
Nationalisms, 1910s to 1940s

In the latter part of his reign, Chulalongkorn and his supporters repeatedly justified the creation of a strong state and its absolutist management on grounds of the need for Siam to progress and be a significant country in the world. This formulation marks the start of one of the two recurring visions in modern Thai politics. The same idea, adapted to changing international and local contexts, would reappear over decades to come. The Chulalongkorn era had also created the key vocabulary of this theme, particularly the notion of *samakkhi*, unity, and its highly masculine and militaristic imagery exemplified by Chulalongkorn's equestrian statue, and Damrong's account of Thai history as a series of wars.

An opposing vision took shape in the early twentieth century, in the new urban society created by colonial commerce and by the nation-state itself. Old relationships of patronage were replaced by contracts in the marketplace. People evolved new ideas on man and society by reflecting on their own status as independent merchants and professionals, and by grabbing the increasing opportunities to compare Siam to an outside world undergoing tumultuous change. The new men and women of early twentieth-century Siam took up the ideas of nation, state, and progress, and recast them. They challenged the definition of the nation as those loyal to the king. They demanded that 'progress' be more widely shared. They redefined the purpose of the nation-state as the well-being of the nation's members.

In 1932, absolute monarchy was overthrown in a revolution whose inspiration came from these ideas and whose force came from the standing army created in Chulalongkorn's reforms. But attempts to redefine the nation were complicated by the status of Siam's large Chinese population, and attempts to reorient the state were complicated by Siam's gradual absorption into a clash of nationalisms on a world scale.

ABSOLUTISM DEFIANT

Despite his own opposition to any qualification of royal power, Chulalongkorn told ministers shortly before his death in 1910, 'I entrust onto my son Vajiravudh . . . that upon his accession to the throne he will give to them a parliament and constitution'.¹

From age 12 to 22, Vajiravudh had been educated in England. He was an aesthete with interests in literature, history, and especially drama. He translated Shakespeare and Gilbert and Sullivan, built a playhouse, and wrote 180 plays and countless essays. He was homosexual and brought favourites first into the palace entourage and later into official positions. He continued Chulalongkorn's enthusiasm for royal display by holding a glorious coronation, and building three pleasure palaces on the seashore. He also continued the enthusiasm for military pursuits by forming the *Sua pa* (Wild Tiger) Corps as a royal guard and as a vehicle to display loyalty to the throne. He fell deeply into debt, forcing the ministers reluctantly to allow him to raise a foreign loan to prevent bankruptcy proceedings. His actions deeply upset many conservative courtiers. His reign saw at least two attempts at a military coup, and possibly one projected palace revolution.

Vajiravudh rejected his father's suggestion about parliament and constitution. On accession he noted that 'things of benefit to Europeans might be evil to us'.² His first list of ministers included ten royal relatives and only one other. But several were later replaced by noble and commoner favourites, angering the court conservatives.

Vajiravudh was aware that some nobles wanted to reverse the extreme royal centralization of the previous reign. He was also aware that others beyond these privileged circles were critical of absolutism (see below). He gave lectures to bureaucrats, and contributed articles to the press, presenting his view of the nation and nationalism. He theorized that humans who came together in society chose a king to overcome their mutual disagreements. From that point forward, the power of the king was absolute and unchallengeable. Succession continued in one lineage for stability. A state was like a body in which all the parts had a certain role. The king was the brain. The other parts should not question the orders of the brain, but obey them:

We are all in one boat. The duty of all is to help paddle. If we don't paddle and only sit back all the time, the dead weight in the boat will slow us down. Each person must decide whether to paddle and not argue with the helmsman.³

Nationalism and royalism were identical: 'loyalty to the king is identical with loving the nation because the king is the representative of the nation'. The duty of the ordinary people was only to be unified, obedient, and grateful, to the point of self-sacrifice: 'When our country faces danger, anyone not prepared to sacrifice his life for the country should cease to be a Thai'.⁴ He urged the Siamese to unite in the defence of 'Nation, Religion and King'. The phrase was adapted from 'God, King, and Country', with the difference that the three parts were the same rather than different. The king was the political embodiment of a nation of Buddhists, and the protector of both nation and religion. The phrase wrapped a very traditional concept of royal power in the modern language of the nation. In 1917, a new tricolour national flag was designed for a Thai contingent sent to fight on the Allied side in Europe. Vajiravudh noted that the blue, white, and red not only matched the colours used in flags of the other allies, but also represented the elements of his nationalist trinity: white for Buddhism, blue for the monarch, and red for the blood Thai people should be prepared to sacrifice in defence of the nation.

CREATING A PUBLIC SPHERE

This duty of passive acceptance held scant appeal for men and women making new lives by personal achievement. The world outside Siam was changing rapidly. Many of the dynasties with whom the Chakri hobnobbed during the *fin de siècle* went into oblivion or retreat after the First World War. More Thai had a chance to view other societies and compare them to Siam. Small but growing numbers travelled abroad. Others could observe Bangkok's foreign enclave. Rather more became literate and created a growing readership for books and journals. Newspapers were brought from Singapore and Penang. Translations of western novels and romances became popular from the 1880s onwards. Cinema extended this opportunity to eavesdrop on other cultures and ways of life beyond the literate. The first commercial film was screened in 1897, and screenings became regular and popular by 1910.

Local production of newspapers and magazines proliferated from the 1890s. The first journals circulated only a few hundred copies. By 1901-06 Thianwan's journal had a print-run of a thousand. In the mid-1920s popular journals had a circulation of 5000. By 1927 there were 127 printing presses and fourteen publishers. Bookshops were 'filled with so many strange new publications'.⁵ Original Thai short stories appeared in the early 1920s and then a flood of pioneer novels at the end of the decade. The first full-length

Report

Expanded
bookshelves
modernities

commercial Thai silent film was produced in 1927 and commanded an audience of 12,000 in its first four days.

The recurrent themes which attracted both authors and audiences were about the ability of people to make their own lives, and about the corruption and unfairness of absolutist society.

Several writers took up the new enthusiasm for history but challenged the royalist claim that kings alone were the prime movers of history. Some great families compiled their own histories. K. S. R. Kulap made a living for a time as a jobbing genealogist. Monks wrote spiritual autobiographies. Some of the new entrepreneurs wrote accounts of their commercial success (Nai Boonrawd and Koson Huntrakun). Sometimes these works explicitly challenged the royal monopoly on making history. The author of a military history pointed out that kings had been able to defend the country in the past only 'because of the ordinary people who belonged to the same nation as the king and were patriotic'. One author compiled histories of all the ministers of the Bangkok period to show that 'the kings could not have delivered protection and progress without ministers' help'.⁶ All these works showed how their subjects contributed to national 'progress'.

Many stories vaunted talent over birth. One of the first full-length novels, Kulap Saipradit's *Luk phu chai* (A real man, 1928), told the story of a carpenter's son who rose through his own talent to become a leading judge. Kulap's subsequent novel, *Songkhram chiwit* (The war of life, 1932), contained a tirade against inequalities of wealth and privilege: 'Siam doesn't encourage people to have faith in opportunity. Siam only curses people who do wrong.'⁷ The first hit novel, Akat Damkoeng's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* (Circus of life, 1929), introduced a theme, later repeated many times, of a new man venturing overseas and thus gaining the perspective to criticize Siam and become committed to social change.

Both male and female authors focused on the practice of polygamy as something unfair to women, symbolic of Siam's backwardness in international perspective, and contributory to the culture of prostitution. Essayists and writers idealized a society in which talent was rewarded, and gender relations were made more equal through female education, monogamy, romantic love, and sexual reciprocity. Elite women rebelled against and campaigned against Mongkut's law under which families of high *sakdina* could legally dictate their daughters' marriage partner. The pioneer silent film *Nangsao suwan* (Miss Golden) in 1923 dealt with the issue of marriage across class barriers. In *Romaen son rueang jing* (Romance concealed in a true story), Dokmaisot, a leading female story writer, showed women how

they could turn an indulgent, old-style man into both a good husband and ideal citizen by abandoning the traditionally passive feminine role.

Kulap Saipradit popularized a term, *manutsayatham*, humanitarianism or a belief in people, which summed up the sentiments of the new commoner writers and readers.

Journalism developed in this same milieu. From the 1890s onwards, a new press carried a discourse in opposition to the royal view of the nation and nationalism. In 1917, one publication described itself for the first time as a 'political newspaper'. The first political daily appeared in 1922.

Some of these papers criticized Vajiravudh's profligacy and idiosyncrasies. Vajiravudh engaged them in literary debate, and in 1912 purchased one of the papers (*Phim thai*) as a mouthpiece. He argued that *khon samai mai* (modern people) or *khon sot* (shortened from 'sophisticated') with their overseas education had become 'half-Thai' and 'clap traps', and that the import of western ideas (especially democracy) would not work. In 1916, the king withdrew from the public debate and chose repression. He had a tough press law drafted in 1917, but hesitated for fear of foreign reactions and instead used security laws to close several papers. In 1923 he finally passed a stringent press law and prosecuted scores of Bangkok publishers for libel, sedition, and lese-majesty. Eight printing presses were seized and seventeen papers closed. But by this time a public sphere was well established.

REJECTING ABSOLUTISM

Through the 1920s, journalists moved beyond personal criticism to a broader rejection of absolutism and the royal interpretation of nationalism, on various grounds.

First, they captured the discourse of progress and *siwilai*. They redefined progress as a situation in which 'human beings have a better and happier life . . . as a result of their own efforts'. They redefined *siwilai* as people 'who behave nobly . . . and contribute to the country's progress'.⁸

If such national progress was the goal of the nation-state, asked the new political journalists, why then was Siam so poor in comparison not only to Europe but also to an Asian country, Japan. Some attributed this to the strict division into rulers and ruled, which allowed a privileged minority to 'farm on the backs of the people' (Figure 9). The elite was reluctant to develop education, particularly for women or the poor, because it believed 'education creates unrest' and wanted to protect the economic advantages of 'less than half a percent of the population'.⁹ An open society profited from the talents of all its members, but absolutism condemned Siam to

rule by a few, selected by birth rather than talent: 'There are both clever men and stupid men among the royalty . . . People have become more conscious that birth does not indicate human goodness'.¹⁰ According to Kulap Saipradit:

If we leave things like this, these big people (*phu yai*) will always make blunders, and little people (*phu noi*) who have the right wisdom and capability will not have a say. In the end this may lead the country to ruin. Or at the very least, we will not progress in line with neighbouring countries.¹¹

Second, absolutism fostered corruption and inefficiency. The cartoons that became a prominent feature of this journalism featured nobles and bureaucrats stuffing their pockets with money or running off with bags of loot. The court was 'a giant leech, draining blood from the provinces, leaving the principal producers of the nation's wealth to live in the forests'.¹² A middle-ranking military official argued: 'The national income was used to feed many people who actually did not work. In addition, the national decay and the inefficiency in the administration was due to the fact that there were many incompetent men in high positions.'¹³

Third, absolutism promoted foreign interests above national interests. The royal elite had become fascinated with things *farang*. It fostered profligate consumption of foreign goods to the detriment of the economy. The absolutist government had accepted unequal treaties which allowed foreigners to dominate the economy.

Royal nationalism contended that the king alone could lead the nation to progress. The new men turned this argument on its head. One summed up: 'the absolute monarchy was the cause of this injustice. Nothing could be done to solve these problems, so long as the king had absolute power.'¹⁴

Within this general framework, specific groups within the new urban society had a specific agenda. Businessmen wanted to use the nation-state to promote the growth of domestic capitalism. They blamed the absolutist regime for concluding the unequal treaties and popularizing foreign products, with the result that Thai were 'becoming the slaves of foreigners in their own home'.¹⁵ They wanted the government to erect tariffs and provide cheap capital so that 'Siam would have more established industries, Thai and Chinese labourers would have employment, and Siam could produce for self consumption without having to rely on imports'.¹⁶

Commoner bureaucrats wanted advancement based on merit. They found that appointments, promotions, and salaries depended on birth, on connections, and on loyalty to the throne. They pressed for competitive examinations, standardized salaries, and promotion by seniority and

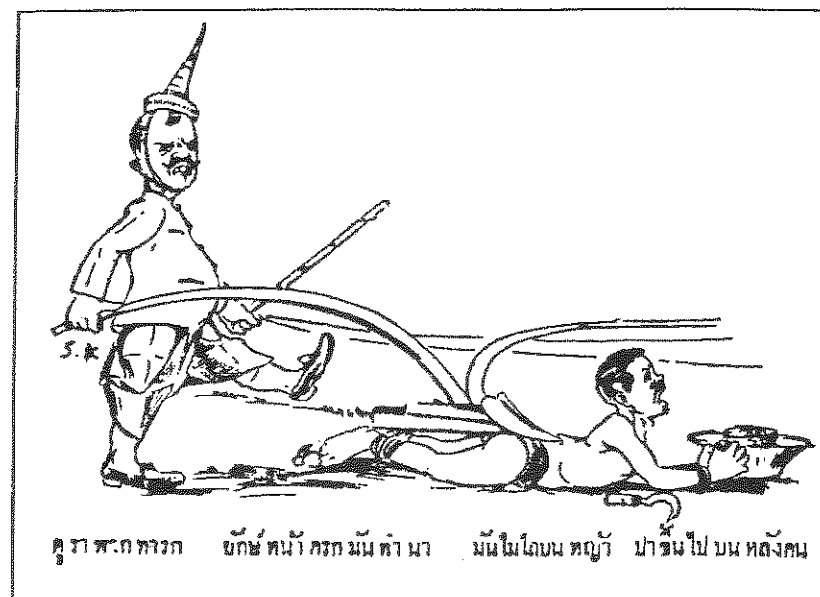


Figure 9: Farming on the backs of the people. Cartoon from *Si krung* newspaper, 4 August 1931. The caption translates as: 'Cruel-faced giants don't plough the fields but on the backs of the people'.

merit – summarized as *lak wicha*, the principle of law and rationality. Vajiravudh replied that Siam's bureaucracy was based on *lak ratchakan*, the principle of service to the king. Not until 1928 were the rules and practices of the bureaucracy formalized by legislation.

Urban labour also expressed its demands in the language of nationalism. In 1922–23, tramway workers went on strike for better wages. Labour leaders portrayed the strike as a blow against the tramway company's foreign owners and noble shareholders 'by labourers who are attempting to make a cruel employer realize that the Thai are not slaves and that the Thai nation must be free'.¹⁷

Perhaps the most significant centre of dissent was among the new men in the recently created standing army. In 1912, the government uncovered a plot among junior army officers to overthrow the absolute monarchy. Three thousand were possibly involved. Leaders had been recruiting support by highlighting the abuses of absolutist power, such as sycophancy, luxurious personal spending, and arbitrary seizures of land. They disliked Vajiravudh's *Sua pa* corps and had been provoked by public flogging of military officers at royal command. They complained that 'individuals who are determined

to work hard tend to have no chance to show their capability, because *phu yai* do not support them'. They believed Siam's progress required a change of government, comparable to the Meiji period in Japan. Their programme included a constitution, but was otherwise vague. They had no leaning to representative government, believing 'the people in our country Siam still know very little about civilization and are very ignorant'. They proposed to change the formula of 'nation, religion, and king' into 'nation, religion, and people'. Twenty-three were jailed for twenty years. All but two were from commoner backgrounds, and the two most senior were medically trained.¹⁸

Vajiravudh died in 1925. His successor, Prajadhipok (Rama VII), removed Vajiravudh's favourites from office and announced his government was contemplating reforms in taxation, economic policy, the bureaucracy, and the structure of government in order 'to do something at once to gain the confidence of the people'.¹⁹ The press became optimistic. But, in practice, Prajadhipok focused on soothing the divisions inside the court, and finding 'some sort of guarantee . . . against an unwise king'.²⁰ He instituted a Supreme Council of State and filled it with five of the most senior members of the royal family. He set up a Privy Council and appointed forty members of the royal family or the official nobility. A Bangkok journalist responded: 'I think these people will draft laws to benefit the upper classes because all the members of the Council come from the upper classes'.²¹

Prajadhipok then considered the possibility of a constitution and a prime minister. Even though the sketched constitution unconditionally enshrined royal power, the proposal met opposition both from members of the court and from foreign advisers. Damrong, by now the senior royal adviser, felt that 'the authority and prestige of the King would suffer in the eyes of the People'.²² Despite the growing public criticism, the monarchy clung to its paternalist ideal. In 1931 Prajadhipok told an American newspaper, 'the King is the father of his people and . . . treats them as children rather than subjects. The obedience the king receives is the obedience of love not of fear'.²³

REDEFINING THE THAI

Historians like Damrong talked about the nation but then wrote about kings. The new urban intellectuals gave the Thai nation a presence in history.

In 1928, a mid-ranked official, Khun Wichitmatra, published *Lak thai* (Origins of the Thai). His material came largely from the Sinologist

Terrien de Lacouperie and a missionary W. C. Dodd, who had travelled in southern China and noted the large numbers of Tai language speakers. In *The Tai Race* (1923), Dodd wrote that the Tai originated in northern China before 2000 BC, moved south in seven 'great migrations', and arrived in Siam after the overthrow of their previous state of Nanchao in Yunnan. Khun Wichitmatra fashioned this into a new kind of history which centred on the Thai as a race, not just the dynasties which figured in works by Damrong. He extended Dodd's list of migrations further back into history by arguing that the Thai must have come from the Altai mountains because 'that was the birthplace of the Mongols'. He extended the history to the present, and included a map of 'lost territories' assigned by treaty to French Indochina, including all of Cambodia and Laos. His aim was to make the Thai 'count as one of the important races of the world'.²⁴

Luang Wichit Wathakan returned from France in 1927 and rapidly became a prolific author, journalist, and early radio broadcaster. He reworked Khun Wichitmatra's story into his encyclopaedic *Prawatisat sakhon* (Universal history, 1929). Wichit presented the main theme of all history as a race's progress towards nationhood, and placed the Thai ethnic history alongside and on par with the stories of other races. Wichit also characterized the Thai as a martial race, symbolized by the country's axe-like shape. Wichit Wathakan's *Prawatisat sakhon* became the first non-fiction best-seller. Khun Wichitmatra's *Lak thai* was awarded a prize by the National Academy.

Other writers wanted to refashion the Thai language as a 'fundamental ingredient of Thai-ness' and 'source of national life and tradition'. They criticized the growing use of English words; the government's 'addiction to Sanskrit' for coining new words; the court's use of long titles which 'slow the development of the nation'; and the court's specialized vocabulary of *rachasap* based on Khmer. These imports were 'threats to independence' and inappropriate 'for the free peoples of Siam'. These critics wanted to simplify the language, in particular by discarding the large number of pronouns which identified social status and were 'a source of national division' and 'breach of democratic principles'. A nine-part essay in the press in 1929 was headlined, 'The existence of the Thai nation depends on the Thai language'.²⁵

The commoner nationalists shifted the meaning of a nation from the people enclosed within the national territory and bound by loyalty to the sovereign, to a community defined by ethnic origins, a long and unique history, and a common language.

LUKJIN IN A WORLD OF NATIONS

The rising discourses of nation and nationalism complicated the position of Siam's population of Chinese origins.

In the new world of nations, belonging and identity, like borders, had become more precise. In 1909, China passed a law granting Chinese nationality to those born of Chinese fathers. In 1913, Siam passed a law granting Siamese nationality both to those born of Thai fathers and to those born within the national boundary. This latter provision opened up a route for descendants of Chinese migrants to 'become Thai'. But China's law meant that Chinese in Thailand could claim dual nationality, and hence promised to add another dimension to the issue of extraterritoriality.

This mattered because the nation had new political meanings. In 1908, the Chinese leader Sun Yat Sen visited Bangkok to raise funds for his attempt to overthrow the Chinese empire and form a new Chinese nation-state. He got enthusiastic support. Sun's Kuomintang (KMT) provided funding for Bangkok's fledgling Chinese press, which in return propagated his nationalist and revolutionary ideas. The government became nervous about the involvement of Siam-resident Chinese in the politics of China, and even more nervous that republican and revolutionary ideas would excite aspirations for change in Siam. Their fears were justified. Around this time, Pridi Banomyong, the future leader of Siam's 1932 revolution, got his first political inspiration listening to a KMT propagandist in his local market. The 1912 military officers plot (noted above) occurred four months after Sun's overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911.

The court's fears were heightened by the sheer size of the population of 'new' Chinese following the late nineteenth-century surge of immigration, and their economic domination of Bangkok as both capital and labour. After the June 1910 Chinese strike paralysed Bangkok business for three days, Chulalongkorn warned: 'We must be careful. Their influence is tremendous.'²⁶ Chinese immigration surged again in the 1920s, to its highest ever level, adding another half-a-million 'new' Chinese to Siam's population between the two world wars.

The court's attitude to the Chinese was also influenced by its bias towards the west. Since their return to Siam in the 1820s, westerners (especially British) had seen the Chinese as rivals for trade and for cultural dominance. In the age of high imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, the west revelled in portraying China as a civilization in terminal decline. The Siamese elite, anxious to be *siwilai*, followed this lead. Borrowing from the anti-semitism which flourished among European aristocracies in the early twentieth century, Vajiravudh labelled the Chinese as 'The Jews

of the East'. In the 1913 pamphlet of that title, he accused the Chinese of refusing to be assimilated into Siamese society, being politically disloyal, expecting undue privileges, worshipping wealth as a god, and being parasites on the economy 'like so many vampires who steadily suck dry an unfortunate victim's life-blood'.²⁷

In other writings, Vajiravudh differentiated between the Chinese who settled down and 'became Thai' like the ennobled *jao sua* and market gardeners, and those whose commitment to Siam was more short-term like the coolie labourers. Government policy followed this class-based divide. Labour agitators were jailed and deported, while businessmen were left alone. The KMT, though illegal like any political organization, flourished, especially among prominent businessmen. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce acted as its front. Some of its leaders sheltered behind extraterritoriality. Siew Hut Seng, who headed both the KMT and Chinese Chamber, was born in Siam but acquired British protection through his father, a Hokkien from Melaka who had become a successful rice miller in Siam. By 1928, the KMT had an estimated 20,000 members in Siam.

In 1924 a radical wing formed within the Siamese KMT. Partly, this reflected the rise of a communist wing in China's KMT. Partly, it indicated the development of an independent urban intelligentsia in Siam; many of the activists were teachers in Chinese schools and journalists in Bangkok's Chinese-language press. When Chiang Kai Shek purged the communist wing from the KMT in Shanghai in 1927, many activists took refuge in Southeast Asia, including Siam. In the same year, King Prajadhipok included the Chinese among nine 'Problems of Siam' identified at the start of his reign. He noted the surge in numbers of Chinese immigrants. He grumbled that Chinese in Siam 'determined to remain Chinese' and that 'new and dangerous ideas are coming in from China'.²⁸

In May 1928, a Japanese army killed and wounded 5000 in a clash with a KMT force at Jinan on China's Shandong peninsula, provoking a surge of Chinese nationalist feeling. Leaders of the Bangkok Chinese organized a boycott of Japanese goods which rapidly halved imports from Japan into Siam. The government moved to restrict the spread of revolutionary ideas into the broader population. It began to arrest communists after their pamphlets called for an uprising of Siamese workers and peasants. It banned the republican writings of Sun Yat Sen which a *lukjin* businessman had translated into Thai. But it still avoided provoking the business community. It refused to suppress the boycott of Japanese goods, and made little use of new powers to restrict immigration after the Chinese Chamber protested against them.

This Chinese nationalism existed uneasily alongside Thai nationalism. On the one hand, many well-established Chinese became involved in Siam's growing nationalism. They reacted angrily against Vajiravudh's attempts to stir up animosity against 'fellow citizens of Chinese descent'. They supported the Siamese nationalist press. They appended Thai surnames to their Chinese names, and formed the *Samoson jin sayam*, the association of Siam-Chinese, to emphasize their identification with Thai nationalism. In the early 1930s, they pinned hopes on political change in Siam.

But on the other hand, some Thai nationalist ideologues had begun to imagine a Thai people for whom the Chinese were an enemy. They accused foreign merchants, both Chinese and colonial, of 'sucking Thai blood to the marrow'. They argued that the flood of Chinese migrants made it 'impossible for Thai labourers to find employment in their own home'.²⁹ They demanded a programme of import controls, immigration restrictions, state funds for industry, and help for Thais to find employment. One newspaper called itself *Thai tae* (true Thai).

THE 1932 REVOLUTION

On 5 February 1927, seven men met in Paris and over the next five days plotted a revolution in Siam. They included three students at military colleges (including Plaek Phibunsongkhram), a law student (Pridi Banomyong), a science student, a London barrister, and a deputy at the Siamese mission in Paris. They called themselves the *Khana ratsadon* or People's Party, using the word for 'people' which the Bangkok press favoured as the opposite of 'rulers'.

The intellectual leader of the group was the brilliant law student, Pridi Banomyong, then 27 years old (Figure 10). From his studies in the French legal tradition, he saw the importance of placing the king within the law under a constitution. From studies in political economy, he adopted the idea prevalent in post-war Europe that the state was a powerful instrument to bring about economic growth and greater equity. At the Paris meeting, the group adopted two aims: first, to convert the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy; second, to use the state to achieve economic and social progress through a six-point programme which summarized themes developed in the Bangkok press over the previous decade – true independence, public safety, economic planning, equal rights (with no exceptions for royalty), liberty for all, and universal education.

The seven recruited secretly among other students in Europe, and then in Siam after their return over the next few years. Their most important

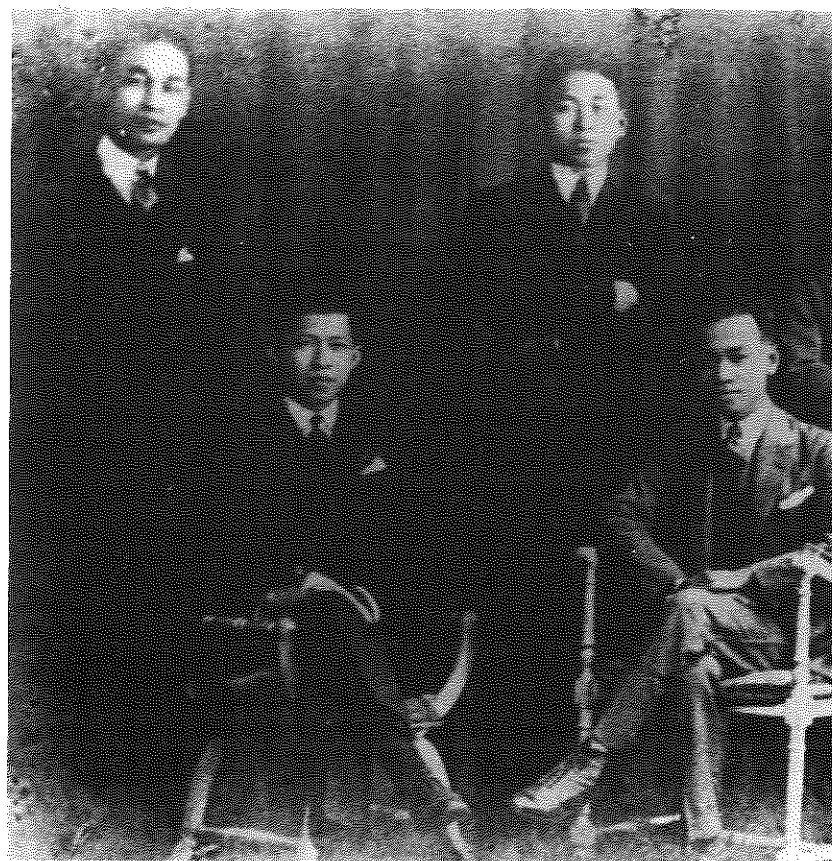


Figure 10: Revolutionaries in Paris, c. 1927. From left: Khuang Aphaiwong (future prime minister), Pridi Banomyong, Thae Aphaiwong, Luang Wichit Wathakan.

converts were a group of senior military officers, who mostly came from commoner background and who had earlier studied in European military academies (especially in Germany). The leader of this group, Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena, explained that he joined because of 'the birth of the feeling that in the government at that time high officials and princes acted according to their whim and were not willing to pay heed to smaller people'.³⁰

Over the late 1920s, the focus of the press changed from criticism of absolutism's failings to proposals for its replacement. More articles explained to readers the meaning of a constitution, and the benefits of

parliamentary rule. A few advocated republicanism. Underground communist groups distributed pamphlets about revolution. With the world sliding into economic depression in 1929, criticism of the absolutist government reached a peak. In response to business petitions for government to aid the economy, Prajadhipok wondered sarcastically if they wanted 'the government to make a Five-Year Plan like Soviet Russia'.³¹ In 1927, his government had made teaching economics a criminal offence.

The government struggled to balance the budget by retrenching more officials, cutting spending on education, and raising taxes on salary earners. Investigations uncovered corruption in several departments, but punishments were limited to minor officials. The government refused to abandon the gold standard which, critics argued, inflated the value of the baht and prejudiced Siam's rice exports – further evidence of Siam's subordination to the foreigner. Prajadhipok told military officers in February 1932:

The financial war is a very hard one indeed. Even experts contradict one another until they become hoarse . . . 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.³²

Resentment spread to senior levels of the bureaucracy. The government reacted by drafting an anti-Bolshevik bill, but then modifying it to combat a wider range of dissident opinions. Serious offences incurred the death penalty. More papers were closed. Some journalists were intimidated with threats or violence. Immigration laws were used to deport many critics.

By early 1932, the government was bombarded with petitions from farmers and businessmen demanding new economic policies; the press and magazines were full of articles discussing reasons for the progress and decline of nations; and the coffee houses hummed with rumours of a political coup. A royal relative and minister suggested the king should adapt Mussolini's plan of pro-Fascism education to rebuild support for absolutism, but Prajadhipok counselled that 'fathers of schoolchildren now like bad-mouthing the king so much it has become a habit', with the result that 'the former popularity and credibility of the king is, I think, beyond revival'.³³

By June 1932, the People's Party had around a hundred members, just over half in the military. In the space of three hours on the morning of 24 June 1932, this small group of conspirators captured the commander of the royal guard, arrested about forty members of the royal family and their aides, and announced that the absolute monarchy had been overthrown. The extent of resentment against absolutism ensured the coup's success.

People queued up to join the People's Party. Business and labour groups welcomed the event. Messages of support flooded in from the provinces. Opposition was insignificant. There was only one minor shooting incident, and no deaths. Pridi circulated a manifesto which justified the revolution on the grounds of economic nationalism, social justice, humanism, and the rule of law:

The King maintains his power above the law as before. He appoints court relatives and toadies without merit or knowledge to important positions, without listening to the voice of the people. He allows officials to use the power of their office dishonestly, taking bribes in government construction and purchasing . . . He elevates those of royal blood (*phuak jao*) to have special rights more than the people. He governs without principle . . . The government of the King above the law is unable to find solutions and bring about recovery . . . The government of the King has treated the people as slaves . . . and as animals. It has not considered them as human beings.³⁴

The Cabinet of princes was dismissed. Around a hundred royal family members and royalists were purged from the military and senior bureaucracy. On 27 August, the People's Party promulgated a constitution which began, 'The supreme power in the country belongs to the people', and which created government by an assembly and a 'committee of the people'.

The apparent ease of the takeover was deceptive. On the night of 24 June, the king and his entourage debated 'whether to agree to the demands of the People's Party or resist'.³⁵ Military members of the entourage wanted to bring upcountry troops to besiege the city. The king vetoed any action which might cause bloodshed, and decided to cooperate with the People's Party. But the royalists also founded an organization dedicated to regaining control. They spread rumours that the revolution was a 'communist' plot. They visited western legations to petition for foreign powers to intervene against this 'communist' menace. The former police chief funded rickshaw drivers to strike and create disorder in the capital.

The People's Party barricaded their office, took to carrying side arms, and proceeded cautiously. They apologized to the king for the demagoguery of Pridi's manifesto. They agreed to the king's suggestion that the constitution was only provisional and that he should participate in drafting a permanent version. They included twenty-five senior officials in the 70-member provisional Assembly, and invited eight senior officials to form the first government. As its head they chose Phraya Manopakon (Mano) Nithithada, who had been one of the few non-royal members of the Privy Council, and whose wife had been a lady-in-waiting to the queen. The

'permanent' constitution appeared to grant more power to the king, and its promulgation on 10 December 1932 was stage-managed as a gift from the throne.

Behind this façade, the following three years saw a protracted struggle between the old order and the new. This struggle revolved around two related issues: property, and the constitutional power of the king.

The Bangkok press claimed that 'the property of each and every member of our royalty exceeds the capital stock of Siam'.³⁶ It urged the new government to strip the royal and other aristocratic families of their land, and use this wealth to bail out the depressed economy. The government did not follow this suggestion, but prepared a bill for estate and death duties, while Pridi drafted an 'Outline Economic Plan' whose main proposal was a voluntary nationalization of all land.

These moves frightened the royal family. Prajadhipok wrote to a relative: 'I'd like to have a real go at them (the People's Party) but I'm somewhat afraid the princes would come off badly . . . We're thinking of so many different plans of action'.³⁷ The king responded to Pridi's Outline Economic Plan with a long, dismissive essay equating Pridi with Stalin. During the drafting of the 'permanent' constitution, the king insisted that the monarch should appoint half the Assembly and have a veto over legislation, but Pridi successfully resisted these proposals. The king then worked on Mano and the other senior officials in the government to break with the coup group. Mano persuaded the Cabinet to reject Pridi's plan, and sent troops to intimidate the Assembly to do likewise. When the Assembly refused to comply, Mano dismissed it on grounds that the plan betrayed 'a communistic tendency . . . contrary to the Thai tradition'.³⁸ Pridi was hustled into exile, and his supporters removed from the Cabinet. Two royalist generals were elevated to senior posts, and young People's Party military officers were dispersed to the provinces. An Anti-Communist Act was rapidly passed, defining communism as any theory which 'rests upon the total or partial abolition of private property'.

But Mano's victory was short-lived. A month later in June 1933, the young military officers in the People's Party staged another coup, dismissed the Mano government, and purged several more royalists from the army. They again drafted senior officials into a new Cabinet, but chose with more care. They recalled Pridi from exile. The royalists again spread rumours of social disorder and foreign intervention. In October, a group of royalist officers, several of whom had been purged from the army by the People's Party a few months earlier, staged an armed counter-revolt under the leadership of Prince Boworadet, Prajadhipok's cousin and a pre-1932 minister

of war. The group aimed to bring nine upcountry garrisons to besiege the city, but only three moved to the city's northern outskirts while the others prevaricated. The city garrisons held firm to the People's Party. Businesses and organizations offered money and volunteer services to help the defence.

Neither side much wanted a shooting war, and most of the salvos were propaganda. The People's Party put out radio broadcasts and leaflets damning the Boworadet forces as 'rebels' and 'bandits'. In reply, the besiegers dropped leaflets on the city from aeroplanes, accusing the People's Party of restraining the king. After an artillery exchange, the besiegers retreated to Khorat. A few days later, the leaders fled, mostly to Saigon. Twenty-three lives had been lost. The People's Party arrested the remnants and eventually jailed 230 people. Two retired senior military officers were tried and executed. A royal prince was sentenced to life imprisonment. Over the next two years, there were two more attempted counter-coups. After the first, two royal family members and thirteen others were jailed.

The king sailed to the south as the Boworadet revolt began. He gave no open support, but in the aftermath called for an amnesty. The People's Party believed he helped in both planning and financing. After long negotiations, the king agreed to return to Bangkok, but left within three months on the pretext of seeking medical treatment in Europe. While abroad, he refused to sign legislation passed by the government, including a bill which he believed would transfer control of the Privy Purse to the government and subject the king to inheritance tax, and a new penal code which reduced the royal prerogative. In response to entreaties for his return, he demanded large changes in the constitution to enhance the power of the throne, including a legislative veto. In March 1935, while still in Europe, he announced his abdication. The government decided that the legitimate successor was one of Prajadhipok's nephews, the 10-year-old Prince Ananda Mahidol, then at school in Switzerland. For the next sixteen years, Thailand had no resident, reigning monarch.

PROGRESS AND LEGITIMACY

The defeat of the Boworadet revolt ended the period of open struggle. The People's Party now had to demonstrate that its post-absolutist order could satisfy the aspirations of a changing society.

Over the 1930s the People's Party divided into two groups, roughly identified with the civilian and military members and their respective leaders, Pridi Banomyong and Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun). The two groups

had different views on the role and purpose of the state which they had wrestled from the royalist grip.

Pridi's thinking was formed by the French liberal tradition with a tinge of European socialism. The role of the state was to provide a framework within which individuals could 'develop to their utmost capability'. That required the rule of law, a judicial system, help for the economy, and systems for education and health. Pridi attracted support among businessmen, labour leaders, and upcountry politicians who had high expectations of a more liberal state. Phibun and the military group, by contrast, tended to see the state as an expression of the popular will, with the duty to change the individual by education, legal enactments, and cultural management. Despite this contrast, the two groups cooperated reasonably well, in common fear of a royalist counter-revolution, until the Second World War.

For the Pridi group, the 'progress' which the state had responsibility to achieve included economic progress. Against the background of the depression, traders, entrepreneurs, and farmers bombarded the new government with petitions for help. Governments around the world were drawn to intervene in their economies to combat the depression. Over the next few years, seven full economic plans were drafted and submitted to the new government, and several other proposals presented in the press.

The Outline Economic Plan which Pridi presented in 1933 had two main proposals. First, land would be sold to the state, which would raise its productivity by applying better technology, while all farmers would become salaried civil servants. Second, the state would start industrial and commercial enterprises to replace imports, using capital raised through taxation and through loans from a new national bank. These measures would meet the aspirations for Siam to 'progress' economically and draw the mass of the people out of poverty. They would also undermine the economic base which the royal family and some aristocratic allies had created over the past generation by using political power to acquire land and by using tax revenues to fund capital investments.

After the political crisis of 1933, this plan was quietly forgotten. Following Prajadhipok's abdication in 1935, the Privy Purse was divided into Prajadhipok's personal property and the Crown Property Bureau which was taken under the Finance Ministry. But proposals to seize, purchase, or deplete aristocratic assets by taxation were shelved. Through the mid-1930s, economic ministers proposed schemes to help peasants survive the depression by forming cooperatives and promoting new sources of employment. But the political will and administrative machinery to implement such schemes were lacking.

The Pridi group concentrated on other forms of progress. Pridi completed the preparation of a modern law code, a project begun in the early 1900s but constantly delayed. The new code removed legal bases of aristocratic privilege, withdrew legal recognition of polygamy, and cancelled the requirement for parental consent of marriage partners. The People's Party government increased investment in education, raising the number of primary school pupils from 0.7 to 1.7 million over 1931-39. Pridi spearheaded the foundation of a second university, named the University of Moral and Political Sciences (Thammasat), designed to train a new kind of bureaucrat for the post-absolutist age. The government also expanded local government, and increased spending on roads, hospitals, and electricity generation.

In 1935, Pridi travelled to London to negotiate lower interest rates for Siam's foreign loans, and to initiate talks to renegotiate the mid-nineteenth-century treaties which restricted Siam's fiscal autonomy and granted extraterritorial rights to western nations.* These treaties were all revised over 1937-38, after which Siam increased tariffs to protect local industries.

Pridi's civilian wing thus made modest steps towards its new definition of 'progress'. But its attempts to legitimize the new regime through popular representation were much shakier. Under the 'permanent' constitution promulgated in December 1932, half of the single-chamber Assembly was elected, and the other half appointed. The Cabinet was theoretically responsible to this Assembly but could always dominate by manipulating the appointed half. In early 1933, a royalist group attempted to form a political party, but the king refused permission and attempted to outlaw all political parties, including the People's Party. Later, MPs tabled several bills to allow political parties, but the government blocked them in fear they would facilitate a royalist comeback. On the eve of the 1932 coup, the People's Party leaders had sworn an oath of solidarity and, despite internal factionalism, negotiated each of nine changes of leadership between then and 1941 by internal debate behind closed doors.

Many groups which had enthusiastically supported the 1932 revolution became disappointed. Some businessmen were appointed to the Assembly and won the right to form a Board of Trade, but failed to convince the government to give more solid support to domestic entrepreneurs. Leaders of the Chinese community were distressed by signs of Thai ethnic nationalism, including regulations to restrict Chinese schools. Labour leaders were allowed to form the first labour associations, but when they lent support to a strike in the rice mills, the leaders were arrested and the associations suppressed. Dissident journalists who had helped to nurture the political

atmosphere in which the 1932 revolution took place fared little better. Between June and December 1932, ten newspapers were closed by government order, and more closures followed in 1933 and 1934, while government funds were used to support papers friendly to the People's Party. In 1933, 2000 monks from twelve provinces supported a petition for Sangha reform, but leaders of the movement were accused of rebellion and forcibly disrobed. In the wake of the Boworadet revolt, the government passed an Act for the Preservation of the Constitution under which suspected dissidents could be imprisoned or exiled to the provinces without trial.

Pridi hoped to make nation and constitution a new focus of public loyalty. He spoke on radio, urging people to love the nation and preserve the constitution because it 'fuses us all together as one unity'.³⁹ A Constitution Association was formed in late 1933. Monks and teachers were recruited to explain the importance of the constitution to the people. Miniatures of the constitution were distributed to all provinces and honoured on the newly designated Constitution Day (10 December) in the same manner as a Buddhist image. Constitution Day was gradually elevated into the premier national holiday of the year, with parades, art contests, dances, and a Miss Siam national beauty contest organized by the Interior Ministry to find 'a symbol of the goodness of our race'.⁴⁰ In 1939, a Constitution Monument was completed. It was conspicuously the largest monument in the city, designed with symbols of Thai tradition, and placed in the middle of Chulalongkorn's 'royal way'.

RISE OF THE MILITARY

The young military officers who controlled the firepower gradually came to dominate the People's Party. The original revolution, the second coup of June 1933, and the suppression of the Boworadet revolt depended on the ability of a small group of officers commanding the city's battalions. After the Boworadet revolt, the minister of defence argued that 'keeping the peace' had become the 'single most important problem' and hence soldiers 'who existed for the nation alone' had to be at the centre of politics.⁴¹ Despite financial stringency, the military demanded increased funds, secured 26 per cent of the national budget from 1933 to 1937, and doubled the number of military personnel.

Within this young military group, Phibun emerged as the leader and became minister of defence in early 1934. He argued that Siam possessed four basic political institutions – monarchy, parliament, bureaucracy, and military – of which only the military was 'abiding and permanent'. The

parliament, by contrast, could be 'abolished through various events and causes'.⁴² The army set up its own radio stations which broadcast Phibun's slogan: 'Your country is your house, the army is its fence'. Without the military, Phibun stated, Siam would be 'effaced from the world'. His Defence Ministry commissioned a cinema film, *Luat thahan thai* (Blood of the Thai military, 1935), in which Siam is attacked by an anonymous foreign power, and the heroes and heroines abandon their romances to defend the nation. *Blood of the Thai military* - Mar. 5. 1935

Phibun and his group were attracted to other states which were rising on the basis of a strong, militarized version of nationalism. In 1933, Phibun had contacted the Japanese legation for assistance in the event the western powers intervened in Siam. Over subsequent years, this contact developed into broader sympathy and cooperation. In 1935, a Japan-Siam Association was formed, including several of Phibun's group. In 1934, he inaugurated Yuwachon, a militarized youth movement modelled on the officer training corps found in the UK and US. After he had sent one of his group who was half-German and German-trained to study the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, Yuwachon became more like the Hitler Youth.

In December 1938, Phibun took over as prime minister. Since 1935, he had been the target of at least three assassination attempts, one of which aimed to kill the whole Cabinet. According to a royal insider, one attempt was 'brilliant in its conception . . . and very nearly succeeded'.⁴³ A month after becoming premier, Phibun claimed to have uncovered a major restorationist plot. He ordered the arrest of seventy people, including the conservative old guard in the People's Party and leading royalists. After trial by a special court, fifteen were executed, two were exiled, and another three (including the senior royal family member, Prince Rangsit) were condemned to death but reprieved and imprisoned along with nineteen others. The lengthy court proceedings were published as a condemnation of royal conspiracy. The government successfully sued Prajadhipok for transferring 4.2 million baht from the Privy Purse to his private accounts overseas. It seized his palace, banned his picture from public display, and disbanded the Ministry of the Royal Household. Many remaining royalists left the country.

Phibun appointed himself head of the army and minister of defence, interior, and (later) foreign affairs. The rest of the Cabinet was packed with military men, and the military subvention rose to 33 per cent of the total budget. When a group of provincial (mostly northeastern) MPs protested strongly against the increase in the military budget and other aspects of military aggrandizement, Phibun dissolved the Assembly. When the opponents were returned in the following election and threatened to

vote down the budget, he began to bypass the Assembly and rule by decree. In 1940, shortly before the Assembly was due to become wholly elective, he rammed through an amendment to extend the appointed half for another decade (up to 1953).

Phibun awarded himself the rank of field marshal, which had previously been held only by the monarch. Early in 1942, he started to have himself referred to publicly as 'The Leader' (*than phu nam*), and to plaster the daily press with slogans such as 'Our nation's security depends on believing in our leader'. He commanded that his picture should be displayed in every home. He passed a series of authoritarian laws, including a press Act and an emergency decree which allowed almost unlimited arrest. Critics suggested that Phibun's model was Mussolini, and that he was elevating himself into a presidential or even royal role. Phibun explained: 'The campaign is meant to demonstrate that we, the whole nation, can act as one person'.⁴⁴

MOULDING POST-ABSOLUTIST CULTURE

Phibun and Luang Wichit Wathakan set out to create a new culture for post-absolutist Siam by using the power of the state.

As noted earlier, Wichit was a quintessential example of the new men of the 1920s who rose from commoner obscurity through talent and access to education. He served abroad in the foreign service and saw Siam in international perspective. After his return in the late 1920s, he quickly made his name as a writer, publicist on the new medium of radio, and ardent advocate of nationalism.

He was also a traditionalist who saw the monarchy as an essential part of the Thai nation. He was acquainted with the Pridi group in Paris but was not drafted into the early People's Party, probably because of his royalist sympathies. Over 1932-33 he served as a publicist for the royalist counter-revolutionary party, but gradually shifted his allegiance. He showed his skill as a political publicist in preparing the People's Party's propaganda during the Boworadet revolt. From 1934 onwards, he became a strong ally of Phibun. The combination of his extraordinary flair for popular culture, his official position, and Phibun's backing gave him the opportunity to shape a new version of Siam as a nation in history.

Wichit was appointed head of a new Fine Arts Department, established to help mould the public culture of the post-absolutist era. After the abdication, the department inherited musicians, craftsmen, and performers from the palace, and used them to create a new national theatre troupe. Wichit wrote plays for the troupe which used traditional historical themes

but a dramatic presentation which was more western than royal-traditional. These plays popularized a new style of *phleng sakhon* (international song) which blended elements of traditional singing into a western format of the popular song.

Wichit believed in 'human revolution', the potential for people to change themselves and thus the world. He wrote manuals of self-improvement, including *Brain, The Power of Thought*, and *The Power of Determination*, which guided people to be modern and successful. He idealized the Sukhothai era as the exemplar of Siamese civilization not, as Vajiravudh had done, because of its form of kingship, but because of its perfect expression of the freedom-loving character of the Thai. Freedom was important because it gave opportunities for all to contribute their talents to the nation. Sukhothai, in Wichit's version, was so creative in art and language, and so productive in material life, because people had the freedom to produce. Indeed, Sukhothai was proof that 'free enterprise has been part of Thailand's philosophy for many generations'.⁴⁵ After the Sukhothai highpoint, Siamese civilization declined in the Ayutthaya period because of the adoption of Khmer practices such as slavery and divine kingship.

In Wichit's view, history was made by great personal achievements. One of his first works on return to Siam in the late 1920s was an essay on *Mahaburut* (Great men, 1928), with capsule biographies of Napoleon, Bismarck, Disraeli, Gladstone, Okubo Toshimichi (of the Meiji Restoration), and Mussolini. Four years later he wrote another laudatory study of Mussolini. These figures were heroic because of their service to the nation. 'Man instinctively loves his fellow men, his friends, his family, and his compatriots', Wichit wrote, and hence 'the division of humanity into nations is correct according to natural law'. Man's duty was 'to uphold the importance of the nation; think of the nation and not individual or sectional benefit in any endeavour; preserve the nation; and unify it through integration'.⁴⁶ Wichit wrote plays identifying King Naresuan and King Taksin as great men who defended Siam from its enemy neighbour, Burma. But such heroism was not reserved for kings. In his most popular play of the 1930s, *Luat suphan* (Blood of Suphanburi, 1936), the heroine is an ordinary young woman who rouses other ordinary people to oppose a Burmese invasion. The Thai were a martial people, including the women. Another Wichit play, *Suk thalang* (Battle of Thalang), celebrated two sisters who defended Phuket against the Burmese. Corrado Feroci, an Italian sculptor trained in the monumental classicism favoured by Mussolini and now working for Wichit's Fine Arts Department, depicted similar ideas on the Constitution Monument (Figure 11), a statue of Thao Suranari, the legendary female

part of the
the 1920s
the 1920s
the 1920s



Figure 11: The nation free and militant. Bas-reliefs prepared under the supervision of Corrado Feroci on the Constitution Monument (1939) introduce ordinary people into official iconography, but with the prime role for soldiers.

defender of Khorat against the Lao in 1828, and another statue depicting the villagers of Bang Rajan who defied the Burmese in 1767.

Wichit further elaborated the Thai national character as constructive, detailed, aesthetical, and martial. Through this martial prowess, the T(h)ai had become the dominant power in Suwannaphum, the golden peninsula. Also as a result of its advanced civilization, 'Siam has become the heart of the Golden Peninsula, like Athens was the heart of Greece' and thus other races had 'come to settle . . . within the boundaries of Siam'.⁴⁷ In his 1937 play,

Ratchamanu, a military commander during Naresuan's reign announced that the Khmer were 'Thais like us' but had somehow become separated; 'all of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same . . . [but] the Siamese Thais are the elder brothers'.⁴⁸ *Chaoying saenwi* (Princess of Saenwi) dramatized the common ethnicity of the Shan and Thai. *Mahadevi* (1938) imagined a sixteenth-century queen of Lanna helping to unify her country with Siam.

For Wichit, the Thai were, as the Nationality Law prescribed, those born in Siam and hence ethnically diverse. But in his songs, like '*Luat thai*' (Thai blood), they were also mystically united into 'one unified stream of blood which must never be broken into many streams'.⁴⁹ The national anthem, rescripted in this era, contained the same sentiment: 'we are all of the Thai blood-flesh-lineage-race'.

Wichit took little interest in the mass. He believed they remained poor because they were too 'lazy' to achieve his 'human revolution'. He argued that the constitution guaranteed justice without any need for mass participation. Only states where the mass was highly educated qualified for democracy. Political parties were like 'the brains of the nation'. He cited Aristotle for the assertion that, 'From birth, some people are marked out to rule others, and some to be ruled'.⁵⁰

Because he chose forms like theatre, song, cinema, and radio which reached beyond the boundaries of high literacy, and because his works were absorbed into the curricula of the expanding education system, Wichit's influence was broad, deep, and lasting.

A WORLD OF RIVAL NATIONALISMS

In September 1937, Japanese troops invaded Manchuria. In April 1938, Hitler launched the *Anschluss* into Austria. From this point, Siam's emergent nationalisms – Pridi's liberal version, Phibun's militaristic one, and the *lukjin* affection for their place of origin – were bound up with the clash of nationalisms on a world scale.

The Japanese invasion of China provoked another wave of nationalist feeling among the Siam Chinese, and a renewed upsurge of organizations and newspapers. Rival KMT factions, the Communist Party in Siam, and other Chinese groups cooperated to sell war bonds, dispatch rice and other supplies to the KMT forces, send 2000 volunteers to fight alongside them, and reinstitute a boycott of Japanese goods. Merchants who imported Japanese goods were blackmailed into making donations. Sixty-one were killed for failing to comply.

The People's Party had hitherto acted carefully towards both China and the local Chinese. It had placed some restrictions on Chinese schools but then revoked them when the Chinese Chamber complained. It welcomed a Kuomintang goodwill mission in 1936. Wichit inserted a song on 'Chinese-Thai unity' in his 1937 play on King Taksin. But the 1937 boycott again drew the government's attention to the powerful Chinese grip over commercial activity, and hence the economy's vulnerability to an external political issue. It also raised the issue of Chinese loyalties in the event of a war of competing nationalisms, and the possibility that Siam would get dragged into the Japan-China war as an enemy of Japan. The deaths of several prominent merchants in the boycott campaign, and of others by freelance gangsterism, rekindled fears about the Chinese secret societies.

In July 1938, Wichit Wathakan gave a speech reviving Vajiravudh's comparison between the Siamese Chinese and the European Jews. He added that the Jews had no homeland, whereas 'the Chinese cannot be compared to them; they come to work here but send money back to their country; so we can say that the Chinese are worse than the Jews'.⁵¹ He wrote another play, *Nanchao* (1939), portraying the Chinese driving the Thai out of their earlier homeland.

The government doubled the immigration fee and closed two banks engaged in remittance to China. It cracked down on the *angyi*, businessmen, and political activists engaged in the boycott and fund-raising. Hundreds were arrested and deported. All but one Chinese newspaper ceased publication. Regulations on Chinese schools were tightened, resulting in all but two closing down.

The government also launched a programme to create 'a Thai economy for the Thai people'. This was partly preparation for a possible war, partly an attempt to compete against western and Chinese firms through state enterprises, and partly aid for the 'Thai' peasants who formed the mass of the population. In the mid-1930s, the Defence Ministry began setting up companies to make Siam more self-reliant in strategic industries such as oil supply and textiles. As the prospects of a widespread nationalist war heightened, this war-style economy was expanded. In 1938, when the Chinese boycotted Japanese trade, the government set up the Thai Rice Company. The economic minister explained that it was dangerous for 'the country's most important product to be totally in the hands of foreigners', meaning merchants of Chinese origin. Phibun added that 'rice is the backbone of the people . . . but people are poor because they are squeezed by middlemen'.⁵² The Thai Rice Company leased existing mills and eventually took control of 70-80 per cent of the rice trade. The government also

set up a pyramid of companies to distribute imports and other consumer goods from the capital down to local markets.

In 1939, the government imposed monopolies on tobacco and salt; reserved several occupations and businesses for Thai citizens, including driving taxis, slaughtering pigs, fishing, planting rubber, and selling petrol; imposed an alien registration fee of 4 baht; and in other ways shifted the tax burden onto commerce through levies on shops, signboards, and income, and increased rates on opium and gambling. In 1941, the government drew up a National Industrial Plan under which the Defence Ministry ventured into more strategically important industries, including mining, tanning, sugar, shipping, tobacco, rubber, salt, fisheries, and (!) the manufacture of playing cards. Most of these were existing factories commandeered from (usually Chinese) private entrepreneurs.

Since the mid-1930s, two commissions had been appointed to consider what to do about the question of nationality for the large numbers of Chinese who had arrived in recent decades. A few first-generation immigrants had petitioned to adopt Thai nationality but there was no mechanism. In April 1939, a law was passed enabling people to change their nationality to Thai as long as they disclaimed any loyalty to China and proved their loyalty to Siam by speaking the language, changing their names, and educating their children at Thai schools. In the first year, only 104 passed these rigorous checks, but they were an important group. Virtually all were wealthy merchants, mine owners, and industrialists. Their change of nationality provided the government with a group of 'Thai' entrepreneurs to help run the proliferation of new state enterprises. Ma Bulakun (who in fact transferred from English nationality acquired in Hong Kong) ran the government's rice trading company. Wilat Osathanon, son-in-law of the late KMT leader Siew Hut Seng, and Julin Lamsam, member of one of the biggest rice-trading families, helped run the government's wholesale and retail network. Under the cover of Thai nationalism and war, the rising commoner politics and rising *lukjin* business cautiously linked hands.

THE GREAT THAI EMPIRE AND THE NEW THAILAND

Soon after 1932, some of the military wing in the People's Party made plans to reclaim the 'lost territories' assigned to other states by the treaties of the 1900s. In 1935, Bangkok's envoy in Paris referred to 'the Siamese Alsace-Lorraine'.⁵³ In 1935-36, the Ministry of Defence published a series of maps which depicted Khun Wichitmatra's story of Thai migrations, and which

showed the imagined boundaries of Thai kingdoms from the Nanchao era to Bangkok. One map showed the 'full' extent of Siam and seven pieces of territory 'lost' to Burma and the colonial powers between the late eighteenth century and 1909.

After the *Anschluss*, a military lecturer claimed that the Burmese, Annamese, Khmer, and Malay were all of 'original Thai stock' and should be united with Siam. In 1939, the École Française d'Extrême-Orient presented Wichit Wathakan with a map showing Tai-speaking peoples scattered across Southeast Asia and southern China. He exclaimed: 'If we could recover the lost territories, we would be a great power . . . Before long we could be a country of around 9 million square kilometres with a population of 60 million'.⁵⁴ He began campaigning for the return of the 'lost territories', particularly parts of Cambodia and Laos. He travelled to the Mekong border and had the That Phanom shrine, one of the sacred centres of the Lao world, heightened by 30 metres so it would be more visible from the eastern bank in French Laos.

The government distributed the map showing the 'lost territories' to schools. Army radio advocated building a *maha anajak thai* (great Thai empire) on Hitler's model. Newspaper articles and street demonstrations helped to fan popular irredentism. Wichit reasoned: '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'.⁵⁵ Phibun agreed: 'If you don't want to be scum you have to be a Great Power'.⁵⁶

In 1939, the government issued seven *ratthaniyom*, often translated as 'cultural mandates' but better rendered as 'state edicts'. Over the following four years, the series was extended to twelve, and strengthened by other Acts and rulings. In part, these were attempts to strengthen Siam in the context of a global war which the country could not avoid. But more basically they showed the Phibun regime's faith in the ability of the strong state to remake the nation and its culture from above.

The first theme of these measures was to move Siam finally away from its royalist past. The first edict, issued on 24 June 1939, changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand on grounds that 'We are of the Thai race, but . . . the name Siam does not correspond to our race'.⁵⁷ A later edict abolished the use of official titles from the absolutist era. The anniversary of the 1932 revolution (24 June) was designated as National Day in 1938, and subsequently elevated as the premier annual holiday, marked by military and cultural displays. In 1942, Phibun passed a Sangha Act which removed the royalist Thammayut sect from its privileged position, and shifted

authority away from the royally appointed supreme patriarch to councils of elders.

The second theme of these measures was 'to make Thai people truly Thai'. One edict explained: 'We must remember there are many new Thai. Now we have Thailand, we can mix the true Thai together with the new Thai to work together in friendship for the united nation'.⁵⁸ This meant applying pressure and providing facilitation for Chinese and other non-Thai to speak and act in ways which confirmed their membership of the national community. An edict prescribed rituals for honouring national symbols such as the flag and anthem. Everyone was urged to learn and speak the Thai dialect of the central region. To make this 'easier to read and easier to write', a government commission modified the language with a simplified alphabet, regular phonetic spelling, unique pronouns which ignored distinction of gender and status, and standard versions for greeting (*sawatdi*) and other common usages. In 1942, a National Culture Commission was established to define and disseminate Thai culture.

A third theme was unity. People were no longer to be described as 'northern Thai', 'northeastern Thai', and so on, but henceforth were simply *chao thai*. Another committee scanned popular songs and removed mentions of 'Lao', 'Ngiew' (Shan), and other non-Thai ethnic descriptors.

A fourth theme of the state edicts was progress. Thai were urged to help the economy in various ways, such as being self-reliant and buying Thai goods. Standards of dress, public conduct, and social life were prescribed to remove any justification for outsiders to treat Thailand as uncivilized. Contests were arranged to promote 'modern' dress (Figure 12). Thai were urged to conduct themselves with decorum in public places, including queuing in an orderly way, and refraining from making graffiti. Some western habits were advised, including using forks and spoons, wearing hats, and kissing one's wife before leaving the house. One edict prescribed a timetable for people to divide their day between work, eating, leisure, and sleep.

Since progress was dependent on the number and health of the population, Phibun aimed to increase the population to 40 million and to make people stronger and healthier. A National Nutrition Project had been launched in 1938. The doctor in charge wrote: 'In revolutionary times, there should also be a revolution in people's food and eating'.⁵⁹ People were encouraged to eat more protein. Exercise was included in the school curriculum, and more funds were devoted to medicine and hygiene. The edicts prescribed public education on nutrition. A mother's day was designated to revere and encourage motherhood. A Ministry of Public Health was formed in 1942.

A final theme was national security. The second of the edicts defined treasonous and anti-national activities. The whole programme was publicized on radio in dialogues between Nai Man and Nai Khong, whose two names joined formed *mankhong*, security. Slogans included 'Hats lead nation to power'.

The whole project, as Phibun explained, was launched because 'government is forced to reform and reconstruct the various aspects of society, especially its culture, which here signifies growth and beauty, orderliness, progress and uniformity, and the morality of the nation'.⁶⁰ In 1944, the government defined a 14-point Code of National Bravery based on the *bushido* code of Japanese warriors, which Wichit and several others had openly admired for some time. It began by stating that 'the Thai love their nation more than their own lives', and went on to define the Thai as martial, Buddhist, industrious, peace-loving, self-reliant, aspiring for progress, and loyal to their leader.

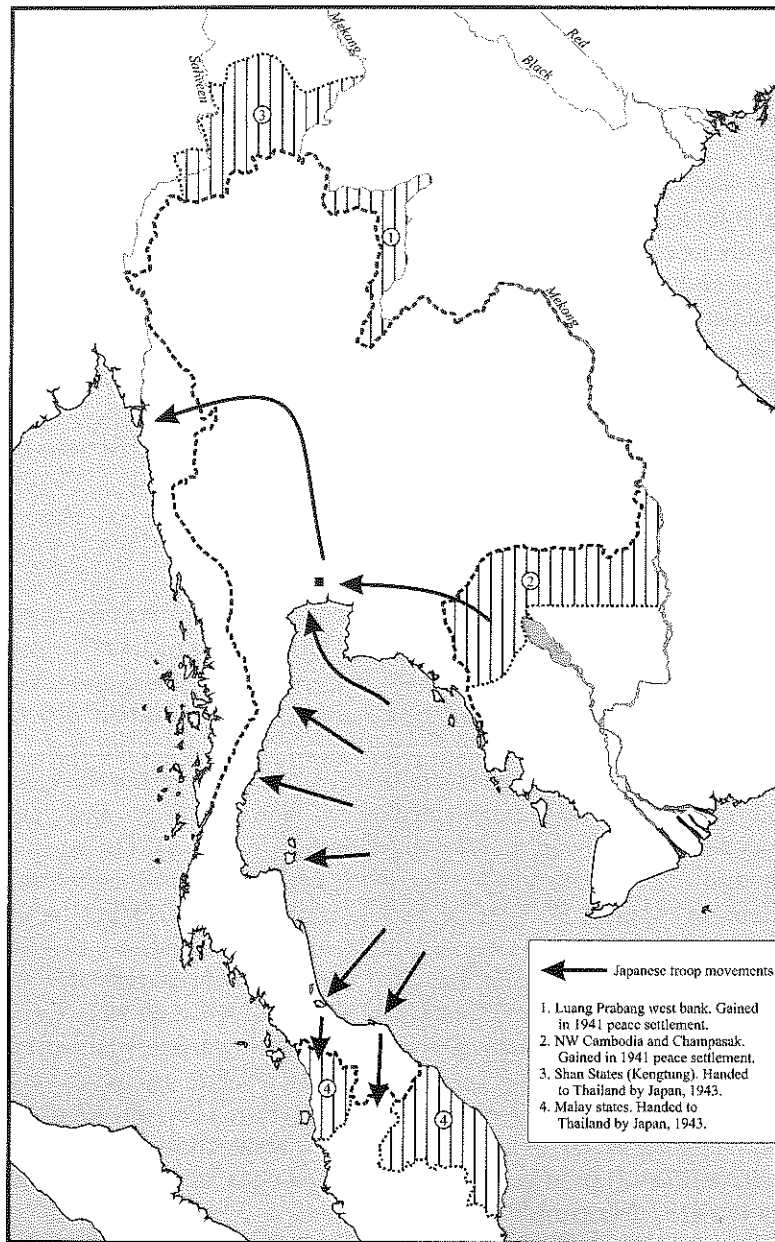
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Phibun group had cultivated strong links with Japan over the 1930s, yet his government's major aim was to keep Thailand out of a war between the great powers by balancing between the Allied and Axis camps. After Paris fell and Japanese forces invaded Indochina, however, Phibun took the opportunity in January 1941 to send troops across the border to seize parts of French Cambodia. The armed clashes with the French were indecisive, but Phibun's government declared victory, held parades, and began building a Victory Monument (with more heroic sculptures by Feroci). The Japanese stepped in to broker an agreement which ceded two chunks of territory to Thailand (Map 5). Phibun was now indebted to Japan. When he was informed that the Japanese would land troops in Thailand to attack the British in Malaya and Burma, he urged the Cabinet to comply in order to regain more 'lost territory'. The Japanese troops landed on 8 December 1941. The government initially agreed to allow safe passage, and then in January formally declared war on Britain and the US. Phibun told Cabinet: 'We should not let them [Japan] build Asia alone . . . They will appreciate us . . . Speaking plainly among the Thai, it is about time to declare war with the winner'.⁶¹ In May, with Japanese blessing, a Thai army marched north to seize territory in Burma's Shan States.

Phibun imagined Thailand serving as Japan's partner in ridding Asia of western colonialism. Wichit, elevated to foreign minister, dreamed of 'raising our country to be the cultural centre of southern Asia'.⁶² But the



Figure 12: Miss Afternoon Wear. Winner of the contest for afternoon wear and special occasions, probably 1941–42, as part of Phibun's campaign of modernization.



Map 5: Thailand in the Second World War

reality was that the Japanese treated Thailand as an occupied state, Japanese troops looked down on the Thai as inferior, and the Japanese government ravaged the Thai economy for war supplies. By mid-1943, Thai leaders were aware that the tide of war had turned against Japan, and they began easing away from the relationship. To strengthen the faltering ties, the Japanese prime minister visited Bangkok and formally confirmed Thai control of four Malay and two Shan states. But Phibun pointedly refused to attend the Greater East Asian Conference in Tokyo in November 1943, and sent messengers through China to make contact with the Allies. He told one of his military commanders: 'which side do you think will lose this war? That side is our enemy.'⁶³ The government began to provide the Allies with intelligence, and laid plans for resisting the Japanese.

The war had widened the rift between the military members of the People's Party who were attracted by the militarized states of the Axis, and many civilian members who had been educated in France or England and sympathized with the Allies. After the Japanese invasion, the civilian leader, Pridi, had been kicked out of the Cabinet and become regent. He began to organize a resistance group which made contact with the Allies through China in mid-1943. In parallel, students and other Thai in the US and Britain formed resistance groups and offered their services to the Allied armies. The group in the US was led by the ambassador to the US and minor royal family member Seni Pramoj. By early 1944, these various networks, known collectively as Seri Thai (Free Thai), came together. Men and equipment were parachuted into Thailand to organize resistance. Both Pridi's undercover group and Phibun's government secretly lent assistance.

In July 1944, the Pridi group manoeuvred Phibun out of power to improve the chances of negotiating with the Allies to avoid being treated as an enemy. Seri Thai wanted to launch a rising against the Japanese to show its bona fides, but the Allies discouraged any such move, and only a few sabotage operations had been completed when the war ended. The British wanted to punish and dominate Thailand in the aftermath, particularly in order to secure Thailand's rice supplies for the devastated colonial territories. The US, however, was opposed to any return of colonial influence and made it clear Thailand would be treated 'as an enemy-occupied country'. To strengthen this US support, Pridi invited Seni Pramoj to return from the US to become prime minister and front the peace negotiations. Eventually, the British were satisfied with an indemnity paid in rice, and the US insisted that Thailand's borders were returned to their pre-war positions.

CONCLUSION

The creators of a new public sphere in the early twentieth century founded the second of Siam's major visions about the uses of the nation-state. Whereas the royalist reformers of the Fifth Reign argued the need for a strong, dictatorial state to enable Siam to survive and be important in the world, the commoner nationalists contended that the main purpose of the nation-state was the well-being of the nation's people. This meant economic progress to benefit more members of the nation through agriculture, industry, and an end to exploitation by both the old elite and the colonialists. It also meant more public services, including education, health, and communications. Most of all it meant new institutions, the rule of law, and especially a constitution as tools to limit or block old forms of power and to create new ones.

This vision consciously set itself apart from the masculine imagery of the strong-state version. Journalists skewered polygamy as the epitome of the old order. The novels and stories of the era are full of strong heroines. The 1932 constitution granted the franchise equally to men and women. Even Wichit built several of his plays around heroines, and conjured women out of Thai history for immortalization in statuary – though these women were rather martial.

But this second vision proved very vulnerable. The main protagonists of the 1932 revolution were servants of the nation-state with great faith in its capacity to effect social and economic transformation from above. They doubted the existence of any mass base which would rise to defend them in the face of a royalist counter-revolution. With growing influence from contemporary fascist models, Phibun's military wing projected the ideal of a strong military leadership leading a united orderly society to modernize and expand in order to survive in a world of clashing nationalisms. They created a modified and more powerful version of the strong-state tradition minus only the monarchy.

By 1945, the economy was wrecked by Japan's wartime demands; Bangkok was subjected to over 4000 Allied bombing raids, resulting in evacuation of 60 per cent of the population; Japan, the exemplar of Asian 'progress', had been defeated; and Thailand's leaders were scrambling to deny the recent past in order to preserve independence at the peace negotiations. Temporarily at least, the ideal of a strong state was discredited. Many of Phibun's innovations were scrapped – the edicts on dress and social conduct, the language reforms, and the bushido-type code. Even the country's name was temporarily reversed to Siam in September 1945 (for three years, but only in foreign-language usage).

But many of Phibun and Wichit's innovations lasted because they commanded wide acceptance in the new urban society. Wichit invented the Thai, not simply as the citizens of a certain state but also as people with a history and 'national character'. He offered guidance on how new urban Thai could become modern citizens of the world. He helped new bureaucrats imagine themselves as a paternal elite which 'relieved the sufferings and increased the well-being' of a backward and passive peasantry.

Phibun and Wichit built their version of the nation on the foundations laid by Chulalongkorn, Damrong, and Vajiravudh, rather than digging those foundations up and building anew. They continued to imagine the Thai as a *race* with martial characteristics, threatened by bad neighbours and great powers, rescued by unifying around a strong leader, and dedicated to the pursuit of progress. They placed the monarch within a constitution, but never seriously threatened to move towards republicanism. They continued to treat the mass of the people as bystanders at a politics carried out by palace coup and intrigue.

These were still the politics of a national capital city in an overwhelmingly peasant society. The royalists, the military party, and the businessmen and professionals clustered around Pridi were elite groups vying for influence over the new central machinery of the nation-state. But the Second World War made two changes which brought this political era to an end. First, it created a war economy with deeper government involvement, and with fluctuations which affected more of the population. The economic crisis after the war brought mass distress and mass political mobilization. Second, the war drew Thailand deeper into a complex international politics involving Japan, China, and the western powers, especially the US. This shift was permanent. The aftermath of the war saw competitive attempts to build transnational empires around rival communist and capitalist visions of the state's potential to lead economic and political development. The struggles to define the Thai nation and control the Thai state were now skewed to the pattern of this Cold War.

- 16 This translation from Somthat, *Krungthep nai nirat*, adapted from that by Kasian Tejapira in 'Pigtail: a pre-history of Chineseness in Siam', *Sojourn* 7, 1 (1992), p. 110.
- 17 In the simplest form, these names joined their *sae* name with *trakun*, a Thai approximation to the meaning of *sae*; hence Huntrakun, and so on. Others translated the *sae* name, and some joined a translation of part of their Chinese name with *wanit* or *phanit* meaning commerce, hence Sophonphanit.
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- 19 The early estimates, summarized by Porphant Ouyyanont, have some guesswork. The counts, from the first census in 1909–10, are complicated by rapid changes in the city's area.
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- 6 Attachak, *Kan plian plaeng*, pp. 273, 275.
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- 8 Attachak, *Kan plian plaeng*, pp. 250, 252.
- 9 Copeland, 'Contested nationalism', pp. 189, 191.
- 10 Nakharin, *Kanpatriwat sayam*, p. 83.

- 11 Nakharin, *Kanpatriwat sayam*, p. 80.
- 12 Copeland, 'Contested nationalism', p. 64.
- 13 Chaiyan, *Rise and Fall*, p. 156.
- 14 Chaiyan, *Rise and Fall*, p. 156.
- 15 Copeland, 'Contested nationalism', p. 65.
- 16 Nakharin, *Kanpatriwat sayam*, p. 94.
- 17 Copeland, 'Contested nationalism', p. 74.
- 18 Chaloeunkiat Phianuan, *Prachathippatai baep thai: khwamkhit thang kanmueang khong thahan thai 2519–2529* (Thai style democracy: political thought of the Thai military 1976–1986) (Bangkok: Thammasat University, Thai Khadi Institute, 1990), pp. 20–1; Kullada, *Thai Absolutism*, p. 168.
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