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The Feudal Photograph of a Democratic *Dhammaraja*

Secularism and Sacrality in Thai Royal Imagery

Since the death of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016, his image has continued to play a defining role in the articulation of Thainess (*khwampenthai*) in reference to the country's "authentic" premodern past and its teleological "progress." This essay addresses several paradoxes in this image and its relationship to Thailand's embattled political history. How might the royal photograph be both sacred and secular? How are premodern understandings of kingship, including the taboo on the monarchy's public representation, reconciled with the contemporary hypervisibility of the monarchy? And what implications do references to the premodern past have for debates over defining democracy in Thailand?

On 13 October 2016, I, along with people around the world, watched the online video streams from Bangkok.[1] For two days rumors had circulated about the declining health of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, reigned 1946–2016). Crowds of people gathered at Siriraj Hospital where the monarch had resided since 2014. After hours of speculation, a spokesperson from the Royal Household appeared on television and online newscasts to confirm the king's passing. In accordance with the conventions of royal language (*ratchasap*), which exists in a diglossic relationship with conventional Thai, the announcer's speech drew parallels between the king and Vedic gods, including Indra (the ruler of the highest heaven in Buddhist cosmology). The king had not "passed away," he had traveled to Indra's abode (*sadet suwannakhot*).[2] The significance of these references is in their comparability to the idealized *chakkraphat* (from the Sanskrit *cakravartin*, "wheel-turning monarch" or "universal king") (Reynolds and Reynolds 161). The use of microcosmic/macrocosmic equivalences

to legitimize royal power is found throughout Southeast Asia (for example, Geertz). Yet the notion of a universal king also finds resonance with perceptions of King Bhumibol as a unifying symbol of Thai national identity. The outpouring of grief online in the year following the king's passing might appear to confirm this hegemony. Could this be the realization of the *cakravartin* in cyberspace?

The ubiquitous love for the monarchy is perhaps, in more ways than one, virtual (Jackson "Markets"). Thailand's monarchy is protected by the country's lèse-majesté laws, which are enforced with harsh penalties for any perceived or actual criticism (Haberkorn 280). The consequential restrictions on public expression have reinforced the political significance of images. This situation was enhanced by the unprecedented visibility of King Bhumibol, which was facilitated by a strategic use of visual technologies, including photography, cinema, and television, a situation that finds resonance with the status of images in Thai Theravada Buddhism. As Christine Gray explains, Theravada Buddhism "contains images that are regarded *as* language; its verbal language is *informed* by images; and it has its own interpretive language for speaking *about* images" (45–46). In this context, culture is not merely something that obscures the true workings of power; it has the potential to constitute power itself (Thompson 179).[3]

This essay seeks to explain the functions of royal images in Thailand that simultaneously evoke the authenticity of a premodern past while departing radically from the taboo preventing the public circulation of royal portraits, which persisted until King Mongkut's (Rama IV, reigned 1851–68) decision to have his photograph taken in 1855. H. G. Quaritch Wales linked this taboo to the Indian Vedic text, *The Laws of Manu*. As he quoted, "*like the sun*, he [the king] burns eyes and hearts; *nor can anybody on earth even gaze on him*" (*Siamese State* 35 [my italics]). As John Clark suggests, this indicates that the monarch's image was iconic: standing in *for* him instead of being a representation *of* him ("Icon"). From the early Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), Buddha images were made in the guise of kings and adorned in full royal regalia (Poshyananda 336–37). This supports the hypothesis that pantheons of royal ancestor images existed during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods (circa 1780s–1850s), which were only accessible to the king and worshipped by him on a daily basis.[4] A Persian visitor to Ayutthaya between 1685–87 observed this practice: "Then he [the king] goes to the temple and prostrates himself before the idols and the carved images of his relatives living and dead" (O'Kane and Ibrahim 139–40).

Fig. 1. Portrait of King Mongkut, Rama IV (r. 1851–1868) and Queen Consort, Princess Rambong Bhamaraghiramy in Costume and with Ornaments, 1857, photoprint, 5 x 7 inches, mounted in a frame 8 x 11 inches. Reproduction by Spieler's Photograph Rooms, Philadelphia. From original daguerreotype taken in 1855 and sent to President Franklin Pierce in 1856. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution [NAA INV 04858700].

Rather than suggest that these preexisting belief systems were overturned during Mongkut's modernization of Thai Theravada Buddhism, I argue that understandings of premodern kingship have been pivotal to the ascendency of Thai royal images in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[5] In this period, one of the most influential models of leadership has been the *dhammaraja* (in Pali, "king of [according to] *dharma*"), which is closely related to the Sanskrit concept of *cakravartin*.[6] In Thailand, the *dhammaraja* is thought to be epitomized by the rulers of the Sukhothai kingdom (1238–1428), whose right to rule was determined by their *karmic* inheritance (Tambiah *World* 86–89).

The *dhammaraja* is the "fountain of justice" (97), possessing *barami* (in Pali, *pāramī*, "moral perfection," "charisma"), which legitimizes his position and ensures the well-being of his subjects. In accordance with his positive influence, the righteous king could be a *phothisat* (in Pali, *bodhisatta*, "buddha-to-be"), while his ineffectiveness could evidence his unsuitability for the role.

In Thailand, this model has been anachronistically interpreted as indicating an accord between premodern ideals of Buddhist kingship and democratic principles insofar as it implies that royal legitimacy is based on a monarch's ability to provide justice and abundance for his subjects. This is supported by a cosmological treatise compiled in the fourteenth century by the Sukhothai king, Lithai (Maha Thammaracha I), from Pali sources. Entitled *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* (*Traiphumikatha*) or *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, it includes descriptions of a righteous king ruling over a bountiful land (Reynolds and Reynolds 153). Moreover, the text locates the origins of Buddhist kingship in the "election" of the figure of Mahāsammata (in Pali,"Great Elect"), a great man of *karmic* merit (36).[7] However, if this was a democratic form of leadership it was an ambivalent one, considering that the "elected" *dhammaraja* was always predestined to rule (Thompson 53).

From the 1950s on, the idea of the elected king was used by Thai royalists to argue that Thai kingship is compatible with popular participation in politics. As Michael K. Connors has posited, this has ensured that Thai democracy has come to connote "governments which rule by the consent of the people *when they* [the government] *are able to make the right choices*, where . . . the king plays a guardianship role, and holds ultimate sovereignty" (145 [original italics]). The king has thus become a "mediator of democracy" in the sense that his subjects' will is thought to be manifested through his actions. As Connors indicates, this relationship is well encapsulated in the neologism *ratchaprachasamasai* (royal-people-mutuality) (144).

Because these royalist claims function rhetorically as prolepses, the influence of the *dhammaraja* model on modern and contemporary royal imagery cannot simply be seen as a revival of premodern concepts without any form of relativization.[8] Consequently, alongside scholars of the European Middle Ages who imagine the medieval as an idea, I am less interested in evaluating the accuracy of these references to the past than in locating how and why certain aspects of premodern Southeast Asian history have come to exist as paradigmatic examples of modern kingship and its representation.[9] In other words, drawing from Kathleen Biddick's vision of a "non-foundational medieval studies," I

hope to "articulate rather than re-present" these pasts as "historical categor[ies]" (84–85).

A Medieval Thailand?

The anachronistic nature of Bhumibol's resacralization presents a number of questions. Does the veneration of his image represent the persistence of premodern concepts of kingship? Or is it an example of the "magic-like effects produced by the cultural logic of late capitalism and associated commodified media" (Jackson "Markets" 364)? How can royal photographs act simultaneously as secular representations of the Thai state and as sacred images?[10] However, such questions also imply a limited view in which tradition (manifested in "eastern" religiosity) and modernity (manifested in "western" rationality) operate as competing forces that gain ascendency or suffer demise depending on historical circumstances.[11] On the one hand, viewing the monarchy's representation as a process of rationalization that displaced previous visual systems fails to account for endogenous relativizations of exogenous concepts and visual technologies.[12] It also presupposes a Eurocentric perspective within which "western" rationality becomes the endpoint of a teleological progression. On the other hand, understanding these images as incomparable plays into conservative royalist-nationalist histories that reinforce the country's "exceptional" status as a non-colonized Southeast Asian nation, and perpetuates narratives that posit the country's monarchy as having a central role in guaranteeing that "unique" position (Hong 322).[13]

Instead, the answer might be untangled through reference to discussions concerning theoretical intersections between medievalism and postcolonialism. Given its noncolonial status, Thailand participates in these conversations with discomfort. Nevertheless, the medieval, as a period negatively defined in contrast to a secular modernity, helps to bring into focus the motivations behind the Siamese monarchy's early self-representations. As John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer have observed, European colonial empires were established by overlaying geography with a teleological vision of history. Here, the colonized "primitive" was understood as "exist[ing] in a past state opposed to the European present" (Dagenais and Greer 435). The time of the medieval past and the colonized subject was thus "a past which belongs to, but which can never be granted full citizenship in, the nation of Modernity" (431).

King Mongkut's adoption of photography can be situated in this context. Observing Britain's defeat of China in 1842 and the colonial

presence in Southeast Asia, the Siamese elite opened up to trade, establishing treaties with a number of colonial powers. Mongkut's photographs became important as a way for him to develop relationships with these "civilized" countries, establish himself as a member of an elite class of modern leaders, and distinguish himself from the "noncivilized" local rulers of colonized Southeast Asian nations (Peleggi *Lords* 16). In the court of his successor King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868–1910), this distinction was signaled by a fashion for accoutrements of European civilization, termed *siwilai* ("civilized") in Thai (Winichakul "The Quest" 528–49). While possessing a camera and being photographed was, in itself, *siwilai*, photography also gained importance as a way of demonstrating possession of other *siwilai* characteristics, including dress and posture. Situated within Mongkut's broader dismissal of "irrational" religious practices (Jory *Thailand's Theory* 122–25), the quality of *siwilai* was seen to evidence Siam's "superiority . . . as the traditional imperial power in the region" (Winichakul "The Quest" 529).

Yet the Siamese elite's partial adoption of European Enlightenment ideals could be seen as conflicting with the institution of the absolute monarchy.[14] This contradiction was not lost on a group of princes and royal officials, who, in 1885, petitioned King Chulalongkorn to limit the monarchy's powers in order to ensure the country's noncolonial status (Jory "Republicanism" 99–101). In his response, Chulalongkorn legitimized his rule by contrasting himself with European monarchies; he was not "a [king] who [had] to be pressured to moderate his authority, like those kings (*phrachao phaendin*) in Europe one reads about in history" (76–77). Using the term *phrachao phaendin* ("lord of the land"), Chulalongkorn implicitly drew analogies between European feudalism and the *sakdina* (literally, "power over the fields") system of social hierarchy based on land and labor, which was prevalent during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods. While Chulalongkorn clearly used this comparison to distinguish his rule from that of a feudal monarch, from the 1950s on, correlations between the *sakdina* system and feudalism were also emphasized by Thai Marxist writers, including Jit Phoumisak (Reynolds and Hong 85).[15] However, in contrast to Chulalongkorn's framing of himself as a modern monarch, these scholars argued that vestiges of the *sakdina* system remained an influence on Thai politics and society.

In 1833, the future King Mongkut discovered a stone lintel with an inscription that described the Sukhothai kingdom. The stone, dated to about 1292, is apparently the first record of the Thai alphabet and depicts a kingdom ruled by a benevolent and paternal king:

> [I]f any commoner in the land has a grievance . . . which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy; he goes and strikes the bell which the king has hung there; King Ramkhamhaeng, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides it justly for him. (qtd in Baker, Streckfuss, and Ouyyanont 22)

This inscription, and the Sukhothai kingdom more generally, served the purpose of reconciling the contradictions between the absolute monarchy and modernity as manifested in the adoption of *siwilai*. For example, in King Vajiravudh's (Rama VI, reigned 1910–25) book describing his trip to the Sukhothai archaeological site, he explained, "[O]ur nation is not a newly-created one, nor is it 'primitive,' or as would be said in English 'uncivilised'" (quoted in Krairiksh 21). Paradoxically, it seemed that by referencing King Ramkhamhaeng's thirteenth-century model of kingship, Siam's monarchs could prove themselves truly modern.

Evidencing the *Dhammaraja*

While Sukhothai remained an "obsession" for King Vajiravudh, it also contained the seeds of the monarchy's downfall (Winichakul "Siam's" 33). In response to calls for wider political participation, Vajiravudh fashioned his image as a "citizen king": an idealized model of national identity to be emulated by his subjects (Jory "Republicanism" 108). This model was communicated to his population through the king's photograph, which was displayed in offices and homes and played important roles in national celebrations. By 1918, all police stations were instructed to have one Buddha image and one suitably displayed photograph of the king (Suwannakij 180).

An image, printed in the *Bangkok Daily Mail* to celebrate the Allied victory in World War I, epitomizes the relativization of premodern concepts of kingship and Siam's *siwilai* status as a modern nation. In the image, Vajiravudh is shown in military uniform, riding on a *garuda* (in Thai, *khrut*), which he had adopted as a royal emblem in 1911. The *garuda*, the vehicle of Vishnu (in Sanskrit, *Nārāyaṇa*; in Thai, *Phra Narai*), draws an equivalence between the king and the god. Yet this invocation of divine kingship is tempered by Vajiravudh's appearance as the leader of a "civilized" country existing among a community of comparable nations, symbolized by the flags that surround him. Thus, in many ways, this image represented Vajiravudh as the paradigmatic *cakravartin*. While his position among a community of rulers might appear to undermine his omnipotent status, in fact he "represents [his]

Fig. 2. Poster of King Vajiravudh, Rama VI (r. 1910–1925) printed to celebrate the end of WWI, 1919. Reprinted in Anake Nawigamune, *A Century of Thai Graphic Design*, Bangkok: River Books, 1999, p. 12. Image courtesy of River Books, Bangkok.

specific local territory in its universal dimension" (Thompson 44). It is this dialectic reconciliation of the secular and sacred within the public image of the monarch that would become the quintessential function of King Bhumibol's photographic image.

Yet despite Vajiravudh's efforts to reconcile the royal institution with secular modernity, he was ultimately unsuccessful. Previously, it was unimaginable for a non-royal person to participate in royal rituals. Under the relativized *dhammaraja* model, however, literate commoners

could adopt the accoutrements of *siwilai* that now formed the basis of royal legitimacy (Veal). In a refutation of the monarchy's use of the *dhammaraja* model to prove their modernity, by the mid-1920s Siamese journalists were making use of the term *feudalism* (*lathi fiwdalit, fudan sitthem*) to describe Vajiravudh's court and referred to examples, including the French Revolution, as models for its future (Copeland 64–65). This indicates that *civility* and *modernity* were the terms that constituted the battle for legitimacy. By the time King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, reigned 1925–35) ascended the throne, the monarchy's role was irrevocably changed. In the *Declaration of the People's Party Number 1*, released on 24 June 1932 when a military coup overthrew the absolute monarchy and established a constitutional monarchy, the king was no longer a *dhammaraja* but a lord (*chao*).[16]

When King Bhumibol inherited the throne after his brother King Ananda's (Rama VIII, reigned 1935–46) death in 1946 from a gunshot wound, the monarchy's political power was limited. The nine-year-old Ananda had become king following Prajadhipok's abdication in 1935 and remained overseas for the majority of his reign, with the country ruled by the People's Party in his absence. The focus on Sukhothai persisted throughout this period in the writings of Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898–1962) who, in using the *dhammaraja* model to legitimize the "paternal" leadership style of the new, non-royal, military government, also inadvertently reinforced a "flattering 'tradition'" for the now-limited Thai kingship (Copeland 8; Barmé 60–61; Reynolds "The Plot" 321).[17] In the 1940s and 1950s the constitutional nature of the *dhammaraja* model was articulated in the writings of royalist scholars, including Prince Dhani Nivat, Phya Anuman Rajadhon, and Kukrit Pramoj, in order to advance their own position and that of the monarchy (Dhani Nivat 91–106; Anuman Rajadhon 1–10; Van Beek 46–50). This re-association of the ideals of the *dhammaraja* model with the monarchy alone meant that a photograph of Prajadhipok signing the country's first constitution in 1932 could be transformed, by the 1980s, from documentation of his being forced to "bear witness to the transitional moment that lowered [his] status" into evidence of the monarchy's role as "protector of democracy" (Chotpradit 24).

In this context, the early visual representations of King Bhumibol's reign were an attempt to build perceptions of his capacity to rule and his *karmic* status in contrast to, and at times in competition with, similar efforts undertaken by the People's Party leader, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Suwannathat-Pian 67). Here, photography was a way of demonstrating the king's merit, the importance of which

would have been apparent given the failure of his predecessors to offer comparable proof. It is outside the scope of this essay to analyze in detail the political relationships that facilitated the production and dissemination of these images, but suffice it to say that these efforts were aided by the pro-royalist government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who took power in a coup in 1957.

Under Sarit's government, the monarchy's image was rebuilt through reference to the "authentic" past (Fong 689–91). This included the reinvolvement of the monarchy in religious ceremonies, including the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (1960) and the Royal Barge Procession (1959). A palace functionary's insistence that these rituals were unchanged, despite minor adjustments, demonstrates their importance as visualizations of the monarchy's links to the past and the unchanging essence of Thainess, which were, in turn, evidenced photographically (Gray 52). For instance, on 30 April 1960, the *Bangkok Post* published photographs of the last Ploughing Ceremony from thirty years prior. When photographs from the reestablished ceremony appeared in the newspaper several days later, the earlier images acted as a point of comparison, thereby enhancing the event's "authenticity."

In the context of the Cold War, representing the king as modern and democratic became increasingly important to both local audiences and Thailand's allies, including the United States. Externally, the monarchy benefited from the perception that the royal family's relationship with its population could be used to stem communist threats. Indeed, the establishment of royal development projects was linked to Cold War diplomacy and supported by U.S. financial aid (Chitbundid 127–30). This support included distributing the king's portrait to the provinces that were perceived as most susceptible to communist influence. Internally, presenting the king as a *dhammaraja* also countered Marxist studies of Thai history that argued for the continued influence of the feudal *sakdina* system. In his response to this criticism, King Bhumibol at times employed terminology that converged with that of his critics. In a speech in 1973, he stated:

> Thailand has been reviled in some quarters as having a feudalist-imperialist system [*rabop sakdina chakkrawanniyom*] when, in fact, our truly Thai system may be "feudalistic" [*mi sakdina*] but certainly not in the sense they mean, that is, oppression [*kankothua*]. Ours is a system in which each has his own land and shelter, but all that is now being turned into the reviled system of feudalism [*rabop thi khao pranam*] of medieval Europe [*rabop baep samay klang nai urop*] with a hierarchy of oppressive rule

> down to the lowest stratum of men entrapped to the soil, known as the "worms of the earth." (Adulyadej *Royal Speeches* 73–4)[18]

As with Chulalongkorn's response to the petitioning princes, King Bhumibol reinforced the civility of his reign by contrasting it with European feudalism. However, while Christine Gray and Paul Handley have each emphasised King Bhumibol's use of Marxist terminology in this speech (Gray "Royal" 456; Handley 209), I argue that his linguistic differentiation between *sakdina* and European feudalism (*rabop thi khao*) reflected Sarit's political philosophy, which emphasised Thailand's uniqueness and the inapplicability of foreign models to it (Reynolds and Hong 86).

The Sacred Image

By the 1980s, the monarchy had reached a level of popularity that meant King Bhumibol's virtue no longer needed to be proven. Photographs of the king dripping with sweat and traveling to his development projects in remote provinces were more than indications of his legitimacy; they were models of moral action against which the behavior of his citizens was evaluated. Following King Bhumibol's death, some of his children, inspired by their late father's deeds, also came to act as exemplars of modern Thai citizenship. For instance, in October 2016, Princess Ubolratana attended ceremonies at the Grand Palace alongside devotees paying respect to her father's body. In video clips disseminated on social media, she was shown sharing food, stating, "He is my father and also everyone's father. . . . Next, we must work together, move forward and not backward" ("We All"). In this case, the dissemination of royal imagery as a digital moving image, as opposed to a photograph, extended its ideological significance. As I will argue, this is because the ever-expanding role of visual and digital technologies had redefined the relationship between public and private life, facilitating the royal image's central role in the making of Thai subjects.

As Princess Ubolratana's statements show, the royal image is not sacred because it has an iconic relationship with the king's person, as in the case of pre-photographic images. Instead, it has the potential to impel individuals toward moral action, defined in the context of the modern civilized state. This disciplinary role parallels the function of Buddhist relics. As Stanley J. Tambiah explains, "when men pay homage and give gifts to the Buddha, goodness is caused to arise within them. . . . the symbols of the Buddha act as a field of merit and men by their own ethical efforts can plough, plant and produce fruits within it" (*Buddhism* 45).

Fig. 3. Photograph by author, Billboard displaying photograph of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Bangkok, 2010. Princess

Frequently, the act of seeing is implicated in this process: the effects of temple art, architecture, and rituals are described as "*karma* for the eyes" (*pen bun ta*) or "eye delights" (in Pali, *nayana-piya*) through which *dharma* is revealed (Gray 46). Nevertheless, the effects of *karma* are sometimes thought to limit ordinary people's ability to understand *dharma* independently. The *dhammaraja* king is, then, tasked with the duty to interpret action in accordance with *dharmic* truth, thereby generating a moral order (45). It is through him and his actions that a moral schema is defined and communicated.

While the didactic function of the king's image already implies a process of subjectification, this has been enhanced through the monarch's representation as father to a nuclear (royal) family. From the 1950s on, informal snapshots of the royals were circulated in the local and foreign

press. The sentimentality of these images, as communicated through pose and dress, gave the perception that the public could participate in the monarchy's private life through their family photograph album. This apprehension of the royals as simultaneously ordinary (in their informality) and extraordinary (in the perfection of that normality) facilitated a conceptualization of them as simultaneously touchable and untouchable. The reconciliation of this paradox through the royal image meant that these family dynamics could be mirrored on a micro level, where they provided the moral framework for relationships between parents and children, and on the macro level, guaranteeing the integration of the nation as family.

This redistribution of public and private life is also apparent in references to the king and queen as "father" (*pho*) and "mother" (*mae*) by their subjects. Moreover, royal photographs can exist in a liminal space that integrates individual biography with the history of the nation. In fact, the participation of the royal family in virtually all degree ceremonies at Thai universities, and the prominent display of these photographs in many homes, ensures a synchronicity between personal achievement and that of the nation. Because social media further blurs distinctions between these spheres, it has augmented the royal image's multifarious nature. Following King Bhumibol's death, individuals shared stories online recounting personal interactions with him, accompanied by photographs. The same may be said for selfies taken by those paying respect to the king's body, in which the documentation of the self undertaking this "privileged duty" represents a desire to integrate personal narratives with those of the nation-state and vice versa (Songkünnatham).

Thai Cultural Constitution

In 1991, Chatichai Choonhaven's government, which in 1988 secured power in the first democratic election since 1976, was deposed in a *coup d'état*. In the wake of this event, the historian and public intellectual Nithi Eaowsriwong published a text entitled *The Thai Cultural Constitution*. In it, he explains the failure of democracy in Thailand as the result of an incompatibility between this system and the country's "cultural constitution." According to Nithi, in the Thai cultural constitution, power is based on *karma* and *barami*. Furthermore, the two constraints on the exercise of this power— influence (*itthiphon*) and morality—cannot be reconciled with "modern administrative law copied from the West" (Eaowsriwong). Comparing the Thai king's position

to that of a European medieval monarch, he says that the king becomes "sacred" (*saksit*) by demonstrating he can "maintain peace and order in the world" (Eaowsriwong).

In a critical reading of this text, Thongchai Winichakul comments that while Eaowsriwong provides insights into Thailand's political roadblocks, he seems to replicate the same arguments he is attempting to discredit. As he posits,

> the elite during the period of the absolute monarchy built knowledge and discourse in opposition to 'democracy,' 'parliament' and 'part[ies]. . . . They did this through a discourse that produced a vision of the absolute monarchy as being already harmonious with Thai culture ("Chat" 31).

Additionally, while Winichakul indicates that the adoption of "western" ideas has the potential to "stir up" stagnation in Thai society, he also recognizes the very real danger that exists for those who attempt to do so ("Chat" 32–33). This intractable situation derives from the fact that both royalism and its critics have been discursively linked through

Fig. 4. His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and their children, ca. 1960s. Collection of Anake Nawigamune. Reprinted in Anake Nawigamune, *A Century of Thai Graphic Design*, Bangkok: River Books 1999, p. 13. Image courtesy of River Books, Bangkok.

a bifurcated view that finds its basis in distinctions between civilised modernity and its others (including the feudal and the medieval). Within this schema, debates over the democratic or feudalistic qualities of the monarchy are contingent on definitions of civilization and modernity in the Thai context.

It is important to note here that the identification of what parts of "western civilization" are compatible with Thai culture has, with minor exceptions, been the prerogative of the monarchy. Indeed, the king's ability to define what aspects of the past are *siwilai* and what dimensions of modernity are amenable to the authentic heritage of Thainess produces a situation in which the capacity to criticize this structure is forced to have recourse to the very framework it aims to dismantle.[19] This problematic can be seen in the call for royal power to be limited in 1855, in the writings of Thai Marxist critics, and in the adoption of the *dhammaraja* principles of leadership by the People's Party. In all these cases, the distinction between secularism or feudalism, civility or incivility, modernity or nonmodernity might be understood differently, but the terms of the debate have remained consistent.

The success of royal photographs in Thailand in dialectically reconciling the sacred and secular is an indication of the ways in which the monarchy has been able to establish a position of preeminence. When principles of civility or democracy are invoked by this institution, the exogenous nature of these ideas is reconciled with endogenous concepts, including the *dhammaraja*. This capacity is circumscribed in the case of non-royal persons. Indeed, despite Vajiravudh's self-representation as a citizen monarch, he also criticized the adoption of the accoutrements of *siwilai* by Siam's middle class as a "cult of imitation" (*latthi ao yang*) (Jackson "Afterword" 200). The same can be said for the notion of a "Thai-style democracy" (*prachathipotai baep thai*), which emerged during Sarit's regime in the 1950s and 1960s and has been constantly used to dismiss calls for popular political participation on the basis that this is incompatible with "the special characteristics and realities of the Thai" (Connors 50). Indeed, it is this process of foreclosure that may be an even more pernicious form of power than that found in censorial *lèse-majesté* laws or their violent application.

Notes

1. In this text, I have used the Royal Institute of Thailand's system for the transcription of Thai terms, except in cases of proper names, where I have followed the commonly accepted usage. For Buddhist terms, I have generally used

the Thai transliteration, but in some cases have included the Pali and/or Sanskrit equivalent in parentheses.

2. *Suwannakhot* is usually translated into English as "heaven," but its etymological roots make clear that it refers to *sawan* (Sanskrit: *svargasya*), Indra's abode.

3. This perspective runs counter to analyses of images in Thailand that posit a distinction between appearances and reality (Morris 4; Jackson "The Thai Regime" 181–219).

4. I am grateful to John Clark for this insight.

5. On King Mongkut's establishment of the reformist Thammayut school (*nikai*) of the Thai *sangha*, see Jory *Thailand's Theory* 109–13.

6. The *cakravartin* is a supremely victorious king who achieves ascendency through his embodiment of *dhamma* and communication of *dhammic* truth to others (Hocart 13–14).

7. Jory points out that modern Thai scholars frequently referred to the legal principle of *aneknikornsomorsonsommot* ("elected kingship"), from the *Aggañña* Sutta, a Buddhist canonical scripture (*Thailand's Theory* 177)

8. I use the term relativization here in the sense outlined by Clark. As he states, relativization occurs when "a type or technique of representation is no longer accepted on customary terms. Contact with other cultures, which bring their own styles . . . puts local style in a new context" (*Asian* 34).

9. For example, the essays included in Davis and Altschul. My argument here parallels that made in Reynolds "A New Look" 421.

10. On the secular nature of these images, see Peleggi "The Aesthetics" 89–90.

11. For more on this issue in the Thai context, see Harrison and Jackson.

12. This analysis is informed by Clark's use of the terms "endogenous" and "exogenous" in his analysis of Asian contemporary art (*Asian* 29–34).

13. I draw the term *royalist-nationalist* from, Winichakul "Prawattisat" 57–65.

14. On the mutually exclusive binary between secularism and feudalism, see Davis 1–7.

15. Jit Phoumisak also linked the term *phrachao phaendin* to the Sanskrit term *kshatriya*, used to describe the ruling and military elite in Vedic societies (Reynolds *Thai Radical* 51–2).

16. Jory translates the Thai title *chao* as "feudal lord" (Jory "Republicanism" 109).

17. These analogies may be found in People's Party leader Plaek Phibunsongkhram's description of his role as *phunam* ("leader") in 1940 as "one who must be followed because of the good deeds he has performed" (Suwannathat-Pian 82).

18. The English text as it appears here is a translation by the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand. I have transcribed the Thai terms from the original document (Adulyadej, "Phrabarom").

19. My analysis here is informed by the deconstructionist methodologies outlined in Thompson 182.

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