasakmontri was involved in a number of areas in education such as teacher training, curriculum development and the production of teaching materials. Under Vajiravudh, he became the Minister for Education from 1917 until 1926 when he was relieved of his position by Prajadhipok. Immediately after the 1932 revolution he came back into favour and was made the first President of the National Assembly. He also resumed direct involvement in educational activities and became Minister for Education for a second time in September 1932. In December of the same year, he was appointed as head of a six-man committee on educational reform set up by the government. See Suchitra Sutdieokrai, *Bot samruat chiwit lae phon ngan khong Khru Thep* [A Survey of the Life and Work of Khru Thep]:1-21, In *Khru Thep* (Cholthira Klatyu, ed.), The Social Science Association of Thailand, Bangkok, 1983. And *Prawat krasuang su'ksathikan*, 2435-2507 [History of the Ministry of Education: 1892-1964], Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1964: 309.

¹⁵⁷ N.A. San. 3.13/16.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* [7-8]. Wichit further suggested that the loss in the administrative budget could be made up if the government stopped its support of the 'aristocratic' [*aristokhrat*] Vajiravudh College which amounted to 45,000 *baht* annually.

officials who had served for twenty years and found to have insufficient qualifications were to be dismissed, as was any official, regardless of their length of service, who had shown signs of opposition to the government or its plans for educational reform. A final suggestion was that the education council, a consultative body of officials, take a more active role in decision making. The council, which had been under the jurisdiction of the minister, would instead become responsible to the cabinet as a whole, a move which was designed to prevent the any one individual dominating the ministry as had been the case in the past.¹⁵⁹

Apart from these measures, Wichit also discussed the question of school texts. In conducting his research he had found that there was no uniformity of teaching materials between schools, and that much of this material was very dated, often presenting the students with conflicting, confusing views of the world. Wichit argued the reason for this chaotic situation was that each school appeared to follow the policy [*naiyobai*] of its headmaster rather than that laid down by the Ministry of Education. He said in order to overcome this state of affairs it was necessary for the ministry to assert its authority by overseeing the development of a standardized set of texts which conformed with the values of the new system of government, and have these introduced in the schools.¹⁶⁰

In the concluding section of the report, Wichit presented his views on the type of education the country's children should receive. Given his keen interest in personal development it is not surprising that Wichit stressed the idea of character building. In the past, he claimed, schools had only been concerned with providing children with knowledge of manners such as: kindness, honesty, frugality, respectfulness. But they had failed to teach them determination, independence and responsibility, qualities that Wichit indicated were incompatible with the previous form of administration. Nor did students develop an admiration for progress or learn to 'love the nation'. This latter weakness in the system was of great concern to Wichit, who said it was vital that children from 'the lowest to the very highest [social] class' learn what the nation was, what the value of loving the nation was, and the ways individuals could help the nation.¹⁶¹

While the government's response to the report is not revealed in the available sources, the document itself provides further evidence that Wichit saw an overriding need to transform the consciousness of the population to accord with the new social and political age they were living in.

During October 1933 when the Boworadet rebellion broke out, Wichit's new-found commitment to the government became more forcefully expressed. While Phibun

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* [6-8].

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* [10-11].

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* [1, 11].

Songkhram, his long-time acquaintance, led the government's forces on the battlefield, Wichit led a radio campaign against the royalists, the first time radio had been used for propaganda purposes in Siam.¹⁶² His role was to prepare official communiques in the name of the Prime Minister Phahon, and have these broadcast around the country. In many of these announcements, Wichit used the simple, yet telling method of branding the opposition as contemptible and beneath respect, while portraying his side in the most positive of terms. For example, one of the announcements which was aired on 14 October read:

During the present conflict, some people have been led to believe that the fighting has simply been a matter of different groups, or cliques struggling for power ... But to say that different groups are struggling for power is incorrect. This conflict, in which Thais are killing each other, has been caused by rebels and bandits [*phuak kabot phuak chon*]

... The rebellion is against the constitution His Majesty gave to the people, it is a rebellion against the nation ... and it is a rebellion against the leader of the nation, the King, causing him great distress.

... Therefore the government must do whatever it can to suppress these rebels and bandits, and bring peace and happiness to the people.¹⁶³

From the early stages of the conflict, the government was particularly anxious to prevent uncommitted military forces from siding with the royalists. This was clearly evidenced in one communique broadcast on 13 October, which claimed only four hundred provincial troops had supported the rebellion. 'Other soldiers', the announcement continued, 'respect the government as before, and are ready to sacrifice their lives for the nation.'¹⁶⁴ Another somewhat more strident communique of 15 October announced:

The rebels have used violent means to seize public monies, killing people in the process. In addition the rebels have attempted to force citizens, from every class including prisoners, to work for them. Those who resisted were punished severely. The things the rebels have done are the actions of true criminals ... Soldiers should be particularly suspicious of the rebels. Men from [the garrison at] Ayuthaya, were duped into thinking they were going to practice battle manoeuvres [and had no idea of they were being drawn into battle] ... They were treated like animals, if they did not fight they were shot ... Some bodies have been found in civilian clothes, with helmets lying beside them. This indicates that these men were soldiers who had cast off their uniforms and tried to escape.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Nakharin, 1985: 299.

¹⁶³ N.A. S.T. 0701.1/4.

¹⁶⁴ N.A. S.T. 0701.1/4.

¹⁶⁵ N.A. S.T. 0701.1/4.

The government's strategy of using radio to wage 'psychological warfare' was particularly effective. Their opponents, who relied on the airforce to deliver orders and distribute anti-government propaganda leaflets around the country, could not contend with the immediacy of radio broadcasts. Nowhere else was this more clearly evidenced than in Nakhon Sawan and other areas in the north of the country where the use of radio played the crucial role in undermining royalist attempts to woo provincial troops to join in the rebellion.¹⁶⁶

While suppression of the rebellion can in large measure be attributed to Phibun's use of artillery against the main concentration of royalist forces on the outskirts of Bangkok, it can also be seen that Wichit's efforts were a not insignificant factor in helping the government to win the conflict. During this time, Wichit had clearly proved himself to be a highly valuable asset to the government, yet his worth was not to become fully apparent until he began working in earnest to create political legitimacy for the new order and win the peace.

4.7 Conclusion

The overthrow of the absolute monarchy on 24 June 1932 did not result in the sudden end of royal influence in the political sphere. As has been argued above, the sixteen-month period following this event was one of intense struggle between the royalists and members of the new order, a struggle which was ultimately decided in favour of the latter group with the suppression of the Boworadet rebellion in October 1933.

It has been shown that during this period, the political allegiance of *Luang* Wichit shifted dramatically. Initially he was involved in pro-royalist activity against the government. However, as the political fortunes of the royalists went into decline after the coup against *Phraya* Manopakon 20 June 1933, Wichit decided to throw his support behind the incoming administration.

In his writing after 20 June, Wichit began addressing one of the major problems confronting Siam's new leaders: the question of establishing political legitimacy. The removal of *Phraya* Manopakon from office by Phahon and his associates made the existing form of legitimacy based on the throne problematic. The answer to this problem, Wichit suggested, was the development of a nationalist ideology. This is precisely what Vajiravudh had done more than two decades earlier when his government was faced with serious political uncertainty and deep social divisions. However, while Vajiravudh emphasized the central role of the monarchy in his nationalist discourse, that which was articulated by Wichit stressed the supreme importance of 'the nation', the throne being relegated to a secondary position.

¹⁶⁶ Great Britain, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

In the following chapter we will look more closely at Wichit's nationalism and his attempts to create political legitimacy for the state.

Chapter 5

Luang Wichit and the Consolidation of the New Order **1933-1938**

If Siam is not to relapse, like China, into a condition of chaos and disorder that threatens to be permanent, it is essential that there should be some degree of fusion between the old and the new.¹

5.1 Introduction

With the defeat of the Boworadet rebellion the Phahon administration had succeeded in taking effective control of the state. Its position, however, was ultimately based on coercive means; that is, control over the modern weapons of war such as tanks and machine guns rather than consent. Elements within the civilian bureaucracy remained less than fully committed to the government, while factionalism beset the military. In addition to these divisions among officialdom, the state was also confronted with the more general problem which the volatile Chinese community posed to social unity and purpose. The present chapter looks at how Wichit served the government in its attempt to legitimize its authority and create a sense of unity in Siam during the period 1933-1938. Wichit's involvement in the promotion of the constitution is discussed, as is his work in transforming the Department of Fine Arts into a key propaganda organ of the state. In essence this discussion will show that through these activities Wichit played a crucial role in re-ordering and re-defining the Thai conceptual universe to accord with changing political circumstances.

5.2 The Divisions Confronting the Phahon Government

It is a significant fact that their first revolution, their subsequent coup d'état, which took the premiership out of the hands of Phya Mano, and the rising engineered later on by Prince Bowaradej, have all of them been virtually bloodless. The average self-respecting revolutionary in any South American republic would certainly laugh these anaemic efforts to scorn and, without

1 *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379.

condoning the ferocious methods of domestic warfare practised in more turbulent lands, it is permissible to argue that, had a little more blood been split in the early stages of political upheaval in Siam, there would be a greater degree of security and order in the country today.²

In the aftermath of the Boworadet rebellion the degree to which Thai society had become politicized and divided was fully revealed to the government. A flood of reports, motivated either by genuine loyalty to the new order or by the desire for personal gain or revenge, were received by the authorities naming members of the bureaucracy as enemies of the state. Officials ranging from provincial governors and judges to village headmen, teachers, clerks and technicians, in such divergent provinces as Nakhon Pathom, Phetburi, Nakhon Sawan and Ayuthaya in the central region, Ubon, Buriram and Khon Kaen in the Northeast, Phetchabun in the North, and Pattani and Nakhon Sithammarat in the South were cited. These men were accused of engaging in a range of anti-government activity: supplying the rebels with food, fuel and money, failing to inform the public of the government's announcements, spreading rumours against the government, making attempts to establish covert opposition groups, and failing to carry out their assigned duties in planning and preparing Siam's first elections held in November 1933.³ While many of the individuals named in these reports were investigated by the authorities, and a number of those with networks of influence in the bureaucracy were imprisoned, or dismissed from service, many other lesser officials of dubious loyalty retained their positions or were simply transferred or demoted.⁴

An even greater threat to the stability and survival of the government were conflicts and divisions in the armed forces. In January 1934, for example, tensions between the junior members of the navy and some of their commanders became openly manifest. One young officer, Lieutenant Prasert Sukhasamaya, apparently angered by the failure of his superiors to commit naval forces against the rebels, urged the lower ratings 'to clear the navy of traitors' and secured 'the release of a number of democratically inclined sailors from detention' to support his cause.⁵ However, before the lieutenant's plan could be put into action, the government placed him under arrest. Shortly afterwards there were further indications of trouble as rumours spread through the capital that royalist elements in the navy and 'extremists' opposed to them were each

2 Comments made by the British Minister, Josiah Crosby, *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18207, 12 September 1934.

3 The above taken from various documents in N.A. S.R. 1201/1, and S.R. 0201.1. 5/5. *Ekasan samnak nayokrathamontri kong klang samnak lekhatikan khana rathamontri* [Documents from the Prime Minister's Office and Secretariat of the Cabinet].

4 N.A. S.R. 0201.1. 5/5.

5 *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379.

planning to stage a coup of their own.⁶ And at the beginning of April, an actual plot by the latter group was unearthed and approximately one hundred men were arrested.⁷

The army was also badly divided. While Phibun Songkhram had emerged as the paramount military leader after October 1933, numerous officers remained loyal to the exiled Song Suradet. In January 1934 increased friction between these opposing factions was reported, leading Phibun to deploy tanks around Bangkok to warn his opponents against taking any precipitate action.⁸ An air of tension and uncertainty prevailed in the capital during the following months, and was further heightened in the latter half of the year when Song returned to Siam. According to the British, Song had come back with the intent of overthrowing the Phahon administration, and with this idea in mind entered into a conspiracy with *Phraya* Devahastin, Vice-President of the National Assembly.⁹ However, the activities of the two men soon became known to the authorities and their planned coup was thwarted. Significantly, the discovery of the plot was not made public; Devahastin was arrested and sentenced to a two year gaol term on charges not related to the case, while Song was encouraged to leave the country once more, this time to Burma 'to study agricultural methods'.¹⁰ As the British noted, the government's decision not to arrest Song and charge him with sedition was due to its fear that such a course of action would seriously antagonize Song's many supporters in the military and further destabilize the political situation.¹¹

Additional problems for the government came from within the Chinese community, which had come increasingly divorced from Thai society. As has already been mentioned, Chinese labour had played a part in the political turmoil of 1932.¹² By early 1934, the government was again faced by problems from sections of the Chinese working class. Between February and April a number of strikes by Chinese coolies for better pay and conditions temporarily brought the rice export trade to a standstill.¹³ From the end of April until early May another strike led by Chinese workers at the

6 *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18206, 22 January 1934.

7 *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379. *B.T.W.M.* 14 July 1934.

8 *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18206, 22 January 1934.

9 *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379. *Phraya* Devahastin a scion of an influential Thai family had lead the Siamese Expeditionary Force to Europe during World War I. At the beginning of February 1934 he distinguished himself in the National Assembly by delivering a series of attacks on the government 'which he accused of entertaining Communist ideas', and demanded 'the removal from the Assembly of the military and naval officers who constituted more than half of the nominated members.' *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379, *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18206, 6 February 1934.

10 *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Not only elements within the Chinese working class posed problems for the state. In the wake of the Boworadet rebellion the government discovered that members of the Chinese business community supported the royalists and had secretly met to discuss raising donations for their cause. *N.A. S.R.* 1201/1 (Letter dated 4 November 1933).

13 *B.T.W.M.*, 1-3, 7, 9, 10, 17, 23 February, 7, 16 April 1934. Also see *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.5045/4, 1 May 1934.

Siamese State Railways disrupted transport services.¹⁴ While these strikes were broken and the ring leaders either deported or turned out of work, the ability of Chinese labour to disable Siam's economy was made plainly obvious to the government.

Nationalist sentiment within the Chinese community was another factor which presented difficulties to the state. To curb the growth of Chinese nationalism the government had imposed strict controls on the local Chinese education system which saw a large number of schools closed down during the period 1933-1935. The move generated further problems however, when 'extreme nationalists' urged their compatriots in China to place an embargo on the import of Thai rice. According to Chinese accounts this call led to a 15 per cent reduction in the amount of Thai rice which entered China in 1935.¹⁵ Further problems for the government were created by the anti-Japanese boycott movement. This movement had originally developed during the absolute monarchy when Chinese resentment over Japanese aggression in China led to a series of boycotts against Japanese goods, causing some disruption to trade.¹⁶ As Japan began to take on a far more significant political and economic role in Siam following the overthrow of the monarchy, the potential for Chinese boycotts to damage Japanese interests, and by extension those of the state, increased considerably.¹⁷ Clearly such a development was something the government wished to prevent.

It was in the context of these various divisions and conflicts that Wichit's activities on behalf of the state to create political legitimacy and social unity are to be understood. We may now proceed and examine these activities in some detail, beginning with his work in promoting the constitution.

5.3 Promotion of the Constitution

Shortly after becoming a member in the reconvened National Assembly, Wichit began to take an active role in promoting the constitution. In late July 1933, for example, he

¹⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, 27, 28 April, 4, 12 May. Skinner, 1957: 220.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 240.

¹⁶ Swan, W.L. Japanese Economic Relations with Siam: Aspects of Their Historical Development, 1884 to 1942. PhD. Thesis, Australian National University, 1986: 38-50.

¹⁷ During the latter part of Prajadhipok's reign the Japanese became anxious to remove Western influence in Siam and replace it with their own. Prior to the overthrow of the monarchy they met with little success however. Members of the old regime were suspicious of Japanese intentions, preferring instead to associate themselves with the European powers with whom they had long-standing, amicable relations. After 24 June 1932 the situation was to change dramatically. The mutual suspicions that developed between the new regime and the West, provided an opening for the Japanese to develop warmer relations with Siam and thereby further their ambitions in the region. The Thai side, for its part, saw great value in a closer relationship, and after the removal of the Mano government on 20 June 1933 Phahon was reported to have told the Japanese Minister Yatabe that 'he [Phahon] looked forward to consolidating the prosperity of Siam solely through reliance on Japan.' Flood, E.T., Japan's Relations with Thailand: 1928-41. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Washington, 1968: 24-27, 62.

proposed that all school teachers require their students to commit the constitution to memory.¹⁸ The following month he was asked by Phibun to produce a short article on the constitution for benefit of the public.¹⁹ This article was particularly interesting. Written in a very simple, repetitive style, it began with a general discussion about the state of affairs in human societies which led to the advent of constitutional government:

In the past ... forms of governmental administration lacked order [*mai mi rabiap*]... If the government did nothing for the people there was nothing they could do, since they had no voice ... In those times if the government was composed of good, moral people, who were clever and capable, the people were happy and progressed. But, if the government had no good people, or they were few in number, the people suffered badly. And when this happened they did not know what to do, they couldn't ask to have the government changed. Anyone who wanted a change in government was branded a rebel [*kabot*] and in danger of being executed ... This form of administration which lacked order has had very bad results. When the people couldn't bear their suffering any more they took up arms to challenge the government and attacked those who supported it. This has happened over and over again in many countries from ancient times until the present day. ...

In order to bring about peace, justice for all, prevent oppression, stop the abuse of power and create political order, progressive countries all over the world have set down a law stating the power of government and the people. What is more this law does not just apply to the government and people, but also the king, the leader of the country as well. This law is called a constitution.²⁰

The following sections of the article focussed directly on what constitutional government meant in Siam. One of the most significant features of the text was Wichit's attempt to counter the belief that the king no longer had any power under the constitution. He stated this was an erroneous view, and asserted that the authority of the monarch remained substantial:

The King is still the head of the nation. He is the highest personage in the land and nobody may harm or criticize him. He is in charge of Siam's armed services. He uses his power to pass laws recommended to him by the National Assembly, and maintains order in the Kingdom with the help of the Cabinet ... He can initiate meetings of the Assembly, ... he can close it down, and choose new members ... He appoints members of the Cabinet, he has the right to impose martial law, and declare war. He has the right to make peace treaties and other forms of legal agreement with foreign powers ...²¹

¹⁸ *Rai ngan kan prachum sapha phu thaen ratsadon samai thi nu'ng khrang thi hok 2476* [Minutes of the National Assembly, First Session, Sixth Meeting, 1933], Nithibanthitsapha, Bangkok, 1933: 173.

¹⁹ *Duang prathip*, 10 September 1933.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Given the bitter political infighting at the time, this assertion can be seen as a calculated attempt to convince those members of the public who were unsure about the intentions of the new order that the king still played a central role in Siam's political affairs.

The other major feature of the article was a discussion of the benefits of Siam's new constitution for the citizenry at large. Wichit told his readers that constitutional administration meant the government and the people were now one and the same, a marked contrast to the pre-1932 period when 'the government was like a master and the people were like slaves.' Under a constitution, the government was to be more responsive to the needs of the people who were entitled to question the activities of their leaders. Furthermore, in the event the public became dissatisfied with a particular government the constitution provided means whereby they could have a new administration take power.

In conclusion, Wichit argued that the people had a duty to abide by the provisions of the constitution and give it their utmost support:

Let everybody be confident that this constitution will bring progress and happiness to our country. We must make our constitution secure as it is the basis of our nation. Anyone who is opposed to the constitution is to be considered an enemy of the nation. Anyone who loves the nation and has hope for the future must ... act in accordance with the constitution ²²

Two features of this concluding section of the text are worth commenting on. First, the association between constitutional government in general and the notion of progress, mentioned earlier in the passage, is made with specific reference to Siam. As we have seen, the discourse of progress absorbed from the West defined what was considered superior and most desirable. Accordingly the constitutional regime established in Siam was, by implication the best, the most suitable, and therefore the most legitimate form of government. Second, a link between the constitution, or constitutional government and identity was suggested. To respect the constitution was to be a part of the group, or 'nation'. On the other hand, for individuals to oppose the constitution was to reject or disavow their membership in this community.

At the end of August, Wichit continued his efforts to promote the constitution. In his role as a member of the National Assembly he suggested that a law 'to protect the constitution' should be enacted, and urged the government to take steps which would allow the constitution to 'flourish permanently'.²³ These suggestions did not go

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Wichit proposed this idea in the National Assembly on 31 August 1933. See Minutes of the National Assembly, First Session, Sixteenth Meeting, 1933.

unheeded, and in the first week of October, the government, increasingly desirous of shoring up its position, decided to appoint a special committee in response. Pridi, who had just returned to Siam was selected as chairman of the new body which also included Wichit together with a number of leading figures in the army and navy such as Colonel *Phra* Sit Ru'angdetphon and Commander *Luang* Sindhu Songkhramchai.²⁴

On 11 October, the same day that Boworadet's troupes began to converge on the capital, Pridi, the head of the committee reported its progress to the cabinet. He announced that the committee had agreed that the proposed law should: promote a belief in the constitution, provide protection for its principles, and to help the people understand the notion of constitutionalism.²⁵ The Boworadet rebellion gave a sense of urgency to the committee's recommendations and on 5 November 1933 the 'Act for the Protection of the Constitution' was duly promulgated. Section Three of this wide-ranging legislation stated that:

Whoever commits any act in contravention of the Constitution, or in order to lessen the people's appreciation of the same, or causes alarm in regard to the Administration of the State by way of the Constitution of Siam, even though such act is only a conspiracy or the making of an agreement or preparation of the act, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to twenty years, or fine of five hundred to five thousand baht, or both [further] if the offence committed is punishable by other laws, the offender shall also be punished under such laws.²⁶

It was clearly a law designed to counter all forms of political opposition. Under Section Four of the act, it was further provided that individuals merely suspected of conspiracy could be sentenced without trial to 'restricted residence' for a period of up to ten years. Essentially this meant a form of internal exile in which the accused were not imprisoned, but required to remain in a particular provincial location and regularly report to the authorities.²⁷ Significantly, it was not long before the law was actually being applied and different individuals suspected of fomenting plots against the government were charged under its provisions and imprisoned in Bangkok or sentenced to restricted residence.²⁸

While the government sought to fortify its position with the act, it also attempted to popularize the constitution through the establishment of a new body known as the Association of the Constitution. This organization, which was formally registered on 14 December 1933, had Wichit as Secretary and included such influential members of the

²⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, 7 October 1933.

²⁵ Minutes of the Cabinet cited in Wina, 1977: 53-54.

²⁶ *B.T.W.M.*, 23 November 1933.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379. *B.T.W.M.*, 25 August 1934.

regime as Phahon, Phibun, and Supha. The basic aims of the Association were to: 'support the Constitution of Siam', 'promote co-operation in the ranks of the people', and to 'assist the Government and people in securing progress for the nation...according to the channel of the Constitution.'²⁹

It should be pointed out that while various sections of the urban population understood the rational, legalistic notion of a constitution, the vast majority of the people did not. According to an account of the period by Kulap Saipradit the general population interpreted this new idea in terms of indigenous magical conceptions of the world:

It was said that the constitution deity was most holy and to be respected...Everybody..., even the king who was considered to be a god, was subject to its authority...All activities in the kingdom were to be in accordance with its commands.³⁰

In devising an approach to carry out its objectives the Association had to come to terms with this type of thinking. As a result it decided to promote the constitution not as a practical code defining the relationship between the people and the state, but as a revered object of national importance [*sing saksit khong chat*]

The idea of the constitution as a sacred entity was suggested in the first political play written by Wichit, a work entitled *Luk rathathanun* [Child of the Constitution].³¹ In essence the play was a short, thinly disguised account of the Boworadet rebellion which glorified the honour of the victorious military forces and called on the audience to be willing to make any sacrifice for the Constitution.³² Significantly when the play was first performed in mid-1934, it was before a large gathering of state functionaries at an official ceremony consecrating the installation of a Buddha image in a Bangkok palace.

The movement to promote the constitution gathered increased momentum in August 1934 when the Association organized an official ceremony which saw the document being ritually linked to the religious domain in Thai culture:

The Regent anointed miniature copies of the Constitution for each of the 70 changwads, while the assemblymen representing the changwads were stationed behind their respective copies as monks

²⁹ B.T.W.M., 14 December 1933.

³⁰ Kulap Saipradit [Siburapha]. *Lae pai khang na: phak matchimawai* [Look Forward: Middle Age], San Sayam, Bangkok, 1975: 136-137.

³¹ The first play Wichit is known to have written, *Sala chip phu'a ngan* [Sacrifice Your Life for Work], a children's drama which extolled the virtues of industriousness and hard work, appeared some months prior to the 1932 revolution and was performed at Benchamaratchalai School. *Duang prathip*, 1 March 1932.

³² *Prachathipatai*, 14 July 1934.

chanted religious stanzas, accompanied by a fanfare of musical instruments and the beating of gongs.³³

Four months later, the Association made arrangements for the public celebration of Permanent Constitution Day on 10 December.³⁴ According to Crosby, the British Minister of the time, these celebrations were, 'on a much more elaborate scale than those arranged...in honour of the King's birthday', and indicated that Constitution Day was henceforth 'to be regarded as the most notable day in the Siamese calendar'.³⁵ Crosby was particularly taken by the ceremonial aspects of the celebrations and produced the following account about a visit to Lopburi north of Bangkok:

In a pavillion set apart for a religious service to be held subsequently, I observed that 3 altars had been erected. One was dedicated to the Buddha, whose statue rose above it, whilst another was for the King and was in conformity with the time honoured custom, surmounted by a portrait of His Majesty. The third altar was that of the Constitution, a minature copy of which was placed upon it; this altar, the largest of the three, occupied the centre of the stage, the others being relegated to the background, and I was surprised to find the same offerings of candles and of flowers had been arranged in front of it. In other words, semi-divine honours were being paid to the Constitution, in the hope, presumably, that the simple-minded Siamese would be induced to regard it as a real entity upon which he could lavish some personal devotion which he had hitherto for the monarch of the land.³⁶

This was precisely what the government had in mind, and it was soon being helped to extend the effectiveness of its promotional campaign. Shortly after the celebrations, a number of provincial representatives from the National Assembly wrote to Wichit, in his new role as head of the Department of Fine Arts [see below], and urged him to have his craftsmen design a special type of cabinet for the minature copies of the constitution they had been given by the Association, so that their constituents could partake in locally organized ceremonies. A design for a cabinet, to be made of teak with gold leaf inlays, was promptly drawn up, and Wichit sent out a circular notifying interested parties that the finished product would be offered for sale at a price

³³ *Department of State, American Consular Reports*, 892.00 PR/65, 10 September 1934. Note: Prince Narit was appointed Regent in January 1934 when Prajadhipok went to Europe for medical treatment, and remained in the position until March 1935 when the king abdicated. The government was apparently keen to retain the prince as Regent, but he declined and a three man Regency Council was established in his place. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1935], F.O. 371/20302.

³⁴ 27 June 1934 had been designated 'Provisional Constitution Day' and was officially celebrated. The previous year the day had been unofficially celebrated. *Department of State, American Consular Reports*, 892.00 PR.163, 14 July 1934.

³⁵ *Great Britain*, F.O.371/19377, 11 December 1934.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

of approximately 240 *baht* each. So popular was the idea that the Fine Arts Department received immediate orders from various provinces in all the country's four regions.³⁷

Expressing respect for the constitution became mandatory for some groups within the society. From the latter part of 1933, for example, army cadets had been required to pledge their allegiance to the constitution in a formal ceremony.³⁸ Such ceremonies were not only limited to the military, however. After 1933 all members of the National Assembly were also required to swear a similar oath of allegiance.³⁹ A further development took place from 1936 when political prisoners arrested in connection with the Boworadet rebellion were required to swear an oath of allegiance to the constitution in a highly ritualistic ceremony of atonement before they could receive a government pardon and be released.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the population at large was repeatedly told that the factors underpinning Siamese unity and independence were embodied in the Nation, Religion, King and Constitution, a modification of the nationalist formulation of Nation, Religion and King popularized by Vajiravudh.⁴¹

These initiatives were particularly noteworthy in that they reflected the continued influence of the past on the present. First, as regards to the oath-taking ceremonies, the submission to authority by soldiers, members of parliament and political prisoners reveals a close parallel with the traditional ceremony of drinking the water of allegiance to the monarch, a ceremony no longer performed after 24 June 1932. It can be seen that despite the change in government, a long-standing political ritual was maintained, albeit with a difference in content. Of greater import however, was the inclusion of the constitution as a fourth element in the pre-existing official conception of Thai national unity (i.e. Nation, Religion and King), inherited from the absolute monarchy. What this development signified, was that the government, in attempting to create political legitimacy, had compromised its stated democratic ideals by having the constitution absorbed into a conservative, elite-centered discourse.⁴²

³⁷ N.A. S.T. 0701. 1/6. The provinces included Nakhon Ratchasima, Satun, Lampang, Samutsakon, Chachoengsao and Phetchabun.

³⁸ *B.T.W.M.*, 14 September 1933.

³⁹ *B.T.W.M.*, 28 March 1935.

⁴⁰ *B.T.W.M.*, 7 December 1936. The taking of an oath of allegiance to the constitution is also referred to in *Mu'ang nimit* [The Enchanted Land] by M.R. Nimitmonkon Nawarat, one of those gaoled for their participation in the Boworadet rebellion. This work, written sometime in the period 1937-39 is arguably Thailand's first overtly political novel. M.R. Nimitmonkon Nawarat, *Mu'ang nimit* [The Enchanted Land], Kaona, Bangkok, 1966: 97-101.

⁴¹ *B.T.W.M.*, 9 August 1935.

⁴² From the mid-1930s the state's efforts to popularize the constitution intensified and 10 December, Constitution Day, emerged as the high point of the official calendar. In the process the occasion increasingly took on a festive atmosphere in which beauty pageants, musical concerts, dancing and other types of entertainment tended to overshadow the ceremonial oath taking and official government pronouncements. Each year the occasion was marked by lavish celebrations and it was only with Thailand's entry into World War II in December 1941 that these ceased. 10 December remains a public holiday to the present day, yet it is now an occasion of which few people have any understanding and passes each year with none of the fanfare and

5.4 The Development of the Department of Fine Arts as a Key Propaganda Organ of the State

The Department of Fine Arts, the government body that Wichit is most closely identified with by scholars, evolved out of an organization of the same name created by Vajiravudh in 1912. The king, whose thespian interests have been alluded to above, was concerned about the 'sorry state' of local art and craft at the time, and created a Department of Fine Arts within the Ministry of the Royal Household in order to 'preserve and develop' indigenous Thai art. In essence this meant court-centered cultural forms.⁴³ Vajiravudh also set up a Department of Entertainments [*Mohorasop*] in order to revive the performing arts such as the *Khon* masked dance drama and the traditional *Lakhon*.⁴⁴ The king suggested that the establishment of such institutions had important political ramifications for Siam, noting that:

Helping our artisans is helping our country,
Because then our art will enhance our reputation
So we can take our place without shame
Among the great nations of the world.

.....
The civilized arts are a nation's glory.

.....
A nation without artists
Is like a man without a woman.
It is not a pleasant sight;
He is derided and shamed.⁴⁵

Vajiravudh's belief in the importance of culture was not shared by his successor however, and the revival of the arts came to a virtual end with his death in 1925. Under Prajadhipok, the Department of Entertainments ceased to exist, while the Department of Fine Arts, together with the National Museum, and National Library were amalgamated to form a new body known as the *Ratchabanthitaysapha*, or Royal Institute, which was administered through the Ministry of the Royal Household.⁴⁶ While this organization was to carry out important work, such as the production of books on historical and cultural topics, it did so in a relatively unobtrusive fashion with

excitement of the pre-war period. *B.T.W.M.*, 12 December 1935, *Bangkok Chronicle*, 8 December 1941.

⁴³ Vella, 1978: 232.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 235.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 232.

⁴⁶ Abbreviated history of the Department of Fine Arts included with the first file of material from the the Department's archives. *N.A.* S.T. 0701. 30 March 1980.

the result that for the remainder of the absolute monarchy the arts did not receive a great deal of publicity.⁴⁷

In the period following the overthrow of the monarchy this was to change dramatically. A more prominent place for the arts was first indicated in March 1933 when the government announced the establishment of a new cultural body, the *Ratchabanthitayasathan*, in place of the *Ratchabanthitaysapha*. The stated purpose of this new institution, which like its predecessor was known as the Royal Institute, was to 'conduct research and disseminate the results to the public in the form of published works.'⁴⁸ Two months later, in May 1933, the government announced that the Ministry of Education was to set up a new Department of Fine Arts utilizing various resources from the defunct Royal Institute including the National Museum and National Library.⁴⁹

The broad role envisaged for this new department was articulated in an internal policy statement drawn up by the Ministry of Education shortly afterwards. The statement, which seems to have been influenced by Wichit if not actually written by him, made overt reference to the principles of political psychology (*lak chitwithaya thang kan mu'ang*). It was claimed that individuals who had an interest in or an appreciation for art (*sinlapa*), were peaceful, considerate, law abiding citizens. In consequence it was suggested that if the department was able to increase public awareness of art by such means as holding musical competitions, staging plays or organizing public speaking exhibitions, political tensions could be lessened and a greater sense of social unity and purpose attained. Significantly, this idea of using a state apparatus to consciously influence political behaviour reflected developments elsewhere, most particularly those in Nazi Germany where a Ministry for Popular Entertainment and Propaganda had been set up earlier in the year under the control of the consummate manipulator — Joseph Goebbels.⁵⁰

While the political dimension was seen as the major concern of the department, the commercial benefits of culture were also considered to be of some importance. For example it was hoped that through the department's support for local arts and crafts a consumer market for such products could be created.⁵¹ Furthermore, it was believed

⁴⁷ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 30 March 1944.

⁴⁸ *Ratchabanthitayasathan* [The Royal Institute], *Rai ngan pracham pi* 2529 (Annual Report 1986), Bangkok, 1986: 1.

⁴⁹ N.A. S.T. 0701.1.1/14.

⁵⁰ *Nazi Propaganda (The Power and the Limitations)*, David Welch (ed.), Croom Helm, London, 1983. Introduction: 4. As Hitler had once exclaimed 'Propaganda, propaganda, propaganda. All that matters is propaganda.' Introduction: 1. It should be pointed out that developments in Germany were made readily available to the Thai listening public by the German English language radio service, which the British noted was 'fuller and more tendentious than its rivals.' *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1933], F.O. 371/18210.

⁵¹ This development seems to have anticipated the state sponsored *Thai niyom* [Buy Thai goods] campaign during the first Phibun era (1938-44) [see Chapter 6].

that the department could help generate increased national income through tourism if it took an active approach in promoting Siam's cultural sites such as the ancient ruins at Phimai and Sukhothai.⁵²

Despite these ambitious plans for the future virtually nothing was heard of the planned department for the remainder of 1933. There was apparently a good deal of activity taking place behind the scenes during this period, however, for in January 1934 the Department of Fine Arts finally came into being.⁵³ At the head of this new institution was Wichit Wathakan who had been personally called upon to take up the position of Director General by his old friends, Phibun Songkhram and Pridi Phanomyong.⁵⁴

Within a matter of weeks after assuming control of the department, Wichit discussed his plans for the arts in a three-part interview published by *Thai mai*. In the first of these interviews, Wichit was asked to respond to critics who believed that he would be of far greater benefit to the country if he became directly involved in politics rather than cultural matters. He rejected this view emphatically, claiming that his critics misunderstood the real significance of art. In his opinion, art was central to human experience, something which differentiated man from animals. Furthermore, he saw it as both 'a symbol of human progress' and 'something which made life better and the world more appealing.'⁵⁵ Curiously, such views did not reflect an indigenous 'Thai' perspective, but rather one which was characteristic of modern European society where 'the arts occupied a special place of respect and esteem.'⁵⁶

Wichit's comments are particularly interesting in that they are almost the same as those made by Vajiravudh years earlier, and reveal a further important parallel between the two men. Wichit, like the king, was an individual who stood between two worlds, the West and Siam, intimately involved in transmitting ideas from the former to the latter for political purposes. At the same time however, Wichit, like Vajiravudh, was strongly imbued with traditionalist notions, and used the interview to re-affirm the view

⁵² N.A. S.T. 0701.1.1/1.

⁵³ *B.T.W.M.*, 16 January 1934.

⁵⁴ Wichit, 1962(a): 56. Almost immediately after his return from exile, Pridi had become a government minister without portfolio and this indicated his strong links to the centre of power (*B.T.W.M.*, 9 October 1933). However, it was not until March 1934 that a specially appointed commission formally exonerated him from any taint of communism (*B.T.W.M.*, 12 March 1934). The following month his political revival was complete when he assumed the position of Minister of the Interior. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379. He was soon initiating various social changes such as a premature attempt to set up popular local governing bodies all over the country, and his more successful endeavour to found Thammasat University in June 1934. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379, *B.T.W.M.*, 28 June 1934.

⁵⁵ *Thai mai*, 4 February 1934.

⁵⁶ Hobsbawm, 1984: 317. Hobsbawm in writing about the arts makes the following observation, 'they [the arts] act as all-purpose suppliers of spiritual contents to the most materialist of civilizations. One might almost say that they took the place of traditional religion among the educated and emancipated.' 1984: 316.

embodied in the Buddhist Jataka, that art should impart morals if it was to be of any value.⁵⁷

In the two concluding interviews of the series, Wichit talked more specifically about his plans for the future of the department. Among other things, he indicated that the focus of the department would be a new body, to be known as the Arts Academy Division [*Kong sinlapawithaya*] which was to include sections devoted to literature, archaeology, the performing arts and language.⁵⁸ Of these four branches, the performing arts section concerned with the promotion of Thai dance, drama and music was to be of particular importance, and he revealed that a national troupe, similar to those in 'progressive nations' would be formed. Wichit pointed out that members of this troupe would be carefully chosen, then fully schooled in the arts of singing, dancing and acting as well as being taught the 'correct' way of speaking and 'proper' morals.⁵⁹ In other words it was planned that a national troupe would be made up of young individuals whose purpose was not only entertain the public, but also transmit officially sanctioned culture and promote the interests of the state.

5.4. 1 *The School of Dramatic Arts and the Creation of the National Troupe*

To facilitate his plans Wichit set up a special dance and drama school (*Rongrian Nathaduriyangsat*) in May 1934.⁶⁰ The school, which was located in the National Museum building, accepted a total of 153 students during its first year: 73 boys and 80 girls. These students fell into two broad categories, those who were sponsored by the state, and those who paid for their tuition. Of these groups, the state-supported students are of particular interest to us, in that it was from their number that members of the proposed national troupe were to be drawn. The criteria for choosing students for sponsorship are interesting, revealing as they do Wichit's desire to find what he considered model individuals to carry on the most public activities of the Department of Fine Arts. While only Thai nationals in a good state of health were eligible, it was also stipulated that these individuals possess a particular demeanour and physical appearance, presumably one which was deemed to be characteristically Thai.

State-sponsored students were of two types: students whose education and living expenses were fully funded by the state, and partially-funded students for whom the state only provided tuition fees. While the fully-sponsored students began their studies at the primary level, the partially-sponsored pupils joined the institution after completing their first few years at the secondary level in the state education system. It

⁵⁷ *Thai mai*, 4 February 1934.

⁵⁸ *Thai mai*, 6 February 1934.

⁵⁹ *Thai mai*, 7 February 1934.

⁶⁰ *Prachachat*, 18 May 1934; *Prachatipatai*, 3 August 1934.

was taken to be a condition of full sponsorship that graduating students would become permanently attached to the school. Parents or guardians of partially sponsored students, on the other hand, were required to sign an agreement which stipulated that their children would work for the school in some capacity for a period of no less than five years after graduation.

Relations between students, both sponsored and otherwise, were regulated by a strict system of discipline devised by Wichit himself. Confidential files were kept on all students over the age of 14, and those trusted by the authorities acted as 'prefects', spying and reporting on their fellows. Such coercive methods were added to by a rigid separation of the sexes which was aimed at maintaining moral standards.⁶¹

The actual syllabus the students followed was extensive, and clearly designed to create individuals with a heightened, unequivocal sense of 'Thainess'. It featured both culturally-oriented studies as well as a range of general knowledge subjects. The somewhat eclectic range of cultural subjects included: elocution and deportment, Thai classical dance drama, Western-styled spoken drama, stage direction, the study of Southeast Asian languages (the actual languages were not specified), Thai and foreign customs, general knowledge about Thai and foreign handicrafts, Thai and foreign folk-tales and classical literature, as well as Thai and Western-style singing.

The general knowledge subjects taught at the school were, with the exception of psychology, virtually the same as those found in ordinary Bangkok schools. These included: language studies (Thai, English, French), civic duties, drawing, handicraft, physical education, general knowledge about Siam, Siamese and world history, as well as mathematics and science, both of which were simplified versions of the normal state school courses.⁶²

Wichit wasted little time before setting his ambitious plans to promote local art into action, and shortly after the school was established, its student musicians, dancers and actors began to perform before the public. On these occasions, a range of works were staged, from classical-style dance-drama such as Prince Narit's *Inao ton wai phra* (a section adapted from the *Ramakian*), to Western-style stage plays, including Wichit's own *Luk rathathanun* mentioned above.⁶³

Local opinion about the merits of the school, as evidenced from comments in the press during the latter part of 1934, was sharply divided. Not unexpectedly, the main pro-government newspaper, *Prachachat*, owned and operated by Prince Wan

⁶¹ *Prachachat*, 18 May 1934.

⁶² *Prachachat*, 30 April 1934. Little is known about the teachers who worked at the school, although it was reported in the press that the many of those who taught cultural subjects were plundered from the Ministry of the Royal Household. *Krungthep warasap*, 26 December 1934.

⁶³ *Prachatipatai*, 14 July 1934.

Waithayakon was fulsome in its praise of the school's activities.⁶⁴ Various non-partisan publications on the other hand, were less enthusiastic. The *Lak mu'ang* for example reported that the performances given by the students were 'very boring', and believed that the government should devote all its energy towards improving Siam's productive capacity rather than committing scarce funds and personnel to the arts.⁶⁵ Further criticisms were raised at the end of 1934 when the government allocated 6,000 *baht* for the construction of a theatre for staging performances by the fledgling student company. This time it was suggested that the money spent on the theatre would have been of greater use in improving the standard of technical education.⁶⁶ While this was indeed a valid point, it should be mentioned that the government actually intended the student company to support itself and contribute towards costs of the department by performing for profit. With the completion of the new theatre early in 1935, the company was in a position to do this and began to compete with the various professional Chinese and Thai performing troupes in earnest.⁶⁷

Notwithstanding the criticism levelled at the school, it quickly emerged as a significant body by functioning as a key link in the development of warmer ties between Siam and Japan. Shortly after the school was established the Japanese Minister Yatabe, announced that his government would provide funds to sponsor ten students a year. At the same time Yatabe also forwarded an invitation to a group of the school's young artists and a number of their teachers to visit Japan the following year to perform for local audiences and learn about Japanese culture.⁶⁸ This trip was to be paid for by the Japanese.

As a result of these initiatives, Wichit developed a good relationship with members of the local Japanese community and in 1935 he became a member of the newly formed Japan-Siam Association.⁶⁹ The formal aim of this body was to promote friendship between the two countries, and at various times in the following years Wichit, as head of the Department of Fine Arts, worked towards this end, helping to organize the screening of Japanese documentary films, and having his staff entertain visiting Japanese artists and dignitaries.⁷⁰ While Japan's support of the arts was a calculated move to improve her own position locally, it also provided benefits to the

⁶⁴ *Prachachat*, 23 August 1934.

⁶⁵ *Lak mu'ang*, 13 December 1934, *Lak mu'ang*, 3 November 1934.

⁶⁶ *Lak mu'ang*, 27 December 1934. Note: Wichit was latter to claim the amount was 6,500 *baht*. Wichit, 1962: 61.

⁶⁷ *Krungthep warasap*, 2 August 1934, *Prachatiptai*, 3 August 1934. Note: References to these other performing groups are found in *Lak mu'ang*, 13 December 1934, 27 December 1934. and *Mitrphap*, 9 January 1935.

⁶⁸ *Itsara*, 17 September 1934, *Prachatiptai*, 20 September 1934.

⁶⁹ N.A. S.T. 701.1/8.

⁷⁰ N.A. S.T. 701.1/8, S.T.0701.9.5/3, S.T. 0701.1/8.

Thai state.⁷¹ When the student company visited Japan and her territories in Korea and Manchukuo in North China during the first half of 1935, it was regarded as a great success. As a result, the prestige of the Department of Fine Arts was greatly enhanced, and the government, by extension, was given important international recognition.⁷²

During the same period political developments in the Siam were to enhance the department's status and importance. After Prajadhipok abdicated the throne on 2 March 1935, the state, desirous of cutting royal expenditure and reducing the prestige of the monarchy, downgraded the Ministry of the Royal Household from a ministry to a department.⁷³ In the process, control of the Royal Privy Purse passed to the Ministry of Finance, while the various cultural sections of the Ministry of the Royal Household were transferred to the Department of Fine Arts.⁷⁴ Dancers, musicians, craftsmen, their equipment, vehicles, and places of work were all commandeered by the department.⁷⁵ This transfer of personnel and resources was of particular significance, in that it saw Wichit, as the head of the department, emerge as a type of cultural czar who had the power to shape and influence the arts for the benefit of the state.

5.4.2 *Emphasis on the Performing Arts*

Although Wichit supervised all areas of the department's activities, his primary involvement was in promoting the performing arts, or more specifically the more 'respectable' elite forms of drama and dance ; traditional 'folk' idioms including *like* were not even regarded as art.⁷⁶

⁷¹ The Japanese assiduously sought to cultivate the Thai opinion makers during the 1930s by such means as sponsoring journalists and members of the National Assembly to visit Japan. Kulap Saipradit was one of these individuals, and on returning from a month-long trip in 1936 produced one of his most well-known novels *Khang lang phap* [Behind the Picture] which was set in Japan and made positive references to the Japanese. Yot Watcharasathian, *Siburapha thi khaphachao ruchak* [The Siburapha (pseud. Kulap Saipradit) I Know], Bangkok, 1982: 119. Siburapha, *Khang lang phap*, [Behind the Picture], Bannakit, Bangkok, 1979.

⁷² *The Siam Chronicle* [Special Magazine Edition], 4 April 1937. The company left Siam on 22 March 1935 and returned on 16 June 1935.

⁷³ N.A. S.T. 0701.10/10. Batson (1984:238) incorrectly claims that the Ministry of the Royal Household disappeared immediately after the monarchy was overthrown. It was in fact listed as one of the nine government ministries at the end of 1933 (*B.T.W.M.*, 12 December 1933), and remained so until 1935 when it was reduced to a department. N.A. S.T. 0701.10/10.

⁷⁴ Immediately after Prajadhipok's abdication was announced, a large number of buildings, houses, fruit orchards, and rice fields which were administered by the Privy Purse on behalf of members of the Royal Family were withdrawn by their owners who suddenly decided to manage their holdings personally. This development, together with a run on the Siam Commercial Bank by depositors at the same time reflected the total lack of trust the royalty felt towards the government. *B.T.W.M.*, 12 March 1935, 14 March 1935.

⁷⁵ N.A. S.T. 0701.1.1/5.

⁷⁶ Wichit Wathakan. *Luang, Nathasin* (The Performing Arts), Department of Fine Arts, Bangkok, 1964: 21.

Shortly after the drama school was established in mid-1934, Wichit had begun to produce popular versions of classical works such as *Kaki*, the story of a high-born, adulterous woman written by *Chaophraya Phrakhleng* [Hon] in the early nineteenth century, for his student troupe to perform.⁷⁷ During 1935, these productions were also serialized for radio, most probably the first time dramatic works were put to air in Siam.⁷⁸ Towards the end of the year, following the transfer of palace personnel, Wichit had the Royal Company of Actresses take over from the student company in staging these classically styled works, and early in 1936 they performed his new adaptation of the epic romance *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* both at the Department of Fine Arts theatre and in serial form on the radio.⁷⁹

At the same time Wichit began to write a series of popular historical-musical dramas for the student-based national troupe to perform. These works were based on the Western-derived *lakhon rong* [operetta] form which incorporated simple everyday dialogue, dance and traditional Thai-style songs.⁸⁰ To this he added the recently developed Thai-Western hybrid form of music known as *Thai sakon*,⁸¹ and included special sound and lighting effects. Such innovations, may be seen as an attempt on Wichit's part to make his work popular with a public whose tastes were being strongly influenced by the many Hollywood musical romances that were shown in Siam during this time.⁸²

It is probable that following the luke-warm reception given to his first political play, the contemporary *Luk rathathanun*, Wichit had come to the view that historical drama was more eminently suited to propagating the abstract nationalist ideas of unity, loyalty, independence and sacrifice to the conflicting groups within society. This was due to the fact that while these various groups had no consensus with regard to the

⁷⁷ N.A. S.T.. 0701.1/7.

⁷⁸ *Krungthep warasap*, 20 November 1935.

⁷⁹ *Krungthep warasap*, 28 March 1936.

⁸⁰ Mattani Rutnin, *Transformation of the Thai Concepts of Aesthetics*, Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1983: 39-41.

⁸¹ *Dontri sakon*, a musical form using Western notation and played with Western and Thai instruments was an innovation developed within the Thai motion picture industry during the early 1930s. Sa'nga Kanchanakhaphan [*Luang Wichitmatra*], *Ru'ang lakhon lae phleng* [The Story of Drama and Music], Ru'angsin, Bangkok, 1977: 59-60.

⁸² Sa'nga Kanchanakhaphan, *Yuk phleng nang lae lakhon nai adit* [The Past Era of Songs, Films and Plays], Ru'angsin, Bangkok, 1975: 37, 54. The music for Wichit's productions was performed by elements of the highly accomplished Royal Orchestra which the Department of Fine Arts inherited from the palace. The orchestra which originally had seventy-five members, was dismembered after Wichit took control: eighteen of its number backed the performing troupe, another eight went to the Publicity Department where they were formed into a jazz ensemble while the remainder were retired. 'Nung rop satawat Phra Chenduriyang' [A Hundred Years of Phra Chenduriyang], Suphot Chaereo, *Sinlapawathanatham*, 4, 9, July 1983: 18-32. Note: *Phra Chenduriyang* (original name Peter Feit), son of a German father and Thai mother was the composer of the music for the Thai national anthem: 31.

present, their historical knowledge was limited to singular view of the Thai past; a view, it should be remembered, that Damrong and Wichit had shaped and put in place.

For the remainder of this chapter a number of these plays will be examined more closely and discussed in relation to the broader context in which they were produced.

5.4. 3 *The Blood of Suphan*

The first of Wichit's historical-musical dramas, *Lu'at Suphan* [The Blood of Suphan], appeared in August 1936. The basic outline of the play, which is set in the Ayuthayan period (1350-1767) during one of the Thai-Burmese wars, is as follows:

Suphan, [Suphanburi] in central Siam, is invaded by the Burmese and the population is forced to work for the conquerors. Mangrai, a Burmese officer, is a man of compassion wishing to treat the subjugated Thais fairly. He comes to the aid of a young woman, Duangchan, and her parents who are being abused by Mangratho, one of his fellow officers. Although enemies in war, Mangrai and Duangchan find they are attracted to one another, and he offers to free both her and her parents. She refuses, however, telling him she could never abandon her people just to save herself. Eventually he decides to allow the captive Thais to escape, and although Duangchan begs to remain with him, Mangrai urges her to flee, hopeful that they will meet again in more peaceful times.

Shortly after Duangchan's departure, the Burmese commanders, led by Mangrai's father hold an investigation into the escape of the Thais. In the course of these investigations, Mangrai admits he is responsible for releasing the captives and is sentenced to death. At the same time, Mangratho's mistreatment of Duangchan and her parents is revealed and he is immediately executed. Just before Mangrai is to suffer the same fate, Duangchan returns to plead for his life, but her appeal is refused and he too is put to death. Duangchan is released and she leaves in search of the villagers who have hidden in the jungle. On the way she comes across the bodies of her parents who have been killed by Mangratho's men in revenge for his death. Duangchan is enraged, and on meeting up with the survivors of Suphan calls on them to join her and attack the Burmese. The people follow her into battle where they are slaughtered by the better armed and more numerous enemy forces. The story ends after the battle when Mangrai's spirit appears to make an appeal for an end to war between the Burmese and Thai peoples who, he says, should now become friends.

With its mixture of romance and death, *Lu'at Suphan*, was designed to elicit a strong emotional response in an audience. It was eminently successful in doing this and played to packed houses in the Department of Fine Arts theatre for months. While there was some minor press criticism of Wichit for depicting intimacy between a Thai woman

and Burmese man, the reaction from newspapers in general was enthusiastic, the music and songs being singled out for special praise.⁸³ The *Sikrungs* even reported that a special cinematic version was planned, although what finally emerged was merely a film of a live performance of the play.⁸⁴ The government for its part made great efforts to ensure *Lu'at Suphan* reached as wide an audience as possible.⁸⁵ For example, shortly after its premiere in Bangkok, the play was broadcast in serialized form over Siam's rapidly expanding state radio network.⁸⁶ The Ministry of Education also played a key role in disseminating the work by sending copies to government schools both in the capital and provinces where it was studied in class. Meanwhile, the military and police authorities made it required viewing for all young cadets.⁸⁷

That the government should have so favoured the play is not hard to understand. In essence, the six-act play complemented the efforts made by the Ministry of Defence under Phibun to bolster the popularity of the armed services and legitimize the military's growing domination of the state.⁸⁸ The previous year (1935) the Ministry had sponsored the production of a documentary-style propaganda film *Lu'at thahan Thai* [The Blood of the Thai Military]. This film was particularly interesting in that it featured elaborate staged battle scenes by the three military services accompanied by martial music and song.⁸⁹ *Lu'at Suphan*, whose title seems to have been influenced by the film, further contributed to the Ministry of Defence campaign by promoting a view that constant military preparedness was necessary to maintain Thai political sovereignty. At the same time the play linked the military to a particular notion of Thai identity, a notion not dissimilar to that developed by Vajiravudh. Wichit, like the king portrayed the

⁸³ *Phadung chat*, 13 March 1937.

⁸⁴ *Sikrungs*, 11 November 1936.

⁸⁵ The play grossed in excess of 10,000 *bah*t during the first 4 months it was performed. *N.A. S.T.* 0701.15/24 : 13. Pridi's wife admitted she had seen the production 4 times. *Itsara*, 19 November 1936.

⁸⁶ *Krungthep warasap*, 13 November 1936. Well over a year earlier plans had been drawn up to increase the number of radios in the provinces and commence daytime broadcasts in addition to the existing night-time programming. *B.T.W.M.*, 1 June 1935.

⁸⁷ Wichit, 1962 [a]: 18.

⁸⁸ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379. The 1935 Annual Report (F.O. 371/20302), includes the following entry about the nature of the campaign, '[This year] there was no lessening of this propaganda...Horse, foot and guns visited boys' and girls' schools, while aircraft manoeuvred overhead; a military tournament was held...and the streets of Bangkok were decorated with posters bearing a martial figure and the legend "Your country is your house, the army is its fence". In addition...a kind of cadet training corps known as the *Yuwachon*, or Youth Movement was established for school boys, apparently modelled on the Hitler Youth in Germany. In 1936 the British further reported that, 'the military have...been strengthening their [political] position...[by] appointing officers of the army and navy whenever practicable as Commissioners of the "changwads" [Provincial Governors], whilst out of the 8 ministerial portfolios as many as four are held by such officers.' *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1936], F.O. 371/21053.

⁸⁹ Sa'nga Kanchanakhaphan wrote the story for the film which was made by the *Sikrungs Film Company* using resources (men, weapons, ships, aeroplanes) provided by the Ministry of Defence. Sa'nga, 1975: 59-70.

Thais, embodied here in the metaphor *Lu'at Supan*, as a martial race, courageous, loyal and prepared to make personal sacrifices in the face of extreme danger. These qualities were crystallized in the anthem *Lu'at Suphan* which was played during the last scene as Duangchan calls on the villagers to support her and march into battle :

The blood of Suphan is brave in war, tough and bold and never
will flee
Never will shiver or tremble before the foe, take dagger or sword,
come join in the fight
Come on together, come on together, the blood of Suphan, the
blood of Suphan, face the enemy, do not worry or fear.⁹⁰

On a broader level *Lu'at Supan* also lent support to the concept of Pan-Asianism. This idea, which was based on the premise of an underlying solidarity between Asian civilizations in opposition to the West was being avidly promoted by Japan during this time.⁹¹ Wichit, who we have seen was developing close links with the Japanese, took on this idea by portraying a Burmese (Mangrai) in sympathetic and even heroic terms. In doing so he sought to counteract the historical antipathy of the Thais towards the Burmese and thereby encourage more cordial relations between the two peoples. It was perhaps not suprising that the play was very popular with the Burmese living in Bangkok. More significant however, was the fact that newspaper representatives from Rangoon approached Wichit for copies of the text of the play so a translation could be made for Burmese audiences.⁹² He also received an invitation to visit Burma shortly after the play opened and he spent two weeks in the country during November meeting with various influential Burmese and touring historical sites.⁹³

Lu'at Suphan, with its underlying Pan-Asian theme also figured in Siam's relations with Japan. When a group of Japanese newspapermen visited Siam on a much-publicized study tour in December 1936, the play was performed at the official government reception held in their honour.⁹⁴ Similarly, a gala performance of *Lu'at Suphan* was put on for the new Japanese Minister, Murai, when he arrived in the latter half of 1937.⁹⁵ It would seem that staging the play on these occasions the government was intentionally emphasizing its ideological solidarity with Japan.

⁹⁰ Wichit, 1962(a): 36.

⁹¹ The genesis and unfolding of the idea of an intrinsic relation between Asian cultures is a complex topic which is examined at length by Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970. Mention of Japan's promotion of Pan-Asian ideas in the 1930s is made by Swan, 1986: 76.

⁹² *Ibid.* 18.

⁹³ *Krungthep warasap*, 18 November 1936.

⁹⁴ *Prachachat*, 4 December 1936.

⁹⁵ *B.T.W.M.*, 18 October 1937.

Clearly, *Lu'at Suphan* was of major political importance during the Phahon era, promoting as it did ideas supportive of the military both domestically and internationally. Nowadays the work is still well-known, although in ways quite different than in the past. At the end of the 1970s, Wichit's original play was transformed into a full-length feature film in which the most enduring features were sex, as expressed in the star-crossed romance between the scantily-clad Duangchan and Mangrai, and violence in the form of interminable battle scenes between the Thais and Burmese.

5.4. 4 *Ratchamanu, Chaoying Saenwi and the Emergent Irredentist Movement*

Wichit's second historical musical play, *Ratchamanu*, appeared in January 1937.⁹⁶ The work was named after the protagonist Ratchamanu, a military commander who was reputed to have played a central role in suppressing Khmer attempts to throw off Thai suzerainty during the reign of King Naresuan in the sixteenth century. As had been the case with *Lu'at Suphan*, a central objective of the play was to lend support to the military-dominated government by extolling the martial virtues of heroism and personal sacrifice in time of war. These qualities were expressed in the central musical moment of the play, *Rak mu'ang Thai* [Love the Country of the Thai], Wichit's best known and most enduring song.⁹⁷ The song, which was particularly notable for the way the word Thai was used to express a range of meanings, virtually became an unofficial state anthem and was broadcast over the radio with great frequency.⁹⁸

Love the country of the Thai, raise up the Thai nation
 Make it glorious make it really Thai [free]
 We are Thai [people] born as Thai [free people] die for Thai
 [freedom, independence],
 We are never weak nor soft, we won't lose to anyone,
 Daring enemies, from no matter whence they come, if they
 threaten will regret it
 Love the country of the Thai.....
 We are Thai, born as Thai.....⁹⁹

⁹⁶ N.A. S.T. 0701. 15/24.

⁹⁷ All school students in present-day Thailand learn to sing *Rak mu'ang Thai* in their fourth year of primary education. See *Baep thotsop rai chut prasong klum sangsoem laksana nisai chan prathomsu'ksa pi thi 4* [A Civics text regarding health, manners, posture etc. for fourth grade primary students, (part of the National School Curriculum drawn up in 1978 and currently in use)], Wathanapanit Samranrat, Bangkok, 1982: 46.

⁹⁸ *Dao nikhon*, 20 January 1937.

⁹⁹ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Lu'at Suphan, Ratchamanu, Phrachao Krungthon, Su'k thalang*. (Four Plays). Commemoration Volume for *Khunying Chan Thepprachum*, Bangkok, 17 October 1937: 71-72.

On a more specific level, *Ratchamanu*, was an early attempt to build popular backing for military elements in the government desirous of creating a modern Thai empire by re-establishing control over the people and territory which had been subject to Bangkok's authority prior to the colonial intervention of the Western powers. The idea of recovering the 'former territories' and creating such an empire was, according to the British, first publicly mooted in 1931 by Prince Boworadet, who believed that the Thais should 'build up...a military organization adequate to effect the re-conquest of the lost lands when France and England are helpless.'¹⁰⁰ After the change in government 1932 his view was avidly embraced by some younger members of the armed forces, and at the beginning of 1934 Prince Purachat reported that secret plans were being made to mount a campaign to regain the former territories. It was not until late 1935, however, that tangible evidence of these plans became available when an official map was produced by the Ministry of Defence showing the alleged extent of the Thai kingdom at the beginning of the Bangkok period and the various depredations it had later suffered at the hands of the British and the French. The map, based on the historical writings of Damrong and Wichit, was printed in large numbers and used both in schools and military training centres to illustrate the changing territorial fortunes of Siam.¹⁰¹ In *Ratchamanu*, Wichit provided support for the irredentist claims on French Cambodia by suggesting the Thais and Khmers were one and the same people. This contention is unequivocally expressed in the final scene of the play after Thai troops, led by Ratchamanu, put down a rebellion in the western Kampuchean region of Battambang. Having met the Khmers face to face, the following exchange between a group of Thai soldiers and Ratchamanu takes place:

Thai Soldiers: Eh! Khmers and Thais look just the same, Sir

Ratchamanu: Of course, they're Thais like us! A long time ago they happened to occupy the old Khom territory and came to be called Khmers. In fact we're all really Thai brothers.

Thai soldiers: We should all be friends, no more war.

Ratchamanu: Yes there's no more need to fight. All of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same...[but remember] the Siamese Thais [the Thai from Siam proper] are the elder brothers....¹⁰²

Although Wichit's claim that a fraternal relationship existed between the Thais and Khmers was completely spurious, the fact that he was a respected scholar who taught history at both Chulalongkorn and Thammasat University, the two major educational institutions in the country, accorded it a good deal of authority.¹⁰³ In the

¹⁰⁰ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/18206, 11 January 1934.

¹⁰¹ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/20299, 11 April 1936.

¹⁰² Wichit, 1937: 71.

¹⁰³ N.A. S.T. 701.1.8. 107, 121, 154, *B.T.W.M.*, 10 June 1937.

introduction to a printed version of *Ratchamanu* he re-affirmed this assertion by citing vague physical and cultural similarities between the two peoples as 'proof'.¹⁰⁴ In consequence he was soon being hailed in the press for bringing this 'new information' to public attention, and urged to continue his research in this area and investigate possible Thai links to other inhabitants of the Southeast Asian mainland.¹⁰⁵

During the first half of 1938, Wichit produced a play entitled *Chaoying Saenwi* [The Princess of Saenwi] which had the purpose of advancing the irredentist cause against the British. In this work he emphasized the racial and cultural links between the Shan people [Thai Yai] of northern British Burma and the Siamese Thais [Thai Noi], suggesting that the two groups should unite:

Thai Noi, Thai Yai, though we live far apart, we are together Thai
 We must love one another as more than friends, because we are of
 the same blood and stock, brothers from olden times, sharing
 sorrow and joy as Thai
 We had our home once, but other nations came and stole it away
 The Thai had ... to move southwards, and thus we found the
 Golden Peninsula
 Of this we took possession and held it in our rule
 The Golden Land of the Thai, of the Thai Noi and Thai Yai,
 together Thai.¹⁰⁶

In order to maximize the impact of the play, performances were not only staged in Bangkok but also in the northern Thai city of Chiangmai, adjoining the Shan states in Burma. This caused the British some concern, and lead Crosby, the Minister, to inform his superiors in London that such historical-cultural appeals would eventually 'have some influence upon the peoples of Thai extraction'.¹⁰⁷

Apart from employing theatrical means to propagate irredentist ideas, Wichit also argued his views in the local press. In an article entitled 'One Road to Peace', which appeared in the daily newspaper *Prachamit* on 6 May 1938, he told his readers that mankind had entered a dangerous ^{and} uncertain period in which it was necessary for the countries of the world to make serious attempts to maintain peace. The most effective way of guaranteeing this, he said, had been developed in Germany by Goebbels, the Minister for Propaganda, who believed in creating 'a new division of the world on the basis of race, language and culture.' Wichit asserted that Goebbels' skilful propaganda campaign in which Germans and Austrians were portrayed as one people had allowed the German Reich to absorb Austria peacefully in the *Anschluss* of April

¹⁰⁴ He wrote: 'If we take the principles used by historians to determine race [*chu'a chat*], such as the shape of the face and skull, the type of food eaten, common diseases, indigenous literature, music and song ... it is clear that the Khmers of the present day are Thai.' Wichit, 1937: 30.

¹⁰⁵ *Pramuanwan*, 10 January 1937.

¹⁰⁶ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/22207, 6 May 1938.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

1938, and claimed that territorial gains could be made by the Thais using the same means.¹⁰⁸

Despite the fact there was no possibility of Siam immediately regaining territory lost to the colonial powers, Wichit, through such articles and his dramatic works, played a leading role in bringing the irredentist cause to the forefront of public attention, and in the process was able to build increasing popular support for the military dominated government.

5.4.5 *The King of Thonburi and the Chinese*

In mid-1937 Wichit produced another historical drama entitled *Phrachao Krung Thon* [The King of Thonburi]. Set in the late eighteenth century at the end of Siam's last major war with Burma, the play dwells on the subject of Taksin, the half-Chinese warrior king, who united the Thais and local Chinese to overthrow their Burmese overlords and secure the kingdom's independence. Like *Lu'at Suphan* and *Ratchmanu*, the work not only extolled martial qualities such as firm leadership, heroism and sacrifice, but also sought to identify the military with the idea of nation. At the same time, an equally central if not more important objective of the play was to provide support for the governments' efforts to improve its relations with the local Chinese community and the Chinese government.

As has been mentioned, relations between the Thai state and the Chinese had deteriorated markedly following the implementation of stringent controls on Chinese schools in 1933.¹⁰⁹ By mid-1936, however, the Thai government had begun to adopt a more conciliatory approach to the Chinese; a change that was signalled when a Chinese Goodwill Mission was allowed to visit Siam in August. The mission, composed of high-ranking members of the Nanking government together with Kuomintang officials, was warmly received by the Phahon administration. Subsequently, Sino-Thai Friendship Associations were 'promoted in both countries, with respective headquarters in Bangkok and Shanghai.'¹¹⁰

In *Phrachao Krungthon* Wichit sought to portray these new, more amicable relations in extreme Pan-Asian terms by suggesting a fraternal link between the Chinese

¹⁰⁸ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/22207, 11 June 1938. One individual who immediately responded to Wichit's article was Phayom Chulanan, a young army captain. In a lecture to military cadets, Phayom put forward the fantastic notion that the Burmese, Annamese, Khmers and Malays were 'all descendents from ... original Thai stock.' On the basis of this preposterous claim he reasoned that 'it would ... appear not to be a difficult thing to effect an *Anschluss* of these peoples.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/22207, 19 August 1938.

¹⁰⁹ Skinner, 1957: 240. For details of the measures imposed on the Chinese schools see *B.T.W.M.*, 5 July 1933.

¹¹⁰ Skinner, 1957: 241-242.

and Thais. This notion of an age-old bond between the two peoples is highlighted throughout the play and encapsulated in the song *Chin Thai samakhi* [Chinese Thai Unity] featured at the end of the final scene:

Chinese and Thai are none other than brothers,
 Their love must be preserved, friendship and unity for all time,
 For thousands of years Chinese and Thai have known each other
 as brothers, worked together as friends, Never did they fall out or
 fight,
 When there was trouble in China the Thais gave succour, taking in
 those who fled, never barring the way,
 And when Siam faced disaster the two peoples helped one another
 to save the Thai nation [*ku chat Thai*].¹¹¹

Although not as popular as Wichit's previous plays, *Phrachao Krungthon* nevertheless performed well at the box-office, and its creator, in keeping with the government's efforts to improve Sino-Thai relations, donated a percentage of the profits to famine relief in China.¹¹² Interestingly, with the growth of local nationalist sentiment at the time, this gesture was not universally approved of, and a writer for the local daily *Pramuanwan*, was quick to ask when Wichit's troupe would stage plays for the benefit of 'the suffering Thai farmer.'¹¹³ The suggestion was not taken up, however, a fact which further serves to emphasize the donation of funds to the Chinese was determined by political rather than humanitarian imperatives.

Wichit's fascination with Taksin, and his efforts to promote improved relations between the Thais and Chinese continued in December 1937 when it was announced that he would collaborate with the member of parliament from Thonburi and organize a fair to raise funds to erect^a statue of the Sino-Thai warrior king.¹¹⁴ Although such amity may have been useful as an abstract concept, in practical terms Wichit soon found himself in an invidious position. Following Japan's invasion of China in September 1937, nationalistically-minded ethnic Chinese in Siam became more stridently anti-Japanese than in the past, threatening the state's efforts to ally itself with Asia's most important power.¹¹⁵ In July 1938, this growing anti-Japanese movement led to one particularly memorable outburst from Wichit in a public lecture at Chulalongkorn University. Referring to the anti-Semitic campaign being carried out in contemporary Germany and Austria he said it was high time Siam considered dealing with their own Jews, that is the economically powerful Chinese.¹¹⁶ In doing so he raised again the

¹¹¹ Wichit. 1937: 116.

¹¹² N.A. S.T. 0701.15/24.

¹¹³ *Pramuanwan*, 5 August 1937.

¹¹⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, December 1938.

¹¹⁵ Skinner, 1957: 243-244.

¹¹⁶ *B.T.W.M.*, 22-23 July 1938, 25 July 1938, 8 August 1938.

racist sentiments expressed by Vajiravudh in his works 'Jews of the Orient' and 'Wake Up Siam', and suggested that henceforth the state would take an increasingly hardline approach towards the Chinese community.¹¹⁷

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter it has been shown that during the period 1933-1938 Wichit played a prominent role in articulating support for the Phahon government. He was deeply involved in the process whereby the constitution was conceptualized as a magical form and used as a symbol for conferring political legitimacy on the state. At the same time, he sought to forge a link between pre- and post-revolutionary Siam by creating plays that addressed contemporary political concerns (i.e. social unity, political legitimacy) in historical terms. Through the support of the state, Wichit's *lakhon rong* style dramas emerged as the premier cultural form in the country and were widely emulated.¹¹⁸ On a personal level, this development enhanced Wichit's reputation as a creative figure with the result that he was able to achieve the type of national acclaim and attention that he had sought since he became a serious writer in the late 1920s.

¹¹⁷ Skinner, 1957: 261.

¹¹⁸ *Phieo lu'ang*, 26 July 1937. It was even reported that a Chinese *Ngiw* company mounted a production about the life of Taksin, although this particular work was said to make a mockery of Thai history by emphasising ghosts and other supernatural phenomena. *Ibid.*

Chapter 6

Luang Wichit and the Development of Hypernationalism, 1938-1941

They ought to hang a sign over the frontier entrance to Thailand reading "proceed slowly, country under construction."¹

6.1 Introduction

The rise of the army commander Phibun Songkhram to the office of Prime Minister in mid-December 1938 marked the beginning of an intense period in which the state became increasingly involved in all areas of Siam's economic, social and cultural life. Phibun, whose admiration for the regimes in Germany, Italy and Japan was well known, sought to create a similar type of chauvinistic order in Siam.² During the first few years of his rule a rigorous nationalist economic policy was enforced in which Chinese and Western business interests were either co-opted or displaced by Thai enterprise. Various large-scale building projects were initiated, primarily in the capital which began to take on a much more modern, Western appearance. At the same time, the state implemented a series of wide-ranging social and cultural changes aimed at extending its authority and legitimacy by making Siam a more purposeful, uniform 'civilized' and 'progressive' society. In a related development, the drive to regain the 'lost provinces' was intensified. This, as we shall see, was to prove a popular cause which led to an unparalleled degree of social unity and public support for Phibun and his government.

¹ Theodore White of *Time* magazine quoted in *The Bangkok Chronicle*, 28 September 1940.

² Phibun's predilection for authoritarian rule had been widely publicized in May 1936 when he told a local Bangkok newspaper that he was in favour of dictatorship in Siam. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1936], F.O. 371/21053. In an attempt to further his aspirations, Phibun sent Prayun to Europe in mid-1937 with express instructions to study the organization and methods of government under a dictator. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/21054, 7 July 1937.

The present chapter looks at the part *Luang* Wichit played in articulating state socio-cultural policy during the three years leading up to the outbreak of World War II. Various aspects of Wichit's work on behalf of the state are discussed, such as his involvement in promoting 24 June as National Day, his activities in formulating the state directives known as *Rathaniyom*, and his views on the significance of culture. In the concluding section of the chapter Wichit's central role in developing the irredentist movement into a popular and potent force is examined.

6.2 National Day

During the pre-Phibun era, the constitutional regime did not celebrate the 1932 revolution which brought it to power other than by means of an annual radio broadcast by either the Prime Minister or more often simply a government minister.³ As a result 24 June passed each year largely unnoticed by the general public. An attempt to change this was made in July 1937 when a private member's bill was put before the National Assembly suggesting that 24 June should be made 'a day of national rejoicing'. The proposal was rejected by a majority in the House after opponents of the idea, including the then Prime Minister Phahon, expressed the view that an official celebration of the revolution might antagonize pro-royalist elements in the society.⁴ Phibun, however, apparently had no qualms about offending the royalists, whom he held responsible for a series of attempts on his life, and after becoming Prime Minister was anxious to do everything he could to create a new image for the country.⁵ In consequence, he soon

³ N.A. S.T. 0701.23.1/1.

⁴ B.T.W.M., 7 July 1937.

⁵ The first of the attempts to kill Phibun occurred in February 1935 when he was shot and wounded by a gunman at a football match. Pridi was to claim that responsibility for the attack lay with the ex-king's father-in-law, Prince Sawat, who was living in exile in Penang. A pro-royalist plot to murder both Phibun and Pridi was discovered by the police in December 1937, while in the latter half of 1938 Phibun was the target of three further attempts on his life. These latter three incidents were believed to be a part of an extensive pro-royalist conspiracy in which it was planned to assassinate other members of the government, and set up a new administration with either Prajadhipok or Prince Boriphat as king. According to Crosby, the ex-king and the prince had provided funds for the plot, which also included Prince Rangsit, one of Chulalongkorn's sons, Phibun's longtime rival, Song Suradet, together with a number of military officers and civilian bureaucrats. The government responded aggressively. Song was immediately sent into exile in French Indochina and his military training school in Chiangmai closed down: eighteen junior officers accused of complicity were sentenced to death, and subsequently executed in December 1939, while a number of other individuals were sentenced to life imprisonment; in addition, the government sued Prajadhipok and his wife Queen Ramphai for the return of over six million baht in state funds, and portraits of the couple, together with those of Prince Boriphat were removed from all public offices throughout the country. References

made it known the 24 June 1939 would be commemorated as the inaugural Thai National Day. In February 1939 a committee with Phibun as president, and including his long-time associates Wichit and Prayun, was established to plan the celebrations.⁶ The underlying objective of the committee was to use the occasion to propagate a laudatory view of the 24 June revolution and the virtues of the constitutional regime on a mass scale so as to forge a heightened national consciousness among the populace.

In order to achieve this a range of functions and events was planned. First, government employees and students throughout Siam were required to attend their place of work or school on the morning of 24 June to listen to prepared announcements explaining the importance of the 1932 revolution and the changes wrought by the constitutional administration. This was to be complemented on the night of 24 June when Phibun was to make an extended speech along similar lines to the general public in a nation-wide radio broadcast. At the same time Phibun's speech was also to be broadcast on the shortwave band so it could be received in the Thai diplomatic missions in Europe and America where official parties would be held in honour of National Day.⁷ Second, it was decided that a large national monument would be built on the broad Ratchadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok to commemorate the change from the absolute monarchy to a democratic government, and an elaborate religious ceremony was planned for the laying of the foundation stone. Third, a military parade followed by a procession of nationalist-style floats down Ratchadamnoen Avenue was arranged to coincide with the foundation stone laying ceremony. These floats were to represent both the various government ministries and interested members of the business community as well as the general public. Fourth, the public was also invited to send entries into an official competition for nationalist songs, literary works and pictures, the winners of which were to be announced on National Day. Special stamps were designed for the occasion and national flags were produced in great numbers for sale to the general populace who were urged to use them to adorn their homes during the celebrations.⁸

for the above — (a) *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1935], F.O. 371/20302, also see *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/19377, 19 March 1935; (b) *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1937], F.O. 371/22215; (c) *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1938], F.O. 371/23596; (d) *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23586, 30 January 1939, 3, 7 February 1939, 26 May 1939, 8 November 1939; (e) *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/24755, 26 February 1940, (f) *B.T.W.M.*, 11, 18, 19 July 1939, *Bangkok Chronicle*, 4 October 1941.

⁶ N.A. S.T. 0701.23. 1/6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, N.A. S.T. 0701.23. 1/1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

As a member of the National Day organizational committee Wichit was required to perform a number of tasks. At a general level he supervised the activities of the Department of the Fine Arts which was responsible for designing the stamps to commemorate National Day, the drawing up of plans for the proposed Democracy Monument, and also for organizing the religious service that was to be performed at the ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone.⁹ More specifically, Wichit was called on to draft the official announcement explaining the significance of 24 June 1932 to school students throughout the country. He was also given the responsibility for arranging and judging the national arts competition.

Using his gifts as a popular writer, Wichit produced a simplified version of Phibun's national day speech that could be readily understood by school children. The text which teachers read out to their students in class began:

The Thai nation [*Chat Thai*] of ours has been a large and important nation since ancient times. Most of the Thai race [*Chon Chat Thai*] have lived in this country for 600 years. We have often had to face crises and danger...Our ancestors attempted to protect and develop our country up to the present time. Even though the Thai nation is independent it has not always been strong and we have suffered. In the past 80 years we have lost up to half of our territory and had our freedom restricted in many ways. Seven to eight years ago the country was in a precarious position. Our armed forces were weak, the economy was disintegrating and the people were in need. The wealth of the nation was being wasted and progress was dreadfully slow. The government ruled the people like a master rules a slave... Then on 24 June 1932 a group of military men and civilians joined forces and changed the administration of the country....¹⁰

The following section of the text went on to catalogue what were deemed to be the major activities of the new government in the seven year period since it had taken power. First and foremost it was noted that the new rulers had dramatically improved Thailand's military capacity not only by equipping the various services with modern weaponry but also by developing a military preparedness in the country's youth through the *Yuwachon* movement. Other areas in which notable advances were claimed included

⁹ The budget for the monument was set at 200,000 *baht* with the contract being awarded to the European run company Christiani and Nielsen (Siam) Limited. *Bangkok Times*, 2 September 1939. However, by the time the monument was completed in June 1940 it was reported to have cost 250,000 *baht*. *Bangkok Chronicle*, 25 June 1940.

¹⁰ N.A. S.T. 0701.23.1/6.

education, health, law enforcement, and agriculture. Mention was also made of the government's implementation of a more equitable tax system and its success in reducing the country's foreign debt. Apart from this, strong emphasis was given to the state's nationalist economic policy, which was aimed at fostering greater self-reliance and prosperity through the promotion of local industrial enterprise and household commercial activity.

In the final section of the text it was claimed that these initiatives had won Thailand the respect and admiration of the international community. This new found stature, it was further claimed, enabled the government to negotiate a series of new treaties with the foreign powers in 1937 which abolished existing restrictions on Thai sovereignty. As a result the 'nation' became fully independent for the first time since the mid nineteenth century. In contrast to this development it was asserted that, 'had there been no change in the administration [the] country would have ceased to exist'; that is, continued royalist rule would have led to the end of Thai independence. In conclusion, the text reiterated the benefits wrought by the new regime and it ended with the following words: 'Let all you students remember 24 June as an auspicious occasion which brought progress and happiness to the Thai people.'¹¹

A summary analysis of the announcement reveals it to be a fascinating combination of truth, partial truth and outright falsehood. Various claims in the text are indisputable. For example, the new administration did effect a substantial boost to the country's military capacity and greatly expanded the education system, most noticeably in the sphere of primary schooling.¹² It was similarly true that a more just tax system was created, largely as the result of the abolition of the highly unpopular capitation tax in 1938,¹³ and that Siam's foreign debt burden had been significantly reduced, in part by Pridi's successful renegotiation of interest repayments in 1935.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 326.

¹² See the relevant sections devoted to defence and education in *Great Britain*, Annual Report [1935 - F.O. 371/20302], [1936 - F.O. 371/21053], [1937 - F.O. 371/22215]. With specific regard to the expansion of primary education, official figures show that in the last year of the absolute monarchy (1931/32), there were 754,271 boys and girls enrolled in primary school with this figure rising to approximately 1.7 million students in 1939. *Statistical Year Book of the Kingdom of Siam*, 1933-1935: 28, 1939-1944: 123.

¹³ The capitation tax, described as a 'badge of continued slavery' by the British financial advisor, Doll, was said to have been abolished by the government at the behest of Wichit and Prayun. *Great Britain*, F.O. 37123590, 2 January 1939, F.O. 371/23586, 2 January 1939.

¹⁴ While visiting London on an overseas goodwill trip during the latter part of 1935, Pridi arranged for Siam's long-term six percent loan from Britain to be converted into a new issue at the lower rate of four percent. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1936], F.O. 371/21053.

Like government propaganda the world over, a somewhat partial view was presented in regard to certain other areas. Thus, while the establishment of state industry was praised, the inefficiency and waste of such ventures was conveniently overlooked.¹⁵ The claim that the government had improved the country's law enforcement services also contained only one side of the story. Although a concerted move was made to strengthen the police force, this was primarily in response to the marked increase in crime that came in the wake of the revolution as the social order began to loosen.¹⁶ Another partial truth concerned health. Improvements had indeed been made in that field, particularly in regard to sanitation, though as Thompson noted in 1941, 'the government has not lived up to its self-imposed ideals...[but] speeded up execution of the policy laid down by the absolute monarchy.'¹⁷ The same was essentially true of the government's work in regard to agriculture, which focussed on expanding the co-operative movement which had been established during Vajiravudh's reign. An increasing number of well-to-do farmers benefited from government promotion of co-operatives by taking advantage of the greater access to credit. At the same time 'the lowest and neediest' cultivators were denied such an opportunity because they did not possess enough capital to provide security on loans.¹⁸ Again, a less than complete picture of the constitutional regime's negotiation of equal treaties with the foreign powers was presented. The announcement made no mention of the fact that the majority of restrictions on Thai sovereignty had been abolished during the absolute monarchy, and that the new international agreements were largely the result of negotiations which were held in the 1920s.¹⁹

In contrast to the above truths and partial truths, the claim that Siam would have ceased to exist as an independent country if the absolute monarchy continued had no basis in reality. Ever since the ceding of territory to the British and French during Chulalongkorn's reign relations between the Thais and the foreign powers had been remarkably amicable. In fact, as is clear from various consular reports after the change in administration, the British regarded the old order as more stable, efficient and less threatening to their interests than the new regime, and would have been far more pleased if no change in government had occurred at all.²⁰

¹⁵ See *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23586, 4 December 1939, F.O. 371/24754, 20 November 1940.

¹⁶ Thompson, V. *Thailand: The New Siam*, MacMillan and Company, New York, 1941: 286.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 724-25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 389.

¹⁹ See Batson, 1984: 19; Vella, 1978: 122-24; Wyatt, 1984: 231.

²⁰ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1932, 1933], F.O. 371/17178, F.O. 371/18210.

Of course, it must be remembered that the purpose of the National Day announcement was not to offer an objective view of the past and present, but to serve as a means of creating a greater measure of legitimacy for the new regime. In doing so developments since the revolution were given greater emphasis while the achievements of the absolute monarchy were ignored. Indeed, the monarchy was in effect denigrated for failing to bring progress and independence to Siam.

As mentioned above, Wichit's other major activity as a member of the National Day Committee was to arrange a competition in which individuals were asked to submit songs, literary works and pictures with inspirational national themes. First prize in the categories for songs and pictures was the rather handsome sum of 200 *baht*, the runner up being awarded 100 *baht*. The literary prizes by contrast were considerably less generous: 50 *baht* for the winner and 25 *baht* for the runner up. Various requirements were specified for each category of work. The prescribed type of songs for example, were those which were compatible with Western-style marching tunes used by the *Yuwachon* in parades, and shorter in length than the national anthem. Entries in the picture-painting category had to conform to strict limitations (i.e. between 80 cm. x 110 cm. and 160 cm. x 220 cm.), and literary works had to be in verse. It was further stipulated that after the winning entries had been selected they would be the sole property of the Publicity Department.²¹

By offering prize money it was hoped that the competition would stimulate a good deal of public participation and thus further the state's campaign to foster a heightened national consciousness. Unfortunately, the extent of the response to the competition cannot be found in the available sources, suggesting perhaps, a lack of enthusiasm for the idea in this particular form. By contrast, the competition in which members of the bureaucracy and public were called on to decorate vehicles emphasizing nationalist themes and enter them in the mass procession through the capital on 24 June was notably successful.²² It is not clear whether Wichit was involved in this aspect of the inaugural festivities, although in the following year he was responsible for judging the best entries and awarding prizes.²³

In its first year National Day, or National and Treaty Revision Day as it was sometimes referred to, rivalled the Constitution Day celebrations in size and scope. The following year, however, when the National Day celebrations were extended from one

²¹ N.A. S.T. 0701.23.1/1.

²² B.T.W.M., 26 June 1939.

²³ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 25 June 1940.

day to three days, it was clear that the event had become the pre-eminent occasion on the Thai calendar. This displacement of Constitution Day by National Day was a remarkable symbolic development in that it indicated the use of military power could be regarded as an equal if not more legitimate means than the parliamentary process to effect political change.²⁴

6.3 *Luang Wichit and the Development of State Conventions [Rathaniyom]*

As preparations were being finalized for the inaugural celebration of the 1932 revolution in early June 1939, a special four-man committee under *Luang* Wichit was set up by Phibun to find a way of removing some of 'the flaws' from Thai society which hampered the country's progress.²⁵ According to the official document which notified Wichit of his new, additional duties, these 'flaws', defined as the unsightly dress and undisciplined social behaviour of the population in the capital which made the country seem 'unprogressive' to foreigners and therefore unworthy of retaining its independence. This view, which echoed the fears expressed by Mongkut and Chulalongkorn at an earlier time, was essentially a veiled critique of the restive, disgruntled elements in society such as the labouring and anti-Japanese nationalist sections of the Chinese community, and other individuals or groups opposed to the state. The way Wichit's committee sought to eliminate these 'flaws' was to formulate a series of *Rathaniyom* or 'State Conventions' as they were known in English,²⁶ which presented certain notions and forms of behaviour as being fundamental to the well being of the Thai nation.

The populace first learnt about the concept of 'State Conventions' during Phibun's National Day Address in 1939 when he told his listeners:

²⁴ While festivities were scaled back considerably during the war, the importance of 24 June as National Day was not diminished and it continued to be celebrated until the Sarit era (1958-63). After coming to power Sarit sought to legitimize his dictatorial rule through a calculated attempt to end the lengthy estrangement between the military and the palace. A part of this process was to allow the monarchy a greater role in public life, and in 1960 National Day was changed from 24 June to 5 December, the birthday of the present King Phumiphon Adunyadet. In effect, the monarchy had come full circle. Having had been overthrown by the military, marginalized during the rule of Phahon and later Phibun, it was resurrected by Sarit to emerge as the central focus of official Thai nationalism in manner not unlike that envisaged by Vajiravudh many decades earlier.

²⁵ N.A .S.T. 0701.29/5. The members of the committee were Samahan Hitakhadi, Prayun Phamonmontri, Sarit Yuthasin, and *Khun* Sosarakon. Prince Wan Waithayakon acted as an advisor to the group.

²⁶ N.A .S.T. 0701.29/5 [9].

The government is now planning to invite all their Thai brethren...to carry out *Rathaniyom*, a popular form of national movement...*Rathaniyom* is similar to the proper type of etiquette to be observed by all civilized people. In this term is included 'public power', which is derived from public opinion. Public opinion brings public power, and this enables either the reformation, or the suppression of a minority of people who are stubborn [and] not desiring to become reformed.²⁷

Following Phibun's brief remarks about the State Conventions on National Day, Wichit was given the task of explaining the new concept to the public in greater detail. He began this work in July 1939 making full use of both the radio and print media to deliver his message.²⁸ According to him, the idea of the Conventions had originated with Phibun who felt the problems of the country could be overcome by 'making the Thai people truly Thai' [*tham khon Thai hai pen Thai ching*]. This meant two things: helping the Thais take control of the country by becoming independent of 'those people' who exploited them, and 'reviving Thai culture' in order that the country be recognized to be as progressive and great as it was in the past. Wichit emphasised that significant political and economic progress had taken place since 1932 making it imperative that efforts be made to forge a new consciousness among the populace to match these changes. He noted that while education was one means of accomplishing this, it took a great deal of time. In contrast, the law was a means by which people's attitudes could be changed rapidly. However, Phibun, according to Wichit, was opposed to using legal measures to transform society since they were repressive and 'un-Thai' [*mai somkiat khwam pen Thai*]. As a result the Premier favoured an approach based on exhortation and encouragement such as the State Conventions.

Notwithstanding this assertion, the real reason for adopting this approach was related to the vagaries of the peculiar 'democratic-authoritarian' political system that was developing in the post-1932 period.²⁹ Plainly stated, the government, through the means of the Conventions was aiming to increase its authority by circumventing the

²⁷ B.T.W.M., 26 June 1939.

²⁸ N.A.S.T. 0701.29/4. B.T.W.M., 4 July 1939.

²⁹ In Crosby's words the post-1932 Thai government was, 'a veritable contradiction in terms ... disposed ... to toy with constitutionalism and with a Legislative Chamber, regardless of the fact that it owes its origin to, and still rests upon the support of, the army and navy. A militarist administration ... playing with the idea of democracy is surely a phenomenon which no other country in the world can exhibit. *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1934], F.O. 371/19379.

established practice of having legislation debated and voted on in the National Assembly before being rejected or officially promulgated. As Crosby acutely noted:

A more dangerous method of governing the people could...scarcely have been invented for, by ignoring the People's Assembly [the National Assembly] the Cabinet sets itself up as the sole arbiter of what public opinion is supposed to be and the temptation to proclaim measures of an oppressive nature is obviously great.³⁰

Wichit sought to diffuse any such objections by explaining that in a constitutional, democratic system [*rabop thamanun rabop prachathipatai*], the Prime Minister was the peoples' representative who could be removed from office by means of a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly. While this was theoretically possible, the fact that the House was composed of equal numbers of government appointed members and publicly elected representatives made such a development highly unlikely. At the same time, Wichit explained that the term *nayokrathamontri* [Prime Minister] derived from the Pali word *nayaka*, meant leader [*phu nam*], and pointed out that it was the duty of the people to follow him. Thus, according to Wichit's logic, in the absence of a no-confidence motion, the leader's pronouncements were to be regarded as expressions of public opinion.³¹

In the same announcement, Wichit also employed metaphoric imagery in order to make his explanation about the importance of the Prime Minister's role and the function of State Conventions more easily understood and accepted by his audience:

Our destination is a nearby crystal island [*Ko Kaeo*] which can only be reached by sea. The waters are treacherous; submerged rocks and whirlpools abound, deadly sharks swim freely. To reach our goal we must be sure that the boat in which we travel has an adept helmsman who knows the way. What is more, to reach the crystal island of joy it is essential that we help each other and paddle as one. The helmsman calls on us to 'come together' and board the craft. Those who don't wish to make the voyage will go their own way or remain where they are. However if they see us approaching our desired goal they will call out and ask us to come back for them....Their cries will be ignored and when night falls they will have to face tigers or other dangers and perish. There are also those who will come on the boat with us

³⁰ Great Britain, F.O. 371/23586, 14 July 1939.

³¹ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/4.

but without wanting to paddle because they think it is beneath them. They will let us exert ourselves while sitting around relaxing. We will not object to this,...but those who dangle their feet in the water to slow the boat down or try to make it capsize will be thrown to the sharks. We will continue to paddle following the orders of the helmsman until, at last, we arrive at our destination where we will experience the happiness that awaits us there.³²

The imagery used is simple and familiar, invoking a number of Thai literary cultural associations. In a broad sense the setting of the passage, a voyage through dangerous waters to an island of refuge and goodness shares resonances with Sunthon Phu's epic romance adventure *Phra Aphaimani*, in which the protagonist and his son escape from the giantess *Nang Phi Su'a Samut* with the help of mermaids to *Ko Kaeo Phitsadan* an enchanted island. The boat in the voyage described by Wichit clearly refers to the nation with the helmsman being none other than Phibun himself.³³ The use of the boat and helmsman metaphor here is notable in that it reflects a direct parallel with the passage written by Vajiravudh some twenty years earlier when he indentified the king as captain and the boat as the nation.³⁴

In a manner similar to Duang Chan, the heroine in *Lu'at Suphan*, Wichit's helmsman calls on his compatriots to 'come together' and unite for the sake of the nation. Some ignore the call and forsake their place, others who make the journey try to impede the boat's progress are labelled as enemies by means of the old well-known proverb *ao thao ra nam hai ru'a doen cha* [to drag one's feet], and are similarly excluded. On the other hand those who unite and follow the helmsman's commands (i.e. the Conventions) reach the desired goal of national security and happiness. Wichit's use of metaphor was clearly designed to have a powerful manipulative effect.³⁵ In the discourse he developed, the audience was presented with a scenario regarding their fate as a nation which offered no alternative: they must put their trust in the helmsman or face extinction.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ The parallel with Mussolini in the 1930s as 'helmsman of the European ship', and Chairman Mao as the Great Helmsman in China during the Cultural Revolution is striking and suggests the cross-cultural relevance of such imagery. The reference to Mussolini comes from, Smith, D.M. *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, Penguin Books, 1977: 54.

³⁴ See Chapter 2.

³⁵ This notion of manipulation is drawn from the discussion of metaphor in Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University Press, 1984: 103.

6.3. 1 Siam becomes Thailand

The first State Convention appeared on National Day 1939 announcing that the name of the country had been changed from *Prathet Sayam* to *Prathet Thai*, in Thai and from Siam to Thailand in English.³⁶ Two recent general English language histories of Thailand offer various explanations for the government's decision to change the name of the country. Terwiel, for example, puts forward the view that 'the name change was part of a campaign to foster values that would be recognized as "cultured" in the international world'.³⁷ In contrast, Wyatt suggests that the change was made to 'signify...the country belonged to the Thai as opposed to the economically dominant Chinese'.³⁸

Of these interpretations, the first is overly general and therefore lacking in explanatory value, while the latter is only partially correct. As has been pointed out above, Phibun was anxious to develop a heightened 'Thai' consciousness among the general populace, and this largely meant to be economically independent of exploitative foreign [i.e. Chinese, European] interests. However, there were other factors which influenced the government to change the name of the country. One cited by Wichit in a radio broadcast explaining the concept of *Rathaniyom*, was to mark the recent signing of equal treaties with the foreign powers.³⁹ The change from Siam to Thailand was seen to symbolize a new era of independence for the country.

An even more important factor in bringing about the change was related to the irredentist campaign led by Wichit. According to Pridi, Wichit gained vital ammunition for his irredentist crusade when he made an official visit to Hanoi and Phnom Penh in May 1939 and was presented with a map produced by the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* which showed areas of the Indochinese Peninsula, Southern China, Burma and Assam inhabited by people of the 'Thai race' [*chon chat Thai*].⁴⁰ On his return home, Wichit set about using this new found data as part of an argument he developed in favour of changing the name of the country. The case was put before the Cabinet and then to the public at the end of May in a radio broadcast, the contents of which were

³⁶ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/1.

³⁷ Terwiel, 1983: 343.

³⁸ Wyatt, 1984: 253.

³⁹ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/4.

⁴⁰ Pridi Phanomyong, *Khwaam pen ma khong chue 'prathet sayam' kap 'prathet thai'*, [The Origin of the Terms Siam and Thailand], Pramot Phu'ngsunthon, Bangkok, 1974 : 6.

also reported in the press. In Wichit's view the use of the term Siam to refer to the Thai nation was inappropriate since it bore no relation to the actual inhabitants of the territory. He explained this by making a number of assertions. First, he claimed that in the tenth century A.D the area in which the Thais now lived was under the control of the part-Indian Khom people who divided it into northern and southern administrative regions. The northern region, which had its centre in the vicinity of present day Sukhothai, was known as 'Mu'ang Sayam', while the southern region located around Lopburi was called 'Mu'ang Lavo'. The Chinese, who had trade relations with the area knew the combined territory as 'Siem-lo', clearly a cognate for Siam.⁴¹

As for the Thais, it was claimed that they had left their 'original [home] in the north' to come and live in the region of 'Muang Sayam' where they existed in a subordinate relationship to the Khoms. In the mid-thirteenth century this situation changed when the Thais joined forces and overthrew the Khoms, demonstrating their independence by changing the name of the territory in which they lived from 'Mu'ang Sayam' to 'Sukhothai'. Subsequently the Thai kingdom came to be known first as Ayuthaya and then Ratanakosin, both names taken from the centre of state authority. In the nineteenth century the kingdom was formally called Siam as treaty relations were established with the foreign powers. The reason for this development Wichit argued, was simply that the Europeans followed the Chinese practice by calling the kingdom Siam, and in the negotiations that took place the monarch raised no objections to the country being known by this name.

Wichit also presented another reason for objecting to the use of the term Siam to refer to the Thai nation. He noted that a number of scholars believed that the word Siam meant 'black' or 'dark' [*dam*], and claimed this to be a totally inappropriate term for the Thai since they were a yellow-skinned race.

Drawing figures from the map he had obtained from the French, Wichit estimated there were up to 60 million Thai people in the combined area of Southeast Asia and China, and pointed out that this made 'the Thai...among the big races of the world'. Citing the work of the American missionary W.C. Dodd, *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese*, Wichit further noted that all Thais, whether in the kingdom of Siam or in other countries, 'considered themselves to be independent because they call

⁴¹ The term 'Siem-lo' [Xianluo] is still regularly used by the Chinese in Hong Kong to refer to Thailand.

themselves Thai' which meant, 'slaves to none'.⁴² He then suggested that if the name of the country was changed from Siam to something which reflected the racial makeup of the inhabitants, the various Thai peoples in other countries would know of their common ancestry and a basis for a 'Greater Thai Kingdom' [*Maha anachak Thai*] could be established.⁴³

Wichit's ideas about a name change for the country did not go unchallenged, however. Pridi for one did not give his full support to the chauvinistic irredentist movement and made his opposition to any change known to his colleagues.⁴⁴ Outside the cabinet there was also a degree of opposition to the idea expressed in the press. For example, one writer, reflecting wider opinion, argued:

I can hardly conceive of anything initiated by a Government more futile ... Why should we rashly change the long-established and dear old name when our sacred Constitution, our beloved national songs, our treasured international treaties recently revised, and our beautiful old poetry and literature will be affected by this whimsical alteration? Let us hope that our members of the Assembly will be possessed of enough foresight and soundness to sense the fatuity of the proposed change.⁴⁵

In all likelihood, it seems that this type of criticism influenced the government's decision to re-name the country by means of State Conventions rather than by formal legal proclamation. The latter course of action would have required a potentially time-consuming and uncertain debate in the National Assembly with the result that the symbolic impact of changing the name of the country on the inaugural National Day would be missed. Some months after Phibun announced that Siam was to be known as Thailand, legislation was finally put before the House for consideration, and after some debate the name change passed into law.⁴⁶

⁴² In November 1939, a Thai translation of Dodd's book was published and distributed by the Ministry of Defence. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23586, 27 November 1939.

⁴³ *B.T.W.M.*, 29 May 1939.

⁴⁴ Pridi, 1974: 7-8.

⁴⁵ *Bangkok Times*, 31 May 1939. Also see 'Hermit' in *B.T.W.M.*, 7 June 1939, and various issues of the *Bangkok Times* from early to mid-June 1939.

⁴⁶ *Bangkok Times*, 28 August 1939. Pridi 1974: 7-8.

6.3.2 Further State Conventions

Following the initial State Convention announcing the name change from Siam to Thailand in June 1939, Wichit's committee went on to formulate a total of eleven other such directives over a period of one and a half years. The first of these, which appeared on 3 July, was concerned with 'Safeguarding the Nation', and informed the public that:

- I. Members of the Thai race should not undertake any sort of business without first thinking of the benefits accruing to, or the safety, of, their nation.
2. Thai nationals should not reveal anything to foreigners that is detrimental to the nation.
3. Thai nationals should not act as agents or mouth-pieces of aliens without first being satisfied that it is of benefit to the nation. They should not express opinions indicating that they side with other nations when an international problem or question arises.
4. Thai nationals should not buy land on behalf of other nationalities in any way which may be considered harmful to the nation.
5. Whenever it is known that a person is treacherous to the nation it is the duty of the Thai to suppress his further actions.⁴⁷

This particular document can only be fully understood in the context of the delicate international situation that confronted the Thai state at the time. From the early 1930s Thailand, as the only politically independent country in Southeast Asia, had pursued a policy of amity and neutrality in its official relations with the major powers in the region, Britain, France and the new force — Japan. This official policy of neutrality became even more important as the threat of war between Britain and Japan intensified in the late 1930s and was therefore given emphasis in the exhortatory directive. At the same time, the relationship between the Thai administration and the Japanese was being complicated by the activities of nationalist elements in the economically powerful, local Chinese community who were engaged in a fund raising and propaganda campaign to assist the resistance to Japan's imperial adventure in China. The newly established Phibun regime was quick to launch an all-out attempt to eliminate this anti-Japanese activity. And shortly after the announcement of the second State Convention the 'grand

⁴⁷ *Bangkok Times*, 4 July 1939.

climax of the government's containment policy' took place when 'schools, printing presses, newspaper offices and Chinese associations were searched, pamphlets and documents seized, and several hundred arrests made.'⁴⁸ Section five of the directive affirmed such repressive actions of the state by presenting them to the public in nationalist terms as 'the duty of the Thai'. The directive also intimated that the legitimate, real 'Thai' were those members of the populace who acted in full accordance with behavioural criteria propagated by the state.

Almost immediately after this State Convention appeared, Wichit's committee produced two further directives in rapid succession,⁴⁹ these being made public on 2 August and 8 September 1939 respectively.⁵⁰ The first of these new Conventions was to the effect that the citizens of country would henceforth be simply known as Thai [*Chao Thai*]. According to the announcement the reason for this initiative was since the name of the country had been changed to Thailand, a single term for designating the populace was required, and that '...everybody must [now] embody Thainess [*khwam pen Thai*], that is independence and freedom from all traces of slavery.'⁵¹ This directive is particularly instructive for it gives a clear indication of the elastic, ideological use of the concept 'Thai' by the state. On the one hand, the country's inhabitants were told they must be free and independent [Thai], yet at the same time their freedom was denied as they were ordered to shed traditional ethnic terms of identification for a new, officially sanctioned historical-cultural identity.

Curiously, the available evidence in relation to this particular Convention suggests that it was not so much an attempt to facilitate the assimilation of the troublesome Chinese community, but rather aimed at forging a 'Thai' consciousness among the Lao and Shan peoples living within Thailand's borders and those in the neighbouring areas coveted by the irredentists. Wichit's involvement in this general process of promoting 'Thainess' was crucial, and went so far as to see him issuing orders that the words Lao or Ngiaw [Shan] be deleted from the popular folk songs of north and northeast Thailand and be replaced, where practicable with the term Thai. A list of more than sixty songs commonly performed by these two peoples was compiled

⁴⁸ Skinner, 1957: 266-267.

⁴⁹ N.A. S.T. 0701 29/1.

⁵⁰ Wan Waithayakon, Prince. 'Thai Culture', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 35, pt. 2, 1944: 137.

⁵¹ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/1.

by the Department of Fine Arts, the desired alterations to their content was made and these changes were then officially announced.⁵²

The next Convention, which appeared on 8 September 1939, was concerned with instilling a new form of ritual behaviour among the population by calling on the public to show respect towards various national symbols. This idea seems to have first been put before the government at the beginning of July 1939 by Sanan Pathamathin, a school teacher and author in an official letter to Phibun. Sanan talked about the way that Westerners venerated their national flags and anthems and said the Thais should emulate them. In making this suggestion, Sanan pointed out that while members of the Thai elite already practised such behaviour, uneducated Thais and the Chinese in general did not, and he believed they should be compelled to change their ways in the interests of national honour and dignity.⁵³ Government thinking was clearly supportive of this type of idea, and Wichit's committee was ordered to formulate an appropriate State Convention. The resultant directive prescribed that whenever the National Flag was raised or lowered in public places individuals in the vicinity were required to stand at attention. It was also announced that citizens were to stand to attention when the National Anthem or the Royal Anthem were played at official functions, festivals or in places of entertainment.⁵⁴ Members of the public were further instructed that they should help enforce these new regulations personally by reminding any individual who they saw disregarding the Convention of the importance of respecting the flag and the anthems as national symbols.⁵⁵ This form of citizen pressure, not to mention the possibility of being arrested ensured that this directive was widely adhered to and quickly became an integral part of Thai public life. Nevertheless there were notable infringements of the order such as a case in October 1941 when two men were caught on the banks of the Chaophraya River cleaning a boat with the National Flag: one of the offenders was gaoled for 16 days while the other was fined the not insignificant sum of 15 *baht*.⁵⁶

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 11 October 1941.

6.3.3 State Conventions and the Economy

Since the economic sphere was an area of major reform as well as one of deep concern for the Phibun regime, it is not surprising that the State Conventions were used as a means for promoting its policies. Two economically-oriented Conventions were formulated by Wichit's committee. The first of these, which appeared on 1 November 1939, called on the public to buy local produce and support Thai industrial and commercial enterprise. The second Convention, announced on 21 March 1940, encouraged all Thais to 'contribute to the task of national reconstruction,' which meant 'every able-bodied person must work.' It was further stated that those 'who take up no occupation...neglect their duty in assisting...national progress do not deserve to be held in respect by the general public.'⁵⁷

These two Conventions were part of a complex process — the administration's resolute policy to 'Thai-ify' the economy. From Vajiravudh's time there had been calls for the state to become more active in the economic sphere by establishing government factories and providing greater employment opportunities for Thai nationals.⁵⁸ However, as Hewison notes the pre-1932 regime 'took a largely *laissez-faire* position towards business and industrial development', which allowed Chinese and European commercial interests a good deal of freedom to develop and exert a dominant influence over the economy.⁵⁹ The post 1932 leaders, on the other hand, who had been brought up on a diet of Vajiravudh's official nationalism and whose perceptions about the importance of the economy had been deeply influenced by the chaos wrought by the Great Depression sought to reverse this situation and assert greater Thai control. While radical reforms to the country's economic structure, such as the plan for nationalization put forward by Pridi in 1933, were rejected, it was not long before the new administration began to take a leading role in organizing and developing the economy. During the Phahon era (1933-38), new commercial regulations were introduced and the state invested in a range of capitalist enterprises: sugar mills were established in Chonburi and Lampang, a paper mill in Kanachanaburi, and a silk factory in Nakhon Ratchasima. A government slaughterhouse was constructed in Bangkok, while the Ministry of Defence opened a cloth factory and, with Japanese assistance, set up an oil

⁵⁷ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 23 March 1940.

⁵⁸ For example see *B.T.W.M.*, 13 August 1923.

⁵⁹ Hewison, 1986: 15.

refinery.⁶⁰ In addition, there were plans for limiting coastal shipping to Thai vessels manned by Thai nationals.⁶¹ A nationality regulation was also applied to rice mills, which were required to employ a '50 per cent minimum of Thai workers'.⁶² At the same time as these developments were taking place, there was 'a gradual exodus of European businessmen and employees...due to a less favourable outlook for foreign commercial firms...and increased taxation.'⁶³

Under the Phibun regime the 'Thai-ification' of the economy went considerably further, the main architect of this policy being none other than the new Finance Minister, Pridi, who 'inaugurated a scheme of wholesale and rapid innovations.'⁶⁴ Within months of the government assuming power, new laws were drawn up which saw such areas as the production and distribution of petroleum products, tobacco manufacture, the sale of salt and birdnests, the butchering of livestock, and taxi driving become the province of Thai nationals. The earlier plans for coastal shipping to be taken over by Thai interests were also realized. These sudden changes apparently alarmed 'moderate' elements in the bureaucracy as well as members of the business community. The British Minister, Crosby, who had been sending positive reports about Pridi to his superiors in London now described him as 'a nice dog with an ugly tail...', in the sense that there is attached to him an unpleasant crowd of hangers on, some of whom are downright dishonest whilst others feed him with all manner of fantastic notions upon the subject of political economy.'⁶⁵

A further instance of the state's policy to undermine foreign influence in the economy was the establishment, in mid-1939, of the Thai Niyom Company. The company, whose shareholders included such individuals as *Yuwachon* leader Prayun Phamonmontri, Wilat Osathanon, head of the Publicity Department and the newly created Thai Marine Navigation Company, Chin Phinthanon, Director-General of the Crown Property Division of the Finance Ministry, and the Sino-Thai businessman Chulin Lamsam,⁶⁶ was in fact, the 'cornerstone' of the government's 'Thai-ification'

⁶⁰ *Great Britain*, [Annual Report 1935], F.O. 371/20302. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/20303 15 October 1936. Anonymous, 'Kon cha thu'ng niyom Thai' [Before the Era of Thai-ification], *Sinlapawathanatham*, 7,1, November 1985.

⁶¹ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00 P.R./64, 11 August 1934. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/21052 28 December 1936.

⁶² Skinner, 1957: 219.

⁶³ *Department of State*, American Consular Reports, 892.00 P.R./71, 11 April 1935.

⁶⁴ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23590, 27 March 1939.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *B.T.W.M.*, 26 July 1940.

program. All import and export transactions in connection with the state enterprises were handled by Thai Niyom, which also set up a network of commercial houses to facilitate the marketing of state products nationally. Crosby, representing the voice of British commercial interests, was critical of the company on the grounds that it would enjoy unfair advantages over its competitors, yet at the same time admitted that it would provide useful training for Thai personnel 'who, without private capital and with little initiative, could in no other way enjoy the same facilities for acquiring business experience.'⁶⁷

Within the context of the state's growing intervention in the economic sphere, Wichit delivered a major lecture at the Ministry of Defence on 16 November 1939. In a manner reminiscent of some of his earlier lectures and radio broadcasts Wichit began to talk about transforming social attitudes and behaviour and the need for a 'human revolution' [*manut patiwat*]. He claimed that in contemporary Thailand there was a widespread attitude of disdain towards all forms of manual labour among the native population which threatened the state's attempts to 'Thai-ify' the economy. This attitude, Wichit argued, in what may be interpreted as a criticism of the royalist class, was related to the time when the elite, influenced by Indian-Khmer culture, projected the love of extravagance and leisure as positive, desirable values. A 'human revolution' meant rejecting this type of perspective and leading the people to 'recognize work as the source of joy, life and honour.' In rather crude ideological terms Wichit insisted that work was intrinsic to Buddhism and Thai identity itself. His view was this: central to Buddhist thought was the dictum that everyone had to depend on themselves to survive, in other words one had to work to live. Further, an individual or group who relied on their own efforts would never 'become slaves to others' and thus remain independent or 'Thai'.⁶⁸ In developing this fusion of a bourgeois-type work ethic, religion and national

⁶⁷ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/24754, 16 September 1940. Another major element of the 'Thai-ification' of the economy was the state's ambitious move to take over the country's rice milling industry which had been controlled by Chinese business interests. Interestingly, this initiative was not so much inspired by indigenous economic nationalism, but rather was a consequence of the clandestine relationship between the Japanese and members of the Thai government. The Japanese, who were desirous of obtaining reliable rice supplies from Thailand saw Chinese control over the industry as a serious threat to their plans, and through the medium of Wanit Pananon a close associate of Phibun, had suggested that the government set up its own mills employing Thai workers. In December 1938 this idea began to take shape when the formation of the Thai Rice Company was announced and within 18 months this enterprise had bought out 11 Chinese mills in Bangkok to become the 'most powerful unit in the local industry. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23592, 10 January 1939, *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/24752 12 March 1940.

⁶⁸ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'Manut patiwat' [Human Revolution], in *Pathakhatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks] vol.2, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok 1973: 311-345.

identity Wichit was providing the Thais with a conceptual framework for coming to terms with, and participating in the growing market economy.

While the extent to which public attitudes towards work were influenced by this sort of appeal is uncertain, it is clear that the actual economic initiatives of the state caused great resentment in the Chinese community. Criticism of the government was often heated, and shortly after the Convention of 1 November 1939 appeared, a vigorous leaflet campaign denouncing the directive was uncovered.⁶⁹ At approximately the same time, Wichit, in his role as head of the Department of Fine Arts hastily produced a historical musical drama entitled *Nan Chao* which sought to give added justification to the state's program of 'Thai-ification'. The play, set in Nan Chao, a purported Thai kingdom in Southern China, is essentially the story of Chinese expansionism during the ninth-tenth century A.D. which forced the Thai people to abandon their original territory and move south towards present day Thailand. As he had done in his earlier nationalist plays, Wichit used 'events' of the past to refer to contemporary developments, the message of this work being clear: to present the Chinese as historical 'villains' who continued to pose a threat to Thai independence.

6.3.4 State Convention on Language

On 24 June 1940 the local Chinese community received further notice of the state's hardline 'Thai-ification' policy when the ninth State Convention, which promoted the use of the Thai language, was announced. A rough translation of the directive appeared in the *Bangkok Chronicle*:

All Thais must consider...their first duty as good...citizens is to study the Thai language, so that at least they must be able to read and write. They must also recognize it as their important duty to assist those who do not know the Thai language to know it and to encourage those who are illiterate to learn the language [Furthermore] Thais are not to give undue consideration to their particular place of residence or their birth-place, or to the difference in accent of the language as indicative of separation. Everyone must consider that he is born Thai, he naturally possesses Thai blood and talks Thai irrespective of birth-place or pronunciation.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Bangkok Times*, 8 November 1939; *Bangkok Chronicle*, 14 November 1939.

⁷⁰ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 26 June 1940.

The announcement was designed in part to put additional pressure on the Chinese community, and the Chinese school system in particular. Although these schools had been reduced in number following temporary government closures in mid-1939, and subjected to increasing regulation, they continued to function and provide the authorities cause for concern.⁷¹ More generally, the *Rathaniyom* was directed at the non-Thai speaking Muslim and Lao communities, who remained largely unassimilated. It was also aimed at reducing the high illiteracy rates among the Thai population itself.

Shortly after the *Rathaniyom* appeared the state began to close Chinese schools again and by 1941 only two such institutions were operating, both in the capital where they were easily monitored.⁷² At the same time the authorities continued to expand the Thai education system and there was a rapid increase in the number of schools, teachers and students, particularly at the primary level.⁷³ An education program was also launched to develop basic literacy among the adult populations of the various groups that made up Thai society so they could keep abreast of the official pronouncements on 'civic duties and culture'.⁷⁴ These developments were followed up in May 1942 when the state decided to introduce a new simplified form of spelling that was designed to facilitate more rapid learning.⁷⁵ Although this reform seemed to make a good deal of sense in strict pedagogical terms it was not well received among certain sections of the educated Thai public: some critics charged that the whole body of the nation's literature would be lost to future generations while a number of well known authors and newspapermen ceased writing altogether in protest.⁷⁶ Since the idea lacked real support outside the state leadership it was not surprising that as soon as Phibun relinquished power in July 1944, the new system was abandoned and the old spelling reintroduced.⁷⁷ Once again, as had earlier been the case when Mongkut and Vajiravudh tried to initiate linguistic change, a conscious attempt on the part of the state to reform the language proved unsuccessful.⁷⁸

⁷¹ See *Bangkok Times*, 20 November 1939 for a report about Chinese school involvement in anti-Japanese activity.

⁷² Skinner, 1957: 269.

⁷³ *Statistical Year Book of the Kingdom of Siam* 1937/8-1944: 122-123.

⁷⁴ *B.T.W.M.*, 7 February 1941.

⁷⁵ *N.A. S.T.* 0701.29/8.

⁷⁶ Sathian Chanthimathon, *Saithan wannakam phu'a chiwit* [Literature of Social Conscience], Bangkok, 1982: 194-195.

⁷⁷ Batson, 1974: 117.

⁷⁸ Vella, 1978: 241-242.

6.3. 5 The State Convention on Dress

The most unusual, and certainly the most talked about State Convention drawn up by Wichit and his committee was concerned with dress reform. This issue had been under official consideration since mid-1939,⁷⁹ but was not the subject of a directive until 15 January 1941 when the tenth Convention was announced, calling on the public to dress in a neat and well groomed manner.⁸⁰ Western style clothing was considered to be the most appropriate form of attire although traditional dress was not proscribed.⁸¹ Interestingly, traditional dress as such was seen to include the custom of wearing long trousers which, according to Wichit had been developed by Thai peoples during the Nan Chao period.⁸² Overall, it was claimed that if the public paid greater attention to the manner in which they dressed Thailand would become 'the equal of civilized nations'.⁸³ As was discussed in Chapter 2, this desire to be 'civilized' had been a feature of Thai social discourse since Mongkut's time. In the Phibun era however, the question of social form became virtually an obsession of the state. It is in this regard that the regime had particularly close similarities with fascist Italy where, under Mussolini's rule the image society presented to the world was seen to be more important than its actual substance.⁸⁴

The dress regulations formulated by the state were extraordinary in their detail. Men, for example, were expected to wear hats, shoes and socks, jackets and long

⁷⁹ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/1.

⁸⁰ Wan, 1944: 137. At one stage an even more bizarre type of directive was said to have been planned by Wichit. In a dispatch to the Foreign Office in July 1939, Crosby reported: 'I have it on good authority that this lunatic [Wichit] has gone so far as to suggest that lynching should be recommended by the system of "State Conventions" ...' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23586, 14 July 1939.

⁸¹ Thak Chaloemtiarana (ed.), *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents 1932-57*, The Social Science Association of Thailand, Bangkok, 1978: 253.

⁸² N.A. S.T. 0701.29/1. In performances of Wichit's historical drama *Nan Chao*, 'trousers were worn by the entire cast'. *B.T.W.M.*, 16 October 1939.

⁸³ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/1. The same type of reasoning is expressed in Gogol's nineteenth century novel, *Dead Souls*, in a passage outlining the beliefs of a feudal lord: 'He attached great importance to dress: he said he was ready to stake his head that the level of culture and trade would rise and that a Golden age would dawn in Russia as soon as half the Russian peasants had donned German trousers.' Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1948: 385.

⁸⁴ A telling example of the importance of appearances over substance in Mussolini's Italy is provided by Smith, 1977: 134. 'The fascist order of priorities, being based on the needs of propaganda, saw civilian uniforms as more important than military ones, just as there was more point in making miniature rifles and machine-guns for children than real ones for the army, because it was easier (and perhaps as important) to give the illusion of militancy than to provide the real thing.'

trousers.⁸⁵ Female fashion, as determined by Wichit with the help of a specially formed eight-woman committee including his second wife Praphaphan, consisted of hats, skirts, blouses covering the shoulders, gloves, and high-heeled shoes. The wearing of socks, stockings and gloves was also encouraged but not made compulsory. In addition a range of colours for clothes and accessories was specified: 'grey, indigo khaki and beige for outdoor wear, while navy blue was deemed suitable...for work connected with machinery.'⁸⁶

Almost immediately after the *Rathaniyom* was announced, Phibun, who was widely known to be interested in female fashion, sought to popularize the dress regulations by having the Welfare Department organize a competition in which the public was asked to design and produce women's clothing using Thai materials.⁸⁷ The entries in the competition were exhibited and judged during the Thai New Year celebrations in April 1941 with proceeds raised by the event being donated to soldiers disabled in the Thai-Franco border war (see below).⁸⁸

At approximately the same time, criticism of the dress regulations began to build up in the local press. This development saw Wichit rush to defend the new reforms in a series of radio broadcasts. In opposing the critics, who claimed that the changes were essentially 'un-Thai', he argued that the official policy of imposing Western-style dress on the public was in no way at odds with the nationalist principles of the state. He insisted that Thailand would only benefit from the reform and sought to justify his position by pointing out that the efforts of Sun Yat-Sen and Kemal Atatürk to introduce Western style dress in their respective countries had done nothing to lessen or undermine Chinese and Turkish nationalism.⁸⁹ Wichit further argued the case for dress reform by claiming that if all citizens were clothed in a uniform manner class differences would be reduced. This assertion was not borne out in reality, however, since it ignored the fact that the dress regulations tended to perpetuate social differences through the colour guidelines. Thus, the navy blue uniforms worn by taxi drivers and trishaw riders distinguished them

⁸⁵ Thamsook Numnonda, Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-45', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, no. 2, September 1978, 238.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* N.A. S.T. 0701.29/12.

⁸⁷ Interview with *Khunying* Praphaphan Wichitwathakan, 21 January 1986.

⁸⁸ N.A. S.T. 0701.46/1.

⁸⁹ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/13.

from such non-manual workers as bureaucrats and business people who were required to dress in a range of different colours.⁹⁰

The public's response to the dress regulations varied enormously. On the one hand it was humourously reported that 'some individuals have...applied [a] strict...interpretation of the rules, and...even go to their bath in the canal fully dressed and with a hat on.'⁹¹ There were also reports of Chinese and Malay support for the regulations, support which was most likely given in order to appease the authorities.⁹² By contrast, government documents of the period make it clear that the State Conventions on dress were not, initially, adhered to in the bureaucracy. Even female workers in the office of Thawi Bunyaket, Phibun's Secretary General, refused to comply with the order to wear hats.⁹³ Notwithstanding such flaunting of the directive in the heart of the bureaucracy, the state issued a series of appeals to the public reminding them of their 'duty' following the regulations. Finally, from early 1942 the exhortatory approach was complemented by more coercive means when it was announced that individuals who violated the Conventions would be fined or arrested under previously neglected legal statutes on dress in public places contained in the National Culture Act of September 1940.⁹⁴ The Ministry of the Interior also announced that people living along or near roads who did not dress suitably would be ordered to remove their houses from public view.⁹⁵

The degree to which the state actually used the repressive powers at its disposal to enforce the wearing of Western-style dress is not known. However, with the passage of time trousers, dresses and shirts became widely accepted, although hats and gloves did not, and when the regulations were done away with in 1944 after the fall of the Phibun administration the public continued to embrace the imported fashions. Transforming the dress habits of the Thai people can therefore be seen as one of the enduring successes of the Phibun regime.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Navy blue uniforms for taxi drivers and trishaw peddlars were introduced in October 1941. *Bangkok Chronicle*, 15 October 1941. Many taxi drivers and trishaw riders (of both motorized and foot propelled vehicles) can still be seen wearing such blue uniforms in contemporary Thailand.

⁹¹ Prem Chaya and Althea, *The Passing Hours*, Chatra Books, Bangkok 1945: 23-24.

⁹² *Bangkok Times*, 22 March 1941, 2 April 1941, 11 April 1941.

⁹³ Ray, J.K., *Portraits of Thai Politics*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1972: 86.

⁹⁴ Wan, 1944: 140.

⁹⁵ *Bangkok Times*, 17 March 1942.

⁹⁶ Other successes in bringing 'civilization' to the nation during this period included the outlawing of betel chewing and the acceptance, by the urban population, of the greeting, *sawatdi*, a new, Western-inspired term which was equivalent to the English 'Good/morning/afternoon/evening'. It

6.3 6 The State Convention on Daily Life

The final State Convention to be discussed in the present work represents another instance of the state's desire to impose a single, uniform order on Thai society.⁹⁷ The directive, announced on 8 September 1941, was rather wide-ranging in scope, setting out what were considered to be the appropriate daily activities of the Thai people [*kit pracham wan khong khon Thai*]. It began by emphasising that the daily lives of individuals should be seen to be composed of three distinct periods of time: that devoted to work, personal activities [*kit suan tua*], and leisure. People were encouraged to pursue their work energetically, and be personally active by growing vegetables, raising animals, attending religious sermons, listening to the radio and reading newspapers. They were also urged to use their leisure time to play sport on a regular basis for an hour a day. The populace was further instructed that they should eat no more than four meals a day at fixed times and sleep from six to eight hours a night.⁹⁸

The vision of an ordered, regularized society contained in this directive is particularly interesting in that it bears similarities with contemporary developments in China, another country in Asia where the influence of fascism was being manifested. In early 1934, Chiang Kai-Shek had helped launch what was known as the New Life Movement which he continued to promote and support into the World War Two period. His description of the movement in a radio broadcast during 1940 clearly reveals a parallel with the Thai notion of State Conventions:

The New Life Movement is a conception in no way remote from everyday life. It is entirely concerned with the general improvement of men's lives and the practice of our moral principles. It aims at the transformation of social customs and habits of mind. We have not only to rouse ourselves but also to

seems that *sawatdi* was originally coined by *Phraya* Upakit Silapasan at Chulalongkorn University during the mid-1930s and later officially promoted in the bureaucracy under the Phibun regime. Upakit Silapasan, *Phraya, Chumnum niphon* [Collected Writings], Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1964: 4-5. N.A. S.T. 0701.29/8, 0701.29/30.

⁹⁷ In addition to the State Conventions discussed in the text there were three other such directives of lesser importance: Convention Number Six of 10 December 1939 which announced changes to the wording of the National Anthem, Convention Number Eight of 26 April 1940 which announced changes to the wording of the Royal Anthem, and Convention Number Twelve of 20 January 1942 which called on the public to show greater courtesy towards 'the young, aged and infirm in public places and highways'. Wan, 1944: 137.

⁹⁸ N.A. S.T. 0701.29/14.

rouse others to full consciousness of their duty, to stimulate both ourselves and others.⁹⁹

It must be pointed out that both the New Life Movement and the State Convention on daily life did not draw all their inspiration from European sources, but were also informed by indigenous traditions. Thus, the New Life Movement, in addition to being seen as a means to implant the 'fascist spirit' among the Chinese people was described as 'sloganized Confucianism' which 'encapsulated for popular consumption...four vague virtues... propriety, justice, honesty, and a sense of self respect.'¹⁰⁰ As for the directive, it incorporated notions of modern mass society with Buddhist overtones that were discernible not only in the specific injunctions to attend religious functions, but in a wider sense by encouraging the populace to develop 'right attitudes and behaviour.' Like the state's attempt to change the dress habits of the people this type of character building program had a good deal of long term impact and the prescriptions regarding attitude and behaviour (i.e. eating, drinking, sports, charity) can still be found in the civic duties texts that all primary school students study in contemporary Thailand.¹⁰¹

In broad terms, the formulation of the various State Conventions by Wichit and his committee was an important and fascinating development. Informed by notions of *civilization* and *progress* absorbed from abroad, the directives were an attempt by the authorities to set in place a particular view of what it meant to be Thai. In defining and deploying its own notion of 'Thainess', the state was in a better position to exert its influence and control over the population than at any time in the past.

6.4 Wichit's Notion of Culture

The significance of the state's efforts to promote the notion of 'Thainess' was portrayed by Wichit in historical terms. As has been emphasized, Wichit was adept at utilizing the

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- ⁹⁹ Chiang Kai-Shek, *Resistance and Reconstruction [Messages During China's Six Years of War 1937-1943]*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1943: 150.
- ¹⁰⁰ Eastman, Lloyd E., *The Abortive Revolution [China Under Nationalist Rule 1927-1937]*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1974:67.
- ¹⁰¹ See the series of primary school civics texts currently in use entitled *Klum sangsoem laksana nisai*, Wattana Panich, Bangkok, 1978.

past, or rather his peculiar conception of the past, to justify or affirm contemporary realities. He continued to do so in an important lecture delivered at the Publicity Department on 6 March 1940, entitled 'Sukhothai Culture' [*wathanatham Sukhothai*].¹⁰² Interestingly, it was one of the earliest (if not the first) occasions on which he discussed Culture [*wathanatham*], a concept that had long been central to Western social discourse, and one which was of great significance in the rhetoric of the Nazi and fascist regimes which he so greatly admired.

The word *wathanatham* [culture] was a recent addition to the Thai lexicon having been coined at some time in the early 1930s.¹⁰³ It was during this period that the nationalist project launched by Vajiravudh some twenty years earlier encouraging his fellow countrymen to eschew foreign (i.e. Western) terms and develop and use 'Thai' equivalents reached its peak, and large numbers of neologisms based on Pali-Sanskrit roots were formulated.¹⁰⁴ While some of these newly created lexical items had an ephemeral existence, *wathanatham* [culture] was more successful and gradually came into wider usage. However, there was a degree of uncertainty as to what the term actually meant.¹⁰⁵

In the aforementioned lecture, Wichit sought to overcome the prevailing uncertainty regarding 'culture' by assuring his listeners that it was not a difficult concept but one which had to be seen as having two meanings. On the one hand, 'culture' referred to material forms, such as architecture, dress and art which 'demonstrated the

¹⁰² Wichit 1962(a): 117-144.

¹⁰³ The term *wathanatham* did not appear in the *Photchananukrom nakrian* [Student Dictionary] published in 1929, but was being used in the press by 1934. *Photchananukrom nakrian*, [Student Dictionary], Khurusapha, Bangkok, 1977 (14th Edition). *Prachachat*, 23 August 1934.

¹⁰⁴ In 1931, lists of these new words were regularly published in Wichit's magazine *Duang prathip*. *Duang prathip*, 11 November 1931. Also see Wan Waithayakon, Prince. 'Coining Thai Words', *In Memoriam Phya Anuman Rajadhon*, The Siam Society, Bangkok, 1970: 33-38.

¹⁰⁵ This uncertainty was well illustrated in a newspaper article of 23 August 1934 concerned with the role of art in Thai society. The author of this article spoke about *wathanatham* with great frequency, stating that it was a new and significant word. At one point it seemed that the writer would actually attempt to define the term when he posed the question 'What is culture?' [*wathanatham khue arai*], but he then draws back stating, 'It is not my intention to write about this just now, I only wish to say that art and the appreciation of art are indicators of culture.' This elliptical response suggests that the author was somewhat unsure of just what he meant when he spoke about culture. *Prachachat*, 23 August 1934. It should be recognized that such difficulty was not confined to the Thai context for in the West the term 'culture' was problematic. As Raymond Williams has demonstrated, this was due to complex historical factors. In English the word 'culture' originally meant 'the growth and tending of crops and animals.' From this 'it became a noun of "inner" process, specialized to its presumed agencies in "intellectual life" and "the arts". It became also a noun [meaning] ... "whole ways of life". What resulted from this development was uncertainty of meaning as 'each tendency is ready to deny any proper use of the concept to the other.' Williams, 1977: 11,17.

achievements or progress of the nation...to other countries'.¹⁰⁶ 'Culture' was also defined in less tangible terms as the underlying basis of morals and behaviour which led to 'national progress and stability'.¹⁰⁷ A 'cultured' race, he further added, was one which possessed four basic characteristics:

- 1) Industriousness
- 2) A love of precision and neatness
- 3) An appreciation of beauty
- 4) Perseverance ¹⁰⁸

Wichit argued that during the reign of King Ram Khamhaeng in the Sukhothai period, 'culture' in both senses of the word abounded. For example, a network of 'modern, wide roads' was built linking Sukhothai with other major regional centres such as Suwannalok and Khamphaengphet; an irrigation system made up of large reservoirs and ponds was established, and household water bores were sunk. Sophisticated temples were constructed and standing Buddha statues, exemplifying 'progressive activity', erected. People were well dressed and tidy. Wichit also proudly noted that Ram Khamhaeng, without any knowledge about the West, had invented a writing system similar to that found in Europe with all the consonants and vowels being written on the same line. The king, he claimed, had developed the new script to make learning easier and hoped that it would come into common usage and thereby facilitate trade and cultural exchanges between the Thais, Burmese, Mons and Khmers in the region.

In addition, Wichit talked of the industry, initiative and the sophistication of the Thai during the Sukhothai period. He noted that the people worked throughout the year growing rice, raising livestock, weaving cloth, forging iron as well as being involved in other productive activities. As a result, there was a surplus of commodities which led many individuals to become entrepreneurs, actively engaged in commerce and trade. This, he seemed to suggest, represented the early development of a free market economy. At the same time the people were artistic, displaying particular talents in the fields of music and dance. Creative ability, Wichit emphasized, was an important

¹⁰⁶ Wichit, 1962(a): 117-118.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*: 118.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: 133.

indicator of culture in the West, telling his audience that this was demonstrated by the keen interest and support given to the arts by such contemporary leaders as Mussolini and Hitler.¹⁰⁹

All in all, he argued that while the Sukhothai period represented the apogée of Thai cultural achievement the following age was a time of decay and decline. The reason for the decline could, in his view, be traced to the time when the fifth Sukhothai ruler, King Lithai began diluting Thai culture by introducing Khmer religious architecture, vocabulary and the 'slave system'. As this process continued, the centre of Thai power moved south to Ayuthaya where the monarchs embraced an elaborate Indian-Khmer ceremonial form of kingship which undermined their former vitality. Wichit expressed contempt for these developments and claimed that the entire period of Ayuthayan history, with the exception of the reigns of strong, martial kings such as Naresuan and Narai, was a 'waste of time' [*pen wela thi sia plao*]. Although he refrained from making any evaluation of the state of affairs during the subsequent Bangkok era, his closing remarks carried an implicit criticism of the pre-1932 administration, reflecting the underlying anti-royalist sentiments of the state leadership:

Thailand was a strong and vibrant nation in the Sukhothai period...and in the time that has elapsed since then we should have made great progress...[However] it was not possible since we cast off our fundamental culture. We achieved nothing in all those years and now it has reached the stage when we must make up that lost time.¹¹⁰

Clearly, the note of urgency at the end of the passage was aimed at winning support for the type of socio-economic changes being initiated by the state, changes which could be interpreted as nothing less than a contemporary expression of an innate, though long dormant, national purposefulness and creativity which had been the hallmark of thirteenth century Sukhothai, the quintessential Thai state. In other words, the present government was seen as the heir to the original Thai tradition.

Whether it was a direct result of Wichit's influence or not, the term 'culture' began to assume increased significance in official discourse. The promulgation of the National Cultural Act in September 1940, which had essentially been devised as a means of enforcing the rules of conduct, language and dress set down in the State

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 131.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 144.

Conventions, was one of the first indications of this development. Subsequently, the word 'culture' seemed to be on everybody's lips. Phibun, for one, was particularly enamoured by the concept, and during the war years (1942-44), founded a National Institute of Culture which carried out a range of activities including such things as organizing mass marriage ceremonies and monitoring public associations.¹¹¹ The Institute was also responsible for staging countrywide festivities known as 'Cultural Fairs', which featured exhortations to rekindle the Sukhothai spirit, walking races, fashion parades, and exhibitions of Thai arts and crafts.¹¹²

In the post-war period, the state has maintained a keen interest in cultural matters for political purposes. During the 1950s for example, a Ministry of Culture (1952-1958) was established by Phibun in an attempt to create a new basis of support for himself within the bureaucracy. More recently, two new cultural bodies, The Office of the National Culture Commission, and the National Identity Board have been created within the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister's Office respectively. These are highly conservative institutions whose functions are essentially concerned with defining and deploying official Thai culture. The establishment of such organizations is an interesting development and one which reflects the abiding influence of Wichit and the work he undertook on behalf of the state during the 1930s and early 1940s.¹¹³

6.5. *Wichit, Irredentism and the Franco-Thai Conflict 1940-41*

As has been discussed above, Wichit emerged as the intellectual leader of the movement to recover the 'lost provinces' during the Phahon administration. In the early stages of the Phibun regime, he was instrumental in giving symbolic expression to the irredentist cause by successfully lobbying for the name of the country to be changed from Siam to Thailand. Subsequently the irredentist drive was to become the central focus of Thai political life, leading to a heightened national consciousness, and ultimately, to armed conflict with the French. The remainder of this chapter looks at the particular role Wichit played in these developments.

¹¹¹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 28 April 1943.

¹¹² *Bangkok Chronicle*, 8 May 1943, 28 May 1943, 6 September 1943.

¹¹³ Ministry of Education, *Organizational Structure Office of the National Culture Commission*, Bangkok, 1981.

Not long after the name of the country was changed, irredentist propaganda increased, and the French, whose possessions were the main target of this agitation, voiced their concern to the British claiming that the Thais 'had a five year plan for the recovery of the country's historic frontiers.'¹¹⁴ French fears about Thai territorial aspirations were, in fact, not new. In 1937, after learning of the Thai army map which showed Cambodia as being historically Thai territory, and hearing of Wichit's assertion that the Thai and Khmer were one and the same people, the French had warned the Phahon government against harbouring any designs on Cambodia. This warning, which was forcefully expressed in a Khmer language newspaper [and translated by the military in Bangkok] stated:

Siam wishes to follow in the wake of Italy which has Signor Mussolini as dictator. She has observed that Italy has recently conquered Abyssinia and feels an inclination to conquer some portions of the Khmer country and some of the Javanese [sic]. It is a matter for surprise that Siam is attempting to elevate herself to the same level as Italy. It would be better and more proper for her to condescend to lower herself to the level of Abyssinia. ... What is Siam ... a country as big as the palm of a hand... We should not be alarmed at all, as barking dogs seldom bite.¹¹⁵

Despite the contempt shown for the Thais in this broadside, some two years later, with the outbreak of war in Europe imminent, the government in Paris began seeking a non-aggression pact with Thailand in order to maintain the regional status quo. Initially their overtures were ignored, but in the latter part of 1939, as the international situation grew increasingly unpredictable, the Thai government, keen to project its neutralist stance as well as to allay French fears, decided to give serious consideration to the idea.¹¹⁶ A period of intense diplomatic negotiation followed, leading to the signing of a non-aggression pact between the two countries in Bangkok on 12 June 1940. Ratification of the pact was not immediate, however, this being dependent on the French making a minor re-adjustment to the Mekong River frontier which had been called for by the Thais since 1936.¹¹⁷ The setting up of a joint Franco-Thai committee to resolve the border issue was projected, but before any progress could be made France fell to Germany and a collaborationist regime was set up in Vichy towards the

¹¹⁴ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23595, 8 August 1939.

¹¹⁵ *B.T.W.M.*, 23 March 1938.

¹¹⁶ Charivat Santaputra, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1985: 180.

¹¹⁷ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Thailand's Case*, Bangkok, 1941: 40.

end of June. The changed situation set the stage for a sharp deterioration in Thai-French relations.

On the Thai side, it was felt that the developments in Europe would result in a weakening of French authority in Asia, something which could be exploited to Thailand's benefit. However, the realization of Thai hopes was complicated in July and August by the Japanese, who pressured the new French administration into allowing them to establish a presence in north-eastern Indochina to strengthen their position in the war against China. In return for these privileges the Japanese were to guarantee the overall territorial integrity of French Indochina.¹¹⁸ Thai concern about Japanese objectives was heightened even further at the end of September when Tokyo entered into an alliance with Germany and Italy which provided that Japan would be given a free hand to establish its mastery over Asia.¹¹⁹

The French, for their part, were still desirous of having the non-aggression pact ratified, although they showed little immediate interest in further negotiations with the Thais. In August 1940, after almost two months of inactivity, the Vichy government adopted a new strategy by urging the Thais to ratify the pact before any territorial re-adjustments were made. This initiative was not well received by the Thais who, spurred on by the perceived weakness of the French and the threat of a growing Japanese presence in Indochina, decided to increase the price for ratifying the non-aggression pact by calling on Vichy to return two areas opposite Luang Prabang and Pakse, both of which had been lost in 1904.¹²⁰ The French response was uncompromising: they demanded that the Thais ratify the pact without any territorial concessions whatsoever, and made it clear that any attempt to impinge on the sovereignty of Indochina would be met by force.

In the context of this hardening of attitudes on both sides, Wichit began to devote an increasing part of his energy to the territorial issue. This became evident towards the end of September 1940 when he visited a number of provinces in the Northeast, ostensibly on an inspection tour of important Thai historical sites, but which was really a fact-finding mission to help him devise new ways of promoting the irredentist cause. During these travels he visited *That Phanom*, an ancient temple in Nakon Phanom province located a short distance from the Mekong River. *That Phanom* was a centre of great religious importance in the area with large numbers of people from both Thailand

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* :195.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Charivat, 1985: 204.

and neighbouring French Laos regularly journeying to an annual festival at the temple to worship and make merit. Wichit, always the master of propaganda, saw *That Phanom* as a powerful cultural symbol that could be effectively used to mobilize local Thai and Lao support for the irredentist movement. On returning to Bangkok he suggested that state funds be devoted to the restoration and beautification of the site. His recommendation was readily accepted by the government, and early in October it was announced that 20,000 *baht* would be spent on the temple to increase the height of the chedi [stupa] by 30 metres and cover it with sufficient gold leaf to be clearly seen from the Lao side of the river.¹²¹ These plans were widely publicized in the press, helping the government appear in the positive role of religious benefactor.¹²²

No sooner had the plans to beautify *That Phanom* appeared in the press than Wichit, accompanied by a group of 22 students from the Department of Fine Arts, returned to the venerable Northeastern temple to take part in a large merit making ceremony. Following the completion of the festivities, the students were assigned to travel around the Northeast and perform some of Wichit's nationalist plays in an effort to 'plant Thai culture' throughout the region.¹²³ Wichit himself returned to Bangkok, and had special performances of his various historical plays staged for members of the military and civilian bureaucracy. He took advantage of these occasions to condemn the French, telling audiences that when he had seen the Mekong River on his recent travels it had made him think of the tears of their 'Thai brothers and sisters on the other side whose suffering would only come to an end with the return of the [lost] territory.'¹²⁴

Meanwhile, tensions along the Mekong river frontier began to rise, and a growing number of incidents, involving exchanges of gunfire, violations of airspace and the harassment of Thai nationals, were reported to have taken place.¹²⁵ During November

¹²¹ *Prachamit*, 11 October 1940. The changes made to the temple at the time were later seen as having caused the dramatic collapse of the main tower at the height of the monsoon season in 1975. *Phra That Phanom*, Mu'ang Boran, Bangkok, 1975: 171-172.

¹²² *Nikon*, 11 October 1940. The government's attempt to project itself as a patron of religion was also evidenced at the end of September 1940, when plans for a major new temple to be built at Laksi on the outskirts of Bangkok using a combination of state and public contributions were announced. In this project, essentially the contemporary expression of a traditional means through which monarchs sought legitimacy, Wichit was made responsible for mounting a nationwide campaign to solicit public donations for the construction. *Wat Phra Simahathat*, or the 'Democracy Monastery' as the temple was known in English, was to be a unique institution: a model of Thai religious architecture, a centre for world Buddhism, and the first place in Thailand where the country's two Buddhist sects, the Mahanikai and the Thammayut could live and work together. N.A. S.T. 0701.46/1.

¹²³ *Thai mai*, 11 October 1940.

¹²⁴ *Khao phap*, 19 October 1940.

¹²⁵ Wichit, 1941: 68-72.

1940 with diplomatic negotiations virtually suspended, sporadic fighting between the two sides broke out, although this did not immediately escalate into a more sustained conflict.¹²⁶ In this charged atmosphere refugees began fleeing from French territory into Thailand, no doubt influenced by the intense stream of irredentist propaganda coming out of Bangkok and the knowledge that the Thai government had decided to amend the Immigration Act allowing persons of the 'Thai race' into the country with a two year exemption on the normal entry requirements.¹²⁷

At this point, the Japanese, eager to advance their own political and military interests, became more deeply involved in the territorial dispute behind the scenes. As will be remembered, they had already indicated to the French that the territorial integrity of Indochina would be maintained. Late in November 1940, they started to work on the Thais in earnest by secretly approaching Phibun and offering to help advance his government's claims on the areas adjacent to Luang Prabang and Pakse in return for Thai co-operation in 'establishing a New Order in East Asia.'¹²⁸ While the Thais were highly suspicious of Japanese intentions, the tacit support they received from Tokyo virtually ensured that a showdown with the French was inevitable.

Throughout October and November local support for the irredentist cause intensified. Articles appeared in the press detailing French aggression against Siam during Chulalongkorn's reign, while other accounts, deriving information from Dodd's work, *The Tai Race, Elder Brother of the Chinese*, described the greatness and extensiveness of the Thai peoples. A sense of purposefulness seemed to grip the country. Numerous processions made up of university students, school children, tradesmen, labourers, public servants and members of the local Muslim and Chinese communities demonstrated in the streets of Bangkok pledging allegiance to the nation. Public campaigns to raise funds to assist the refugees from Indochina were mounted.¹²⁹ Similar fund raising campaigns and parades were also held in various provincial centres. While much of this activity was heavily orchestrated by the government, a good deal of it was not.¹³⁰ A notable case in point was the backing Phibun's administration

¹²⁶ Charivat, 1985: 231

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*: 205. Over a period of six months from September 1940 until early February 1941, more than 13,000 people were estimated to have fled Indochina seeking sanctuary in Thailand. *Bangkok Chronicle*, 10 February 1941.

¹²⁸ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/24752, 15 December 1940.

¹²⁹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 4 November 1940, 7 November 1940.

¹³⁰ A key force in organizing public demonstrations was the mysterious group calling itself 'Thai Blood'. This group was almost certainly linked closely to the state, perhaps it was within the army or may have even been directly connected to Wichit himself. The reasons for this latter

received from the Royal Palace Bureau at the end of October. The Bureau called on those individuals in receipt of a royal annual salary to contribute ten percent of this to the Minister of Defence (Phibun) for the purchase of arms.¹³¹ Considering the high degree of antipathy that existed between the Royal House and the government this was a particularly significant development, and indicated how important the irredentist movement had become in creating a sense of national unity and purpose.

Within this context of broad-based support for the government, Wichit became increasingly forthright in his public statements. At the beginning of November, he cited what he claimed to be the opinion of Phibun, saying that Thailand must become a power or perish. He told an assembled group of military instructors and their students:

When the present war was over, there would be no small nations in the world; all would be merged into big ones. So there are only two ways left for us to choose, either become a Power or be swallowed up by some other Power. If we got back our lost territories, then we could have the hope of becoming a Power...¹³²

Shortly afterwards, as incidents along the Indochina border continued, Wichit, who had become Chairman of the Radio Broadcasting Committee of Thailand, was reported to have made a radio broadcast calling on the Thais to go to war against the French.¹³³ He also reiterated his earlier claims that the Thais and Khmers were of the same stock. French radio broadcasts from Saigon responded in turn, dismissing Wichit's racial theories as nonsense and warning the Thais against any precipitate action. A full-scale 'war of the airwaves' erupted with each side furiously attacking the other. Wichit, along with a number of other Thai announcers including Prince Wan seemed to relish the opportunity to denounce the French and stir up the local populace

supposition are as follows: First, the name 'Thai Blood' was taken from one of his irredentist-style songs of the same name written some two years earlier. Secondly, in a leaflet calling for a mass show of support for the Phibun regime, the public was urged to dress well and behave in accordance with the State Convention on appearance, which, as we know was formulated by Wichit. Thirdly, the group, was agitating for the Thais to take control of French Cambodia, a point policy which echoed Wichit's own stance. *B.T.W.M.*, 28 November 1938, *Prachamit*, 19 October 1940, Charivat, 1985: 207.

131 *Ibid.* : 209.

132 *Bangkok Chronicle*, 2 November 1940.

133 Charivat, 1985: 232.

as well as Lao and Cambodian listeners in Indochina.¹³⁴ In one of his more colourful broadcasts towards the end of November 1940, Wichit outlined the brutality and oppression that was found under the French in Indochina. Drawing information from the writings of Andre Viollis, a French observer, he claimed the French used all types of torture to control their Asian subjects. Victims were tied by their wrists and suspended from poles for long periods of time, some were forced to drink kerosene, others were set on fire. Coiled wires were inserted into the penises of men and then pulled out violently. Women were tied to the ground with their legs apart and red ants released into their vaginas. French Arab soldiers were also said to have raped and murdered local women. Wichit argued that the situation was intolerable, declaiming that while 'the body of Thailand was safe, its arms and legs (i.e. Laos and Cambodia) were bound and abused.'¹³⁵ In closing, Wichit proclaimed the moral superiority of the Thais over the French, and re-affirmed the state's territorial cause in popular Buddhist terms:

Our Lord Buddha overcame the Evil [*Man*] he encountered and we, his disciples, will also defeat the Evil One. Let the power of the Triple Gems [*Phra Si Ratanatrai*] help our brothers and sisters join our family to enjoy everlasting happiness.¹³⁶

In mid-December 1940, the establishment of a group known as 'The Free Khmers Party' in Bangkok, dedicated to the overthrow of the French seemed to indicate that local Khmers were responding positively to such rhetoric. However, the degree to which this was a truly nationalist organization is doubtful since its leader, an expatriate Khmer by the name of *Phra* Bhises Panich, praised the 'righteous and good morality of the policy of the Thai administration', and was wholly supportive of Wichit's idea that Cambodia should be a part of Thailand.¹³⁷ A more interesting development that took place at this time was the announcement that the Thais would support the Vietnamese nationalists in their fight with the French by founding an "Independent Indochina Party". It was planned that this organization would channel arms and other assistance to

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang, Khwam samphan thang chu'a chat rawang Thai kap Khamen* [Racial Links Between the Thai and Khmer], *Pathakatha lae kham banyai* [Lectures and Talks], Vol. 2, Soemwit Bannakhan, Bangkok, 1973 (1-25): 23.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*: 25.

¹³⁷ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 20 December 1940, 23 December 1940.

the Vietnamese, obviously with the hope that they would tie up French forces away from the Thai-Indochina frontier.¹³⁸

In early January 1941, the intermittent skirmishing that had taken place during the previous months finally developed into something more akin to a conventional conflict. Almost immediately, the Bangkok press was claiming great victories on all fronts. This was only partially true. While the army did indeed advance and capture some French territory in Western Cambodia, the navy performed rather poorly, the most notable event being the pummelling it received off Sichang Island in Chonburi province on 17 January 1941, which resulted in the loss of over 800 lives.¹³⁹

Hostilities, however, did not continue for long, and at the end of January both sides accepted the offer of Japanese mediation in the dispute and a ceasefire was effected. In early February, Phibun sent a delegation led by Prince Wan to conduct negotiations with the French in Tokyo.¹⁴⁰ Initially neither side showed any inclination to make any concessions to the other, and as the talks dragged on the likelihood of further hostilities began to loom. At this point Wichit himself became involved in negotiation process, when he was sent to Tokyo on a special mission by Phibun to restart the stalled discussions.¹⁴¹ No explanation was given in the press as to why Wichit was chosen for this important task, but it was possibly due to the close links he had forged with the Japanese during the previous years both as head of the Department of Fine Arts and as a member of the *Japan Siam Association*.¹⁴²

While the negotiations did in fact begin to proceed once again shortly after his arrival, Wichit's dream of reclaiming all of French Laos and Cambodia were frustrated by the Japanese who forced both sides to accept a compromise agreement. In the final settlement, the French were required to return the two enclaves opposite Luang Prabang and Pakse in Laos to the Thais, together with the rich rice growing province of Battambang, a large area of Siemreap and one third of Kampong Thom in Cambodia. For their part the Thais had to pay the French an indemnity of approximately 1 million pounds sterling and accept the demilitarization of the Thai-Indochina frontier.¹⁴³

138 *Bangkok Chronicle*, 21 December 1940.

139 Charivat, 1985: 231.

140 *Ibid.*: 237-238.

141 *B.T.W.M.*, 28 February 1941.

142 According to one British report Wichit's links with the Japanese were of a highly sinister nature, it being claimed that he had played an active role in a Japanese plot to smuggle arms into Burma during 1939. *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23587, 17 October 1939.

143 *Ibid.*: 237-240.

Although the territorial gains made by the Thais were far less than he had hoped for, Wichit did not show any outward disappointment with the settlement, and following his return home strongly encouraged the belief that Thailand had won a great victory. This view was avidly promoted by the state and elaborate celebrations featuring military displays were mounted throughout the country at the end of April. The outcome of the war was a great personal triumph for Phibun who was elevated in rank to become the country's first Field Marshall. In addition, one of the returned territories, the province of Siemreap, was renamed Phibunsongkhram in his honour.¹⁴⁴ Immediately afterwards, Wichit, ever anxious to support his leader, wrote a special anthem for the new province which portrayed the Prime Minister cum Field Marshall not as an ordinary individual, but as a *phu mi bun*, a charismatic type of leader that had long been recognized in the Thai cultural-historical context as one possessing magical power and the political right to rule.¹⁴⁵ A rough translation of the anthem reads as follows:

'Phibunsongkhram', is the name we have bestowed on our new territory. Let us give the highest honour to a hero whom heaven has sent to regain Thai glory
We are so grateful for the return of our land that we have called it 'Phibunsongkhram', 'Phibunsongkhram'
Please, let it prosper so one and all will be content and joyful ¹⁴⁶

This particular work of Wichit reflected the euphoria that swept through Thailand in the period following the border war. As a result of the success of the Thais over the French, the Phibun government achieved a degree of political legitimacy and popular support unmatched by any administration since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. On a broader level, the campaign against the French, largely engineered by Wichit, had given rise to a real sense of nationhood in Thailand. While writers may talk of a Thai nation at earlier times, nowhere does one find such a fusion of 'will, culture

¹⁴⁴ *Bangkok Chronicle*, 28 July 1941, 29 July 1941; Wyatt, 1984: 256; Charnvit, 1974: 50 notes that the name was changed from Siemreap to Phibunsongkhram not only to honour Phibun, but also due to the fact that Siemreap meant 'the Defeat of the Siamese [*Siem* = Siam and *reap* = defeat], a name which was rather inappropriate for a new Siamese province.'

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of the concept of *phu mi bun* see Charnvit Kasetsiri, 'Kabot phrai samai Ayuthaya kap khwam khit phu mi bun Phra Si Ari Phra Malai' [Peasant Rebellions in the Ayuthaya Period and the Concepts of Phu mi bun Phra Si Ari Phra Malai], *Warasan Thammasat*, July-September 1978: 7-9.

¹⁴⁶ N.A. S.T. 0701.1/8. Phibun was rather embarrassed by the degree of adulation expressed in the Wichit's original draft of the song and had him replace the words 'a hero whom heaven has sent' with 'one who was born on 14 July' [Phibun's birthday].

and polity' as during this period when various groups and social classes consciously identified themselves as Thai and united as one people, one nation.

6.6 Conclusion

The present chapter has examined different aspects of Wichit's work on behalf of the Phibun regime prior to World War II. We have seen that as a member of various committees, Wichit played a leading role in the state's attempts to assert itself and impose a new, uniform, mass order on Thai society. In essence, he was responsible for elaborating an official notion of identity that both drew on his conception of the Thai past, in particular that of the Sukhothai era, and aspects of 'civilization' and 'progress' found in contemporary Western society. It has also been shown that through his promotion of the irredentist movement, Wichit was able to create an important basis of political legitimacy for the state and in the process facilitate the emergence of a unified Thai nation.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

This study has examined various aspects of the work of *Luang* Wichit Wathakan in the pre-World War II period, with particular attention being given to his role in the development of official Thai nationalism. In broad terms, it has been shown that during the years 1932-1941 Wichit emerged as the dominant intellectual figure in Thailand, exerting a profound influence on society. His assumption of this role was largely due to the key position he assumed in the modern, increasingly centralized state apparatus following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. As Director General of the Department of Fine Arts and as a member of different policy-formulating committees, Wichit's ideas received official sanction. By means of state directives, and by using the tightly-controlled media and the education system his ideas were disseminated both among the factionalized bureaucracy and the general public as a part of the post-1932 regime's attempt to win political legitimacy while creating a modern, purposeful Thai nation.

Parallels have been drawn between the methods employed by Wichit and those found in European and Japanese fascist regimes of the 1930s. The similarity was not lost on British Minister Crosby who once described Wichit as a 'pocket Goebbels'.¹ It is a fitting comparison. Both represent a type of individual unique to the twentieth century; what one scholar has described as 'the professional propagandist ... an expert in a new sense,... a manipulator or words cum organizer, a man who thinks not in terms of individuals, but of collectives such as the public, the movement, the Party.'² Wichit, like Goebbels, provided a new conceptual framework for the way society was to be conceived and governed.

Bernard Lewis has commented upon the use of history for purposes of political legitimization: 'attaching one's regime to some earlier ... recognized predecessor,... serves the purpose of providing not merely dignity but also authority.'³ This is

¹ *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/22207, 9 May 1938. Elsewhere Crosby once referred to Wichit as 'A strange personality with a touch of dramatic and musical genius. Otherwise a complete moron.' *Great Britain*, F.O. 371/23590, 2 January 1939.

² Bramsted, E.K., *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda 1925-1945*. The Cresset Press, Michigan, 1965.

³ Lewis, B., *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1975: 62.

precisely the technique Wichit employed. Influenced by Western historiography and by ideas developed by Vajiravudh, Wichit conjured up a martial image for the Thais, portraying them as natural fighters who had always been willing to sacrifice themselves in order to maintain their independence, that is, their Thainess.

It was an image which ran through much of his work and was central to his influential plays. These productions are a striking example of art for socio-political purposes. In contrast to the post-war radical art movement which sought to question the Thai social order, Wichit's dramatic work was unequivocally committed to the state. It served a similar purpose to that produced by Vajiravudh in an earlier era, but surpassed that of the king in aiming to forge a popular historical consciousness in which no particular social class could claim a monopoly on Thainess. Ostensibly, anybody could be a national exemplar whether they were king or commoner, male or female, on the condition that they were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their nation. Clearly, however, in the context of the deep political divisions that emerged following the overthrow of the monarchy, not to mention the increasingly belligerent international environment of the time, the virtues embodied in Wichit's model of the quintessential Thai were more readily associated with the military than any other section of the society—who better to safeguard internal unity and national independence? Thus, in contrast to Vajiravudh who had set in place the idea that it was the king, as the 'chief warrior', embodied and guaranteed the existence of the Thai nation alone, Wichit now cast the military in this role. In short, the military-dominated state and the nation were equated as one and the same.

The ideological links between Wichit and Vajiravudh were perceived at the time: a newspaper article written in 1936 claimed that both Wichit and Vajiravudh had an identical palm print indicating similar destinies or intellectual gifts.⁴ Wichit nonetheless displayed a marked ambivalence towards the throne in his work, obliquely criticizing much of the royal past as decadent, lacking dynamism and detrimental to national progress. His glorification of the monarchy extended only to those kings who had led the Thais in 'national liberation struggles' such as Naresuan and Taksin. While contemporary official history has assiduously promoted the view that the throne has always been central in defining Thai identity and nationhood, it is obvious that this was not the case during the period under scrutiny. In the conception of Thainess developed and promoted by *Luang* Wichit during the 1930s and 1940s, the monarchy played but a marginal role.

According to Wichit, the Thais were, at heart, not only a heroic, martial race but an economically self-reliant one. This latter notion was designed to give support to the state's attempts to gain control over an economy which was largely dominated by

Chinese and European interests. As has been discussed in Chapters Four and Six, Wichit related the economic sphere to the cultural realm; he stressed that aspect of Buddhism which implied independence, and reiterated that all individuals were responsible for themselves and their own well-being. In portraying individual economic responsibility in relation to religion, Wichit was attempting to fuse bourgeois ideas of self-reliance, crucial to the developing market economy, with a central element of indigenous Thai culture. From this perspective, an essential part of being Thai meant having a keen interest and involvement in the realm of business and industry [areas which had long been dominated by Chinese and European interests]. Wichit, in fact, contended that there was historical support for the relation between Thainess and free market ideology in what he saw as the pristine Buddhist Thai state of Sukhothai where the people were said to be hard-working entrepreneurs, who were permitted to trade as they pleased. While consciously supporting state policy, this rather fanciful interpretation of the past served a psychological function by 'easing the difficult process of borrowing ideas...from an alien and stronger civilization. To have to borrow from others was galling and damaging to national pride. The hurt was much eased, and indeed even transformed into a pleasure, if it could be shown that what was borrowed was not really foreign at all but was something native....'⁵

Wichit was also deeply involved in modifying social behaviour, in order to have it better reflect the civilized, progressive path in which the nation was being directed. Thus as a result of his work, important symbolic forms of behaviour in the West such as respect for the national flag and the national anthem were promoted as an essential part of being Thai. Similarly, Thais were encouraged to adopt Western style dress which was equated with progress and civilization. It will be remembered that when this policy was questioned on nationalistic grounds, Wichit made use of historical precedent to justify the change. Trousers, for example, were considered to be indigenous Thai dress during the *Nan Chao* period and to begin wearing them once again was merely depicted as the taking up of long lost tradition.

The ideas Wichit's developed virtually mapped out the dimensions of Thai social reality; state control over education and the media ensured that alternative views would not be freely disseminated. By defining and helping to deploy an official discourse aimed at promoting unified purpose and action, Wichit played a major role in determining who would have a legitimate voice in Thai society, and who would not. From the state's point of view, to be a part of the Thai community meant an acceptance of particular conceptions and behaviour. Resistance or non-compliance effectively disqualified an individual from being considered Thai, making them an outsider, an outcast, a non-being. Although the formal governmental institutions which had been put

in place after the overthrow of the monarchy suggested a representative form of politics, state-promoted nationalism, based on specific concepts of history, culture, civilization and progress, became the guiding principle of Thai political and social life in the pre-war era.

Key elements of Wichit's thought came to find application in the build up to the border conflict with the French; the popular broad-based movement to regain the 'lost' territories was in many respects the manifestation of his conception of the Thai as a martial and independence-loving race. Diverse social groups within the national boundaries, in response to state prompting, had come to express a common support for the government in an affirmation of new-found identity. Indeed, to not support government policy one would have been 'un-Thai'. The Thai 'nation' which had been avidly talked about from the latter part of the nineteenth century; had now become a tangible reality.⁶

The essence of Wichit's thought was thus established prior to the Second World War; its latter evolution was largely a matter of adaptation to changing circumstances. Shortly after his release from prison on war criminal charges in 1946, he began writing in earnest, and again turned to the promotion of nationalism which he believed to be more suited to Thailand than the fledgling democracy of the time.⁷ Wichit had not lost his particular affinity for the type of intense nationalism developed in the pre-war totalitarian regimes of Italy, Germany, and Japan despite the all the horrors they had visited on humanity; now he perceived it as the only hope in controlling the spread of communism in Thailand.⁸ The threat of this happening, he felt, had come about as a result of the civilian government's abrogation of the Anti-Communist Act in October 1946, its recognition of the Soviet Union and its tolerant attitude towards the increasingly militant labour movement.⁹ However, with the reemergence of the military in Thai politics after 1947, Wichit's nationalist ideas were again to find favour and remain a potent force in contemporary society to this day.

⁶ Seen from another perspective, this represented the ultimate success of the process of internal colonization, launched during Chulalongkorn's reign, in which the culture of the ruling Bangkok elite was promoted as 'the legitimate' culture for the peoples living within the Siamese polity.

⁷ During the war, Wichit became Minister for Foreign Affairs and was latter sent to Japan as the Thai ambassador. At the end of the war he was arrested by the Americans and sent back to Thailand where he was to stand trial on war crimes charges, and for various matters relating to financial impropriety. A number of other individuals were also to be charged as war criminals including Phibun, Prayun and *Phra* Sarasat Phonlakhon. However, when Pridi replaced Khuang Aphaiwong as Prime Minister in March 1946, all the charges were dropped and the accused given their freedom. See *Democracy*, 12, 25 January 1946, 23, 25 March 1946.

⁸ Wichit Wathakan, *Luang*, 'Chatniyom' [Nationalism] in *Tu thong*, October, 1970 (44-85): 50.

⁹ It was in this period that he was to write: 'If communist, Thailand would cease to be Thai (i.e free) and fall under Russian control.', *Ibid.*: 59.

Areas for Additional Research

Social commentator and critic Sulak Sivaraksa has compared the influence of *Luang Wichit's* work on the contemporary Thailand to that of the ancient cosmological treatise *Traiphum Phra Ru'ang* [The Three World's of *Phra Ru'ang*] in pre-modern Siam.¹⁰ Indeed, Wichit created a modern cosmology, 'a classificatory system ... by which ... society is not only understood but governed.'¹¹ While there are many areas meriting further research two of the most significant are related to the reemergence of the monarchy to a central position in Thai life, and the part played by nationalism in developing the Thai economy.

It seems clear that under Sarit, Wichit once again assumed a central role in the shaping of the bureaucratic state. This is a view supported by Thak Chaloemtiarana who has suggested that Wichit was very influential in forming Sarit's political ideas.¹² Such a contention is born out by the Field Marshal himself who was known to have called Wichit 'my golden cabinet' [*tu thong*], his treasure chest.¹³ Perhaps the most crucial development during the Sarit era was the reemergence of the monarchy to prominence. The rapprochement between the palace and the military was of great mutual benefit to both parties; the regime was given legitimacy through its association with royalty, while the throne became influential in Thai society once again. Although it is more than likely that Wichit was involved in this process, the real nature and extent of his involvement is unknown. Future studies of Wichit's work could examine this question and hopefully shed greater light onto the construction of contemporary Thai nationalist ideology.

The linkage between nationalism and the economy in Thailand is another area which would prove fruitful for additional research. That the economic aspect of the nationalist ideology articulated by Wichit has not lost its utility for the contemporary state is suggested by a recent publication of the Public Relations Department, *Fact Sheets on Thailand*,¹⁴ which cites the laissez-faire trading arrangements of the Sukhothai period as proof that 'free enterprise has been part of Thailand's philosophy for many generations.' Clearly, the legitimacy of the contemporary economic system is still grounded in the mythic past created by Wichit in the 1930s. Future studies could perhaps attempt to provide a detailed examination of the relationship between nationalism and the economy and thereby come to a greater understanding of the particular nature of contemporary Thai capitalism.

¹⁰ Sulak, 1984: 16.

¹¹ Reynolds, 1984: 22.

¹² Thak, 1979: 179-186.

¹³ Author's personal interview Khunying Praphaphan Watanakan, 21 January 1986.

¹⁴ The Government Public Relations Department, *Fact Sheets on Thailand*, September 1985.

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