WORSHIPPING THE GREAT MODERNISER

King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class
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Irene Stengs

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Preface

This study focuses on the cult of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), which reached its zenith in the 1990s. The king is remembered as Thailand’s great moderniser. Introducing a variety of people and places involved in the cult in various ways and degrees, the book situates the social imaginary around King Chulalongkorn in the context of popular Buddhism and the everyday life of urban Thai, rather than studying the king as a historical figure. In this sense it offers an ethnography of Thailand that gives insight in people’s anxieties, dreams, and aspirations during this period. In addition, I situate the King Chulalongkorn cult in the context of the general promotion of the Thai monarchy, and of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in particular. In fact, the ever more exalted expectations of kingship in the person of King Bhumibol formed the core of the King Chulalongkorn cult.

At present, the salient worship of King Chulalongkorn has given way to a predominance of King Bhumibol. At the time of the field research (1996–98) the image of King Bhumibol was already omnipresent in Thailand. The degree and intensity of current displays of veneration and adherence for the ruling monarch surpass the previous use of royal images by far, while the images of King Chulalongkorn in public and semi-public realms gradually fade away. Given the close interconnection between the images of the two kings, this study can be read as a preamble to a study of the image of King Bhumibol as it surfaced in the political turmoil surrounding the 2006 coup d’etat.

Comparing the roles of the two royal figures as the ideal personifications of what I call “modern Buddhist kingship”, one major difference is that the image of King Chulalongkorn as a spiritual presence offers other possibilities for and imposes less restrictions on the imagination than the image of the ruling monarch. King Bhumibol and his visual representations are essential factors in actual politics, and to a far stronger extent subject to state control. These representations are mobilised to both legitimize and obscure the power of the state and its manifestations. In the
political arena, all views on political core issues such as redistribution of wealth, corruption, human rights, and democracy are sucked into the vortex of the persistent political antagonisms, to surface as elaborations of the slogan “we love the king” (raw rak nailuang).

The ideology of the Thai people’s unconditional love for their king is controlled and enforced through a strict lese-majesty law that precludes even the most trivial criticism of the king or the monarchy in general. The combination of a pervasive royalism, in which every person and party seeks to appear more royalist than any other, and a general internalised self-censorship are central to grasping the transformation of the worship of the monarchy in recent years. Also foreign media publications are subject to allegations of lese-majesty. Indeed, also this study suffered some occasional self-censorship.

The image of King Bhumibol as the nation’s “pillar of stability” is not confined to the borders of the kingdom. On the contrary, more often than not newspapers and other media around the world follow this perspective rather uncritically in their analyses of Thai politics. The apparent appeal and seductiveness of this image testifies to the enduring aura of kingship in the modern Thai nation-state and beyond.

Irene Stengs
November 2008
Dedication

This study is the result of a project conducted under the Research Program on Globalisation and the Construction of Communal Identities of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I am indebted to WOTRO for financially supporting this project. The National Research Council of Thailand kindly granted me the permission to conduct field research in Thailand. Institutional support also came from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam, which provided me with infrastructural and organisational support. I want to thank the Meertens Institute for the support in the final stages of finishing the manuscript. My gratitude also goes to the two anonymous referees for their careful reading and critical remarks.

In Thailand, I am obliged to all who willingly shared their knowledge, feelings and experiences with me. I want to mention in particular the hospitality of the abbot of Wat Doi Chang, the medium Mae Wan, and the leaders of the Prayers Society. The Venerable Thongchan of Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai contributed substantially to my understanding with his lessons in Thai royal language and his patient explanations. I am also indebted to my research assistant Nate for helping me understand the Thai conceptual framework surrounding kingship. I am grateful for the assistance of Prof. Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Dr. Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool, who helped me find my way in Thai academic circles. A special word of thank goes to Sjon Hauser for generously sharing his time, archive, knowledge and friendship with me. I also want to thank him for his detailed readings of the first drafts of most chapters.

In the Netherlands, a supportive environment of colleagues, friends and family has contributed to the accomplishment of the project. First of all, I am indebted to Prof. Dr. H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen and Dr. H. ten Brummelhuis for their encouragement and inspiration. I feel particularly privileged because of the high degree of academic freedom they granted me during my PhD project, a privilege that is rare these days. In addition, I am grateful to colleagues and friends from the WOTRO.
Globalisation Seminars and the Study Days organised by the Research Centre for Religion and Society of the University of Amsterdam. I gained much from the inspiring discussions and the opportunities to discuss my papers. I wish to thank in particular Gerd Baumann, Wim van Binsbergen, Birgit Meyer, Peter Pels, and Rafael Sanchez for their suggestions and for sharing their thoughts with me. Towards Birgit Meyer I am greatly indebted for being both my mentor and friend. Her critical readings and intellectual support have been fundamental throughout the process. Special credit goes to Jan Kerkhoven for editing the entire text while simultaneously being a critical reader. I want to thank Baas Terwiel for his comments and encouragement.

Last but not least I wish to thank my family for their everlasting support. They accompanied me to Thailand and granted me all the time needed to finish the writing. I especially want to thank Rosa and Max for their patience. It is difficult to do justice to the significance of the mental and intellectual support of Jeroen. His enthusiasm for discussing the subject of study and his readiness to comment in detail on every chapter throughout the various stages of writing were essential for the completion of this book. Finally, I thank my parents for always supporting my endeavours. I therefore dedicate this book to them.
Short Note on the Transliteration of Thai Words and Names

For the transliteration of Thai words I have followed the Romanization Guide for Thai Script of the Royal Institute in Bangkok, 1982 [1968]. I have made exceptions for names of persons and organisations. Here I have followed established transliterations or the preferences of the persons concerned.
Introduction

10 PM, Tuesday evening, 22 October 1996. Thousands and thousands of people flock around the huge equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn at the Royal Plaza (Suan Amphon) in Bangkok. Dense clouds of incense sting the eyes. The square in front of the statue, normally a barren asphalt plain, is crowded with people seated on mats, sheets of cardboard, or newspapers. They sit behind small tables on which they have displayed their offerings. I see garlands, incense, candles, betel leaves and nuts, black coffee, Thai brandy, Scotch, Hennessy cognac, red wine, water (cooled), beer, lemonades, plates with Thai sweets, decorated cakes, fresh coconuts, apples, Thai fruits of first quality, cigars, Winston cigarettes, bundles of red or pink roses — hundreds sometimes. People tell me that the offerings they have selected reflect those drinks, foods, colours and flowers that were the king’s favourites. The king’s taste apparently was a fascinating mixture of modern Western and typically Thai delicacies.

A number of worshippers buy a bundle of grass from the grass vendor, who also rents out small tables and mats. The grass serves as an offering to the king’s bronze horse. There is also opportunity to hire one of several classical Thai dance groups to perform for the king, as a votive offering (kaebon) once a wish has been fulfilled. Some people do not offer a regular garland, but have brought one or more larger Brahman-style garlands (baisi). Apparently it is quite common to spend as much as one or two thousand baht on offerings. From the (child) vendors — whose number has quickly grown since nightfall — garlands, betel-attributes, and sets consisting of nine sticks of incense and one little candle are available. Other vendors exhibit King Chulalongkorn statuettes, posters, portraits and amulets on tables or in the back of their cars, parked at the entrance of the square and along the pedestrian area. At 10 PM the square is packed with an enormous crowd, which still seems to be growing. Ratchadamnoen Nok Avenue, the major road leading to the square, is jammed with cars. Those who finally have reached the square can hardly find a place to park. Other vendors have reached the square in the meantime, selling food and drinks, and various things like leatherware, children’s toys and balloons.
Around the statue stepladder-like constructions are waiting for the big garlands or commemoration wreaths (phuangmala) to be presented the next day — Chulalongkorn Day 1996 — when the official ceremony in commemoration of King Chulalongkorn will be held. A yellow fence encircles these constructions and the statue. At the front government officials await the people who have come to worship the king. They collect the small garlands (phuangmalai), the small bundles of pink or red roses, and the incense offered, and lay them at the base of the statue. The first worshippers started to arrive around 5 PM. Most of the early ones asked the officials to return their garland (or, more precisely, a similar one) so they could take it home: these garlands are considered to be loaded with the king's charismatic power or barami, which emanates from the statue. With the number of worshippers rapidly increasing, it becomes more difficult and soon even impossible to have a garland returned. The officials are preoccupied with trying to keep pace with the offerings presented. The garlands now remain around the statue, piling up in large colourful heaps. People are calling the officials in a bid to catch their attention. Some officials only collect the burning incense, others the offerings on serving trays. Candles are refused — it is impossible to collect all the burning candles too. Therefore, people stick them on the asphalt. Most direct a prayer (khatha — a magic formula) to the king, sitting or kneeling behind their candle. They have taken their shoes off, as they would in a temple.

The space in front of the statue is divided as follows: immediately along the front fence a dense crowd of people is about to present their offerings. Then follows an area where rows of candles are placed on the ground, with seated people softly praying in between. Behind this candle-lit area, worshippers with more extended offerings have found a place, almost filling the entire square. Most visitors have come in small groups of friends or family. The event reminds me very much of a huge picnic, and many in fact have their evening meals on the square.

Besides offerings, almost everybody has brought one or more King Chulalongkorn image from home, in the form of portraits, statuettes or amulets. These are placed amidst the offerings on the make-shift altars. The effect is impressive: when looking in the direction of the equestrian statue from behind the crowd, one sees the king's face looking back. When the altar is ready and everybody in the company is seated, people approach King Chulalongkorn reciting khatha together. Some read from special khatha booklets, while others use leaflets distributed on the square.
that contain detailed instructions on what offerings and which *khatha* should be presented to the king. These leaflets also state the name of the person or company taking credit for distribution. One “donor” has left ten or more boxes near the statue, each filled with hundreds of small leaflets with instructions. A well-appreciated initiative, apparently, as I see many people using them. After having recited one or more *khatha* most people also approach the statue to offer garlands and incense. When the ritual is completed many people stay for another hour or so, seated together on their mats, chatting, sometimes eating, and watching what is going on.

A family sitting next to me gets ready to leave. The glass of whisky offered to the king is shared among the adult men. The children eat the opened young coconut and the sweets. According to this family, the king’s spiritual consumption transforms the food and drinks into ambrosias. Everything else is repacked, except for the bundle of grass. As soon as they are gone, the grass vendor comes to recollect the bundle. After refreshing it with some water, he will sell it again to a newly arrived family. Around 1 AM I head back to my hotel. The gathering at the square shows no signs of ending any time soon. My taxi passes an endless stream of cars, slowly making their way to the square in opposite direction. To my estimate it will take at least one hour for the last car in line to reach its destination.

**Modernity and Social Imaginary**

This account of Chulalongkorn Day’s Eve 1996 is a condensed description of what I encountered the first evening of my research on the “cult of King Chulalongkorn”. On the next two evenings there were similar immense gatherings around the statue. Clearly, something in the historical figure of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) was appealing to large sections of the urban populace. Who was this king? Why did a cult evolve around him more than eighty years after his death? And what does the king’s sudden popularity say about present-day Thai society? These are the leading questions of this ethnography of the King Chulalongkorn cult.

The cult emerged in the late 1980s, when people began to worship the king publicly at the equestrian statue in Bangkok (Nithi 1993). A few years later, the king’s portrait could be found almost everywhere in the urban areas, while books and magazines with writings on the king flooded the market. The years in which King Chulalongkorn became a
nation-wide popular figure were a period of fundamental social, cultural, and economic change in Thailand. The relation between the emergence of the cult and rapid changes in Thai society lead me to think that the King Chulalongkorn cult could be approached as a prism through which processes of local identity formation and their interplay with global processes of change could be explored and understood.

My aim in this study is to contribute to two anthropological debates. First of all, my research on the King Chulalongkorn cult falls within the context of earlier scholarly work on Thai religion and society, focussing in particular on divine kingship, Buddhist ritual, spirit cults and potent objects. Secondly, this book is written in the context of discussions on modernity, modernisation and globalisation. As will become clear, mediation between modernity (khwm than samai) and Thainess (khwm pen thai) is the central theme in the King Chulalongkorn cult. The massive worshipping of King Chulalongkorn, the paramount mediator, reflects the struggle of many urban to Thai deal with this field of tension. As an anthropologist, I seek to mediate between the particularities of the Thai case, and the wider theoretical debate just mentioned. This ethnography of the King Chulalongkorn cult then reflects my encounter with Thai modernity.

The King Chulalongkorn cult is an all-embracing phenomenon, not to be reduced to a single religious, social or cultural dimension. I approached the cult as a site where the homogenising attempts of the state both converge with and diverge from “counter-hegemonic” forces generated by the mass media, emancipation and consumerism. Although drawing on tradition, the King Chulalongkorn cult is first of all a specific, contemporary phenomenon of the late twentieth century.

Asking why King Chulalongkorn became an object of worship so long after his death is to ask how the king is presently remembered, and how this memory is shaped. On the level of the individual worshipper the “remembrance of King Chulalongkorn” does not refer to people’s personal memories of a person they have known, but instead must be understood in terms of “transferred knowledge”: although they never met the king in person, people know who he was, what his achievements and qualities were, and why this makes him a significant figure in their personal, day-to-day lives. At the same time, worshipping King Chulalongkorn supersedes the level of the individual; King Chulalongkorn has become a person of significance for so many people in that we may think of the phenomenon as a “cult”. “Remembering King Chulalongkorn” is first
and foremost a social process. The pool of knowledge about King Chula-
longkorn is a social construct that is the outcome of simultaneous and
selective processes of remembering and forgetting.

The King Chulalongkorn cult is, however, anything but a nostalgic
or escapist orientation on the past. As the argument unfolds, we will
see how people, whether individually or in shared events and practices,
successfully rework existing remembrances of the past to fit newly arisen
hopes and anxieties, or, in other words, concerns with the present and
expectations of the future. Because of this orientation toward the present
and the future, I have chosen to approach the cult as part of a distinct
“social imaginary”. My approach has been inspired by Thoden van
Velzen’s “social imaginary” (1995) and Connerton’s “social memory”
(1989), in its turn an elaboration of Halbwachs’ concept of “collective
memory”. The formation of social memory encompasses, according to
Connerton, repetitive processes of transfer of knowledge of the past, in
textual forms (myth) and through non-textual, habitual practices (ritual)
(1989:36–40). In these lingual and embodied processes of transfer social
memory is fostered. Social imaginaries are produced by similar processes,
but rather consist of “promises and visions of a future and need not bear
much relation to the bread-and-butter issues of the day” (Thoden van
Velzen and Van Wetering 2004: 278). Social memory, therefore, may be
understood as the specific part of a social imaginary that relates to the
past. Differentiating social imaginary from social theory rather than from
social memory, Taylor explains “that common understanding makes pos-
sible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor
2002: 106).

This book connects well with the volume Cultural Crisis and Social
Memory. Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos, edited by Tanabe
and Keyes, which also seeks to explain how the Thai deal with the
radical social and economic changes of the late twentieth century and the
consequent “major crisis of cultural identity” (2002: 1). In their intro-
duction to the book, Tanabe and Keyes take the construction of social
memory as a key to understanding the ways the Thai enter the condition
of modernity. The specificity of the Thai socio-historical context gives
the Thai relationship with modernity its own flavour, different from the
experiences of modernity elsewhere in the world. Recalling social memory,
according to Tanabe and Keyes, is one way of dealing with the uncertain-
ties resulting from the irreversible rupture with the unquestioned and
natural condition of the traditional order on the one hand and the
simultaneous appearance of the virtually unlimited freedom and possibilities of modernity on the other (ibid.: 6–8). Following Tanabe and Keyes the King Chulalongkorn cult might be interpreted as an instance where “social memory is recalled” to answer the problems that have come with modernity. In terms of “social imaginary”, however, these interpretations of the past are embedded in wider imaginaries surrounding modernity. Within this framework, King Chulalongkorn is remembered as the Great King who made Thailand a modern nation. Modernity is perceived as the outcome of King Chulalongkorn’s plans for the kingdom, and as being in line with the king’s desires, which makes modernity a genuine attribute of Thainess and takes the sting out of it. Or, to verbalize this social imaginary’s intrinsic contradiction, the King Chulalongkorn cult heals the rupture by rendering “being modern” as a Thai tradition.

**Siamese Sovereignty and the Chakri Reformation**

The social imaginary around King Chulalongkorn is constituted for one part with reference to the situation of the kingdom in the second half of the nineteenth century. In order to explain the significance that this period carries for present-day interpretations of political and economic experiences, I will discuss the period in some detail.

For Thailand, the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of increasing confrontation with global influences as a consequence of Western imperialism. In this period two kings reigned: King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–68) and his eldest son, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910), the fourth and fifth king of the — still reigning — Chakri dynasty. During the Fourth Reign, Thailand — then named Siam — was drawn into international political and economic power-play, the first point in this process being the signing of the “Bowring treaty” with Great Britain in 1855. The treaty cleared the way for British trade by lowering Siamese import and export taxes. Similar treaties with other European countries and America followed almost immediately (Terwiel 2005:144–7). During the Fifth Reign many of the changes associated with late nineteenth century modernisation were introduced into the kingdom. For all other states in South- and Southeast Asia, the presence of the imperialist powers, in the end, meant colonisation, but Siam managed to maintain its sovereignty.

The spread of colonial power and modernisation were two sides of the same coin. With the colonial conquest, the pre-colonial states of
Southeast Asia acquired modern administrations based on a European model. The colonial governments were quick to introduce modern technologies and communications, such as railway systems, post and telegraph, and later the telephone. Efficient governance and maintenance of law and order were the most important prerequisites for improved trade and optimal extraction of revenues from the local population. The need for primary products as well as new outlets for European industrial products was the major imperatives of the European enterprise.

The British were the first Europeans to establish trading relationships with Bangkok in the nineteenth century. Long before this happened, the Siamese royalty and nobility were extensively involved with trade themselves and the king derived most of his income from trade monopolies. Because trade with China was particularly important for the Siamese, Chinese merchants were encouraged to settle in Siam, first in Bangkok and later also further upcountry (Skinner 1957), and were granted certain trade privileges. Over time, the British became increasingly dissatisfied with the Siamese favouring of Chinese merchants. British traders asked their government several times to intervene. This step was considered too costly by both the colonial administration of British India and the government in London, but the pressure on Siam to remove the privileges given to Chinese merchants and to extend British trade mounted during the 1840s (Xie 1988; Wyatt 1984: 169–70).

Britain’s defeat of Burma in 1826 and, fourteen years later, of China in the Opium War (1838–42) made the Siamese fully aware of the military strength of the imperialist powers. King Nangklao (Rama III, r. 1824–51), who had always been wary of Westerners, reacted with a growing distrust and dislike towards anything European, and discouraged any contact (Terwiel 1983: 147–57). His younger brother and eventual successor, King Mongkut (Rama IV) had a radically different attitude towards the West. Equally aware of the threat of Western presence towards Siamese sovereignty, King Mongkut savoured a different approach. He was of the opinion that the future of Siamese sovereignty would largely depend on good (trade) relationships with the West, Great Britain in particular, and to adoption of certain Western notions and standards of civilisation and progress. When still a prince, he had developed a deep interest in Western science and technology (Barmé 1993: 17–9; Terwiel 1983: 149–50). King Mongkut’s accession to the throne marks the beginning of a new era of Siamese-Western relationships, in which maintenance of the kingdom’s sovereignty was the political leitmotiv.
Introduction

Shortly after concluding the Bowring treaty, King Mongkut sought to counterbalance British power by signing similar agreements with the United States (1856), with France (1856) and with several other European countries (Wyatt 1985: 184). At the same time, however, King Mongkut was eager to establish a special relationship with the British. The king’s general policy was to negotiate only with metropolitan governments and never with colonial administrations, thus presenting Siam as an equal partner in international relationships, and its king as a head of state comparable to the European monarchs (ibid.). On the other hand he tried to suggest, somewhat ambiguously, that Siam was under British protection (Xie 1988: 22–3; Terwiel 1983: 187–8). In 1858, King Mongkut was assured by the British Foreign Secretary that “he may confidentially rely upon the friendship of the queen, but Her Majesty wishing Siam to be thoroughly independent, would not desire to exercise any protection over that country (…)” (quoted in Xie 1988: 23).

In the above account, the interconnection between colonial presence and Siamese independence begins to unfold. Modernisation, however, came to play a role only later. For King Mongkut, administrative reorganisation and large technological infrastructures were not matters of great urgency. Taking into account the obstacles he would have to overcome to reorganise the archaic, hereditary administration of the old kingdom, he felt that he should not act hastily. Besides, the foreign threat had faded, in the king’s opinion (Wyatt 1984: 186–7). Indeed, neither Britain nor France showed much interest in expanding their influence in the region until the end of the 1860s.

The relative stability came to an end in the 1870s. France, searching for a shortcut to trade with China, developed an interest in the Mekong River (Wyatt 1984: 197). British expatriates and businesses in Siam, feeling increasingly hindered by Siamese limitations and a lack of legislation and law enforcement, asked their government to take action to protect their interests (Brown 1992: 1–4). Under these new pressures, the Siamese managed to maintain the independence of the kingdom but at the cost of ceding border territories and vassal states to France and Britain, and by taking advantage from Siam’s position as a buffer zone between the two colonial superpowers. As a result, the realm under the power of the Siamese crown had decreased by one third at the end of King Chulalongkorn’s reign.

Siam’s domestic policy was also dominated by the pressure from the two neighbouring colonial powers. Fundamental internal administrative
and infrastructure reforms were carried out to make Siam a modern state. Preparations were made from the onset of King Chulalongkorn's reign, and between 1887 and 1892 various modern ministries with new responsibilities after European model were established, culminating in a total reorganisation of the government in 1892. These reforms, today known as the "Chakri Reformation", resulted in a centralised, efficient and powerful administration and helped to prevent foreign intervention.

For the purpose of this study it is not necessary to deal with the scale and impact of the Chakri Reformation. This would lead us too far from the topic under study: the present-day veneration for King Chulalongkorn. Some of the reforms will be discussed in more detail later, whenever a good understanding of the ethnography requires so.

The foreign and internal politics of the Fifth Reign were moulded by the political triangle of colonial pressure, modernisation and preservation of independence. More than anything else, however, it was the faith that the king and his entourage had placed in modernisation — both as an end in itself and as a means to preserve independence — that fuelled these politics. Significantly, as this study will demonstrate, the King Chulalongkorn cult rests on a similar faith in modernisation, but this faith has lost its elite character in the present constellation: it has become "popular" — shared by wide sections of the urban population. In other words, the ideology articulated by the King Chulalongkorn cult directly stems from concepts developed during the Fifth Reign itself.

King Chulalongkorn’s Rise to Absolute Power

When King Chulalongkorn ascended the throne, there was no indication that his reign would leave much of a trace: he was only 15 years old and seriously ill. The real power was with the regent, Chuang Bunnag or Suriyawong (Somdet Chaophraya Si Suriyawong), King Mongkut’s former right hand man. After King Mongkut’s death, Suriyawong had taken care that Bunnag’s or their family allies were appointed to the most significant positions in the new government. That Prince Chulalongkorn succeeded his father at all was probably due to Suriyawong’s awareness of the importance the Western powers attributed to the notion of the “crown prince” as the legitimate heir-apparent. This is not as self-evident as it might appear, since “crown prince” was not yet a Siamese notion. Ideally, the king selected his successor from a pool of suitable princes, often one of his brothers rather than one of his sons. King Mongkut,
however, had refused to decide on a successor, but instead had asked Suriyawong to serve as regent in case Chulalongkorn should be chosen to succeed him. Suriyawong appointed the Prince Wichaihong to the position of uparat,\textsuperscript{15} residing in the “Front Palace”. Traditionally, the uparat, often a (half)-brother of the ruling king provided the greatest threat to and limitation of the position and power of any Siamese monarch. In this case, Suriyawong made Prince Wichaihong also “heir-presumptive”, an “unprecedented” step possibly taken in anticipation of an early death of the ailing king.

The young king, however, recovered and reigned for 42 years. From the onset, King Chulalongkorn proved to be a man of his time. During the regency period he was already working on a plan to reorganise the kingdom’s administrative, financial and military institutions after the Western colonial model. To prepare and inform himself better he made three study tours to neighbouring colonies in 1871 and 1872, visiting Dutch Java and the British colonies of Singapore, India and Burma (Rangoon) along with some of his brothers and half-brothers. He wanted to visit Europe but only did so in 1897 and 1907.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, King Chulalongkorn took care that his siblings and his children received a modern education, first by appointing Western tutors in the palace and then by sending many of his sons to universities in Europe.\textsuperscript{17}

Shortly before the end of the regency period in 1873, King Chulalongkorn put forward an extensive program of reforms, motivated by modern-mindedness as well as a wish to extend his power. The plan was rejected by the council of ministers (senabodi) as too drastic and unrealistic. The large concentration of power in the hands of members of the Bunnag family hampered the authority of the king. King Chulalongkorn feared the intentions of Prince Wichaihong, the uparat. The tensions between the two men escalated in 1874, when the prince openly challenged the power of the king with the backing of conservative nobility. Although the prince did not succeed, the crisis clearly articulated the limitations of the king’s power and provided the senabodi with the opportunity to take control of state affairs again.

King Chulalongkorn had to wait almost twenty years before he could proceed with his reform plans. In the second half of the 1880s so many members of the old clique had retired or died that they posed no threat any longer. The most powerful of the Bunnags, ex-regent Suriyawong, died in 1883 at the age of 74. The uparat died in 1885. In the meantime, the king had made sure that significant positions were occupied by his
friends and allies, including a number of his (half)-brothers. By 1885, the balance of power had shifted to the extent that the king could say: “We ourselves have become the government.” During the rest of the king’s life and reign, governmental power would remain in the hands of the royal family. As time passed by, the king’s sons, returning from their studies abroad, occupied more and more high government positions. The king, however, remained the centre of power. In Terwel’s words: “The whole cabinet consisted of the “king’s men”, chosen because [King Chulalongkorn] trusted their personal loyalty. They could be primarily seen as extensions of the king” (Terwel 1983: 255).

Among this intimate group of brothers and princes, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) was particularly important, for the king personally as well as for the Fifth Reign in general. His influence, in the field of governance and Siamese history, and as an author, will appear time and again in this study. Under the guidance of Prince Damrong as Minister of Interior (from 1892 until 1915), the central government greatly advanced in effective power. As the architect of the new administrative system, the thesaphiban system, the prince was of special importance for the Chakri reformation. The thesaphiban system brought all levels of administration under the responsibility and control of the Ministry of Interior (Tej 1977), putting an end to the autonomy of local aristocracy. The combination of these and other transformations (in particular of the financial and judicial system) with the king’s overall control over state affairs, finally made King Chulalongkorn the strongest monarch Thailand ever had (Chayan 1994; Engel 1975: 1; Vella 1955). During the Fifth Reign, there was no separation between the increasing power of the state and the increasing power of the king. Paradoxically, the staffing of the civil system with royalty largely nullified one essential aspect of modern governance: an independent and disinterested civil service (Anderson 1978: 218–9).

Safeguarding the Absolute Monarchy

King Chulalongkorn’s familiarity with European history made the king well aware of the potential threat posed by modern political thought. He knew of the fate of the French monarchy, and the restrictions that the Enlightenment and liberalism had imposed on the monarchies of Europe. King Chulalongkorn’s position as an absolute monarch was not entirely uncontested, and to counter possible dangers to the throne, the
king relied on a European-inspired national ideology, although with a central position for the king. Moreover, during his reign, he increasingly used modern media to promote himself and his family.

The king’s awareness of the danger of a revolution perhaps becomes most clear from his policy never to send any prince to France for his education. Only monarchies were considered to provide a suitable political environment, so the king sent the Siamese princes to Great Britain, Prussia and Russia for their education. This policy, however, did not prevent disagreement with princes from the king’s own generation: several high-ranking princes, including some of his modern-minded half-brothers, favoured a constitutional monarchy. In 1885, the king was offered a petition that pleaded for several reforms, including the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and a parliament, in order “to be accepted and respected by the Western powers as a civilized nation. […] No nation (chat) in Europe can believe that Siam maintains justice since everything is decided by the king”. The king rejected the suggested political reforms on practical as well as moral grounds. His major practical objection was that Siam lacked the capable people a well-functioning parliament would require. His moral objection was based on Theravada Buddhist concepts of kingship, which he contrasted with European kingship. The Siamese king, according to King Chulalongkorn, had absolute power, but:

(...) must always practice moderation and justice. (...) Contrary to what happened in Europe, Siamese kings have led the people so that both they and the country might be prosperous and happy (...) [The people] have more faith in the king than in any members of parliament, because they believe that the king more than anybody else practises justice and loves the people. It is enough, therefore, just to write into a constitution what already has become accepted royal custom.22

In this rejection of political reform, King Chulalongkorn’s rendering of the history of Siamese kingship reflects the idea that only a righteous Buddhist king can make the kingdom and its people prosper. The king silenced the liberalism within the palace by forcing his most senior opponent into exile23 and by pacifying the others with ministerships and other high positions, often in the newly established ministries and departments (Brummelhuis 2005: 67).

Significantly, King Chulalongkorn’s interpretations of kingship have become part of a national ideology constructed around the people, the Buddhist religion and the monarchy (Murashima 1988: 85–9). We will
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encounter this ideology time and again as it forms the very base of the King Chulalongkorn cult itself. One of the questions this study seeks to answer is why this ideology gained so much strength that in the 1980s a cult developed.

Creating and Disseminating the Royal Image

Another element of the king’s reign that reappears in the King Chulalongkorn cult is the king’s extensive portraiture. As we will see later on, it is impossible to understand the King Chulalongkorn cult without specifically addressing the role of portraits. The portraits that existed in the late 1990s, a wide variation of paintings, photographs and statues, are a direct result of the king’s own interest in portraiture and photography.24 The early portraits of King Chulalongkorn and his family were mainly meant to decorate his palaces. Portraits were also sent to European courts as gifts, following a European tradition adopted during the Fourth Reign. In the same vein, King Chulalongkorn from the onset of his reign adopted the European custom of presenting a signed photograph as a token of appreciation.

The various coins minted on the occasion of Bangkok’s centennial in 1882 (also the centenary of the Chakri dynasty) marked the beginning of a new policy around the king’s image: from then on, coins, medals and stamps bearing the king’s portrait were regularly issued, and national events became occasions to mint special coins with the king’s portrait, stressing the unity of king and nation.25 The increasing usage of the king’s portrait may have reflected King Chulalongkorn’s increasing power and the issuing of a coin with the portrait of Prince Vajirunhis in 1886/87, on the occasion of his investiture as the crown prince, supports this idea. That particular coin symbolises a vital addition to the king’s power: the official appointment of the heir-apparent by the reigning monarch, and the definitive abolition of the institution of the uparat.

In the last two decades of the Fifth Reign the king’s image became a “public” image. The king’s portrait reached the general populace more and more frequently. In addition to coins and stamps, photographs of the king and his family appeared on picture postcards and New-Year’s greeting cards, and were reproduced on a large scale for distribution, at least in urban and elite environments. One particular example of a “portrait” produced for publicity purposes is a 1905 lithograph portraying the five kings of the Chakri dynasty.26 The promotion of the royal
image reached its zenith with the unveiling of the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn in 1908, an event accompanied by the production of “equestrian statue stamps” and “equestrian statue medallions”.27 The growing promotional use of royal portraits kept pace with the use of royal portraiture in Europe, which indicates that new reproduction techniques and publicity practices were readily adopted in Siam. The development was to a large extent the fruit of the king’s own interest in portraiture and his awareness of the potential of his image. The great number of portraits King Chulalongkorn had made during his two European voyages expresses this interest in particular.28 With the invitation of European painters and sculptors to the Siamese court, King Chulalongkorn not only followed his own interest, but adopted European royal custom as well. The same can be said of the king’s increasing occupation with photography, because the European monarchies were patrons of photography. Kaiser Wilhelm II (r. 1888–1918), for example, employed 20 court photographers, and took great care to ensure that every moment of his life was recorded — and published (Pohl und Wilderotter 1991).

A Royal Cult

Neither the king’s personal interest in portraiture in a period of technological innovation, nor his exploitation of images for political purposes, directly explains the proliferation of portraits in the King Chulalongkorn cult but these personal and contemporary circumstances help to explore the mass-media based phenomenon that the King Chulalongkorn cult is. For the moment it is sufficient to emphasise the omnipresence of newly produced King Chulalongkorn portraits, which, in combination with a varied but nevertheless well-delineated set of ritual practices, justifies speaking, following Nithi (1993), of the “cult of King Chulalongkorn” (*latthi phitthi sadet pho ro ha*). But is the King Chulalongkorn cult merely a religious cult, in the traditional sense of the word: King Chulalongkorn as a divinity, endorsing a system of rites and beliefs (Durkheim 1964: 36)? Or are we confronted with its more “modern” and “secular” equivalent, a “personality cult?” As this study will demonstrate, it is impossible to draw the line. The worship of King Chulalongkorn draws upon Thai concepts of Buddhist kingship and popular beliefs in the power of sacred images. At the same time, the cult is shaped and carried by mass media promotion of the image of the king, commercial as well as governmental. With respect to mass-media involvement, the cult is
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as modern a phenomenon as the hype around the death of Princess Diana and the enduring popularity of modern icons like Elvis Presley ("the King").

And how to compare the King Chulalongkorn cult with, for example, the state-dominated personality cults of the (former) communist states? Some parallels are clear. In the Thai case, a strong state ideology dictates absolute respect for the monarchy, including kings from the past as well as members of the present royal family. The legislation on lese majesty precludes even the mildest criticism. But although these circumstances may be relevant for understanding the promotion of the image of Thailand's present monarch, they do not explain the profusion of portraits of one particular historical king. This largely spontaneous development indicates that individual elaborations and interpretations of the meaning of kingship play a significant role. It also indicates that Thai notions of kingship are dynamic rather than fixed, and are constantly reworked and given new meanings.

Partly, this reworking reflects the history of the monarchy's presence and presentation in the course of the twentieth century. When a military coup ended the absolute monarchy in 1932, kingship only remained a distant reality for several decades. Political power was for many years with the military, which in subsequent regimes sought different alliances internally and abroad. Overall, Thailand remained Western-oriented with the exception of the Second World War, when the government welcomed the Japanese and declared war against members of the Allied Powers. This turn of policy was inspired in part by the hope of regaining territory ceded during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, a goal that was in fact achieved, but rescinded immediately after the Japanese surrender. This brief disloyalty to the West was redeemed during the Cold War, when the military sought to legitimate their power with a fervent anticommunism and allowed the United States to make Thailand their stronghold in Southeast Asia. Increasing tensions over the ideology and legitimacy of the military-dominated political system dominated Thai politics of the 1950s. To counterbalance these tensions, the military regime of the late 1950s, in particular that of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–63), began to promote the royal image of King Bhumibol Aduljadey or Rama IX (r. 1946–) as a symbol of national unity and harmony. The splendour of the monarchy was gradually restored, and Thai kingship was given new significance within a constitutional framework. King Bhumibol and the monarchy survived a long list of coup d'états, constitutions, rapid
successions of cabinets and prime ministers, and traumatic violent con-
In the final chapter of this book I will return to the latter three political 
crises when analysing the present image of King Bhumibol and current 
popular Thai elaborations of Buddhist kingship. Here, I want to emphasise 
the enduring political significance of the monarchy in the Thai political 
arena, where the 1990s brought an increase of direct democracy, with 
an elected parliament and prime minister, and the advent of politicians 
with a business instead of a military background. The 1997 constitution, 
the most liberal ever, seemed to mark an alteration of the Thai political 
framework: in November 2004 Thaksin Shinawatra was the first Thai 
Prime Minister ever to complete his four-year-term in office, and he 
was re-elected with a landslide victory in February 2005. Although the 
democratic calibre of the Thaksin governments has been a matter of dis-
pute as long as Thaksin has been in power (critics spoke of a one-party 
monopoly, parliamentary dictatorship, populism and corruption, cf. Pasuk 
and Baker 2004), the 2006 *coup d'état* that ended Thaksin’s second term 
was a setback for democracy.

The relation between king, constitution and democracy has always 
been ambiguous. Although King Bhumibol has no formal political power 
as a constitutional monarch, His Majesty’s political opinions matter. These 
opinions are generally of a conservative, paternalist nature, stressing the 
importance of law, order and stability, while downplaying the signifi-
cance of the democratic process (Hewison 1997; Morell and Chai-Anan 
1981). Occasionally — in particular in his annual birthday speeches — 
the king may voice approval or disapproval of certain government poli-
cies, openly criticise the Prime Minister, emphasise certain societal issues 
or voice policy suggestions and recommendations. The king’s immense 
popularity and symbolic importance not only make his statements factors 
politicians have to reckon with, but also often directly influence the course 
of political developments. The king himself has frankly admitted that 
he has actually more power than the constitution allows him (Hewison 
1997: 71–2). On the other hand, the king is not always in full control 
of the use made of his charisma: politicians and political institutions 
draw upon the king’s prestige in political power plays by soliciting 
his presence or using his image in support of their own purposes. My 
primary interest, however, is not how particular governments or prime 
ministers have related to the king or used his image, but what the social 
imaginary around kingship says about Thai society. In particular, I will
discuss the steady rise of King Bhumibol’s image, partly a product of governmental and court promotion, as a significant factor in the King Chulalongkorn cult.

**Divine Kingship**

A dynamic perception of “kingship” may seem at odds with Thailand’s image as an ancient kingdom of mainland Southeast Asia, kingship being the principal institution that ties the present to the past. Understanding the iconography of Buddhist kingship and the legitimating power of accompanying symbols and rituals requires, however, attention to historical context and contemporary political processes. For Thailand, one of the Indianised states of Southeast Asia, the relation between Hinduism, Buddhism, kingship, and the political order, has been dealt with in detail by Stanley Tambiah (1977; 1985). He followed the dynamics of Siamese kingship from the founding of the thirteenth-century kingdom of Sukhothai — when moral Buddhist concepts of the king as the reincarnation of the righteous ruler or as a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) were incorporated into Hindu cosmological concepts of the king as the centre of the universe — to the current situation with the king as the head of state in a constitutional monarchy. The Thai concept of kingship owes its resilience to an ability to adapt over the course of time, incorporating new notions and practices, whether Buddhist, Brahmin, Khmer, animist or European (see also Peleggi 2002). Tambiah’s work makes clear that the Thai commitment to Buddhism requires charismatic monarchs (Aung-Thwin [1985] makes a similar argument regarding Burmese kingship). Instead of a direct, legitimating identification of the king with the Hindu-god Shiva — as was the case, for example, in the Angkor (Khmer) god-king cult (eighth–thirteenth century AD) — individuals assuming kingship have to prove their claim to power by meritorious conduct and political success (Tambiah 1985: 324–7).

If there were “divine kings”, they were continually dethroned by palace rebellions and wars of succession and secession. Divinity, or claims to universal and righteous kingship [or Buddha-hood], was based on personal charisma as much as or even more than on institutionalised rules pertaining to the tenure of office (ibid.: 325).

In Buddhist ideology, therefore, the king is human and is forced to legitimate himself continuously, a successful dethronement being proof
of the illegitimacy of the old king. Even when kings are considered to be reincarnated Bodhisattvas, and as a consequence auspicious power is attributed to them, they remain human, “for even Buddha was a man, not god” (Aung-Thwin 1985: 68). This humanity of Buddhist kings concerns, importantly, a living king. Deceased kings, on the other hand, are believed to possess supernatural qualities. As “divine beings” (guardian angels, deva, thewada) they may intervene in the world of man, having become tutelary spirits of the kingdom.

Buddhist ideology is still highly relevant for understanding the meaning of the monarchy and the reigning king in the present Thai constellation. For my analysis of the King Chulalongkorn cult I will return repeatedly to classical notions of Buddhist kingship and their recent elaborations. The explanatory path of “Buddhist kingship”, however, insufficiently accounts for the emergence of the King Chulalongkorn cult 80 years after the king’s death, and does not adequately fathom its nature. Cutting through so many layers of society, the King Chulalongkorn cult, with its potential for continuous change and multiple interpretations and its articulation in the modern media, touches upon more than Buddhist kingship alone. Although the cult’s idiom is based on the traditional idiom of Buddhist kingship, present-day issues are at stake.

Following Herbert Blumer’s suggestion to avoid the tendency in social sciences to formulate abstract generalisations, I will not attempt to outline a precise definition or interpretation of “the King Chulalongkorn cult” nor of the concept “cult” as such. Such things, Blumer suggests, should be thought of as “sensitising concepts” (Blok 1975: 33). Thinking of “the King Chulalongkorn cult” as a sensitising concept allows me to focus on processes instead of trying to delineate fixed meanings, and to better describe and analyse the complex ethnographic reality that makes up the King Chulalongkorn cult, which, as a complex reality, requires a multi-focal approach.

Thainess: Independence and Modernity

The fact that Siam was the only country in Southeast Asia that was never colonised fuelled an ideology in which the kingdom, its leaders and its culture appear as possessing unique qualities. These distinctive characteristics are captured by the expression khwam pen thai (Thai nationhood or Thainess), a concept introduced by King Vajiravudh, or Rama VI (r. 1910–25), in 1911. According to King Vajiravudh, the word “Thai”
has a double meaning, it means “free” and it refers to the martial race of the “Thai” inhabiting Siam (Barmé 1993: 27–30). In his analysis, the king declares independence to be a natural and essential element of Thainess. King Vajiravudh’s ideas gave the impetus to an official Thai nationalism, “a willed merger of nation and dynastic empire” (Anderson 1991: 86) that was — and still is — essentially ethnic in nature.

The current veneration of King Chulalongkorn is rooted in the idea that safeguarding Siam’s independence was the king’s personal achievement. This study will show why “independence” has become such a topical theme in Thai society at a time when the effects of global developments are experienced as putting pressure on Thai independence and identity once more. “Independence” in the King Chulalongkorn cult on the one hand reflects worshippers’ concerns about the kingdom’s sovereignty in terms of a shared, official, nationalist ideology. On the other hand, the theme of “independence” also offers an opportunity to articulate an individual’s personal distress. The king’s words and deeds are experienced as relevant for, and affecting, a worshipper’s everyday life.

In a similar vein, the fact that Siam has become a modern nation is seen as King Chulalongkorn’s personal achievement. The perception is that the king, by deliberately modernising his kingdom out of his own genius and love for it made modernity an essential attribute of Thainess as well. Analysing the meaning of “modern” as it appears in the King Chulalongkorn cult, however, is complicated by the fact that modernity and modernisation are a subject of study on two different levels. On the one hand, my overall research concerns Thai society and culture as a particular articulation of modernity. On the other hand, Thai perceptions of modernity are part of the empirical material to be analysed.

Cultural Style in a Globalising World

The King Chulalongkorn cult is a recent and largely urban phenomenon that developed during a period of extraordinary economic growth, and the people involved with it belong to the sections of society most active in the “new economy” of the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1985 and 1995, Thailand’s economic growth was the world’s largest (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 1). Although it is impossible to pin down an exact year or period of origin of the cult, worshippers of King Chulalongkorn did not appear at the statue in growing numbers until 1990 (Nithi 1993), just after the economy began to boom. Until 1985, when the year the Thai
economy almost came to a standstill, the country relied mainly on the export of agricultural products. After 1985, manufacture for the world market and international tourism replaced agriculture as the driving forces of the economy, and in the decade that followed, Thailand’s real GDP grew by over ten percent annually (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 151–3). My proposition of an interconnection between the emergence of the King Chulalongkorn cult and the profound changes Thai society went through after 1985, however, does not imply that I see the King Chulalongkorn cult as a mere response to economic growth. Rather, I approach the cult as the product of complex interactions between a variety of local and individual politics, practices and discourses, and global political power configurations and ideologies.

In the King Chulalongkorn cult, global and local cultural and symbolic forms have merged into a specific Thai cultural practice. This observation is not, borrowing a phrase from Geschiere and Meyer, “to celebrate globalisation merely in terms of a creative blending of different, pre-existing cultural traditions” (Geschiere and Meyer 1998: 604). Instead, I seek to “unravel the politics of the making and unmaking of boundaries, localities and ‘cultures’ in particular power constellations” (ibid.) In many places in the world, the “open-ended” global flows of people, goods and images make existing boundaries vanish, while simultaneously triggering the reconfirmation of old boundaries and formation of new ones as people search for “fixed orientation points and action frames” (ibid.: 602). The King Chulalongkorn cult highlights the paradoxical relation between “global flow” and “cultural closure” pointed out by Geschiere and Meyer, among others. The new significance of King Chulalongkorn demonstrates the apparently widely shared need for local orientation among urban Thai. This does not imply, however, that “King Chulalongkorn” is a one-dimensional, uncontested articulation of the Thai need for locality. The cult has evolved, and still evolves, out of a variety of interests and orientations, in which the king’s image is as much employed in creating state politics of identity as in individual attempts by worshippers to bridge the discontinuities between their present life and the recent past.

Returning to the new economy of the 1980s, the inflow of foreign investments and cash earnings, spurring industries and business conglomerates, profoundly affected the composition of the urban population. In response to the demand for workers in the industrial and service sectors, millions of people — mainly migrants from the countryside,
temporary as well as permanent — came to live and work in the urban areas. Proportionally, the white-collar workforce expanded most rapidly (Ockey 1999: 234–5). As a consequence, business and industry increasingly competed with the government for educated employees.

The dramatic change in size and composition of the urban population was accompanied by a rapid increase in spending power for millions of people. Within three years, the large expenditure on consumer products (houses, cars, luxuries) produced a secondary boom in the domestic economy (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 162–4). Thai perceptions of prosperity fundamentally changed, and consumerism became a central feature of the urban Thai lifestyle. A modern, affluent middle-class life, drawing on the international repertoire of symbols of modernity like private cars, credit cards, air travel, shopping malls, branded clothes, fast food, cellular phones, and air-conditioned houses, appeared within everybody’s reach, at least in urban environments. The seductive power of consumerism affected lower-income sections of the middle class and working class as much as it did the “new rich” (Mills 1997, 1999).

A consideration of lifestyle shows that no separation can be made between the dynamics of economic and cultural change. Hence, the middle class should not be delineated merely in terms of occupation, education and income (Dwyer 2000; Gerke 1995; Mills 1997, 1999; Ockey 1999). Appadurai (2001) speaks of a “politics of style”. The working class, or urban poor, strive to adopt the lifestyle of the middle class as a strategy for survival, and these elements, which I would like to call the “aspiring middle class”, desire participation in a lifestyle they cannot afford, but they cultivate certain “practices” or “styles” drawn from this lifestyle (Ferguson 1999: 101). In order to conceive cultural differences between social categories, Ferguson introduces the concept of cultural style as a “performative capacity” (ibid.: 98). Participation in a cultural style “unites people in sending similar stylistic messages, but they may at the same time have diverse motives, values, or views of the world” (ibid.: 97). I view the King Chulalongkorn cult as such a cultivated cultural practice of signification, and participation in the cult as part of a cultural style.

**Sino-Thai Ethnicity, Religiosity and Morality**

Understanding urban Thai cultural styles requires a brief elaboration of the substantively Chinese background of the Thai middle class (although my field research focused neither on “Chineseness” nor “Sino-Thainess”).
The predominance of Sino-Thai in the urban middle class means that Sino-Thai values and practices significantly influence urban middle class culture and religiosity.

With regard to the Chinese minorities in Thailand, much has been written on migration and assimilation histories, business success, and the enduring impact of these groups on the Thai economy. In this literature, the successful assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand (in comparison with other Southeast-Asian countries) is often a central focus, but this approach is problematic as it “downplays” the continuity and significance of Sino-Thai ethnicity in Thai society. To escape from the assimilation discourse, Bao Jiemin introduced a cultural concept of Sino-Thai ethnic identity. Instead of attempting to define “Chinese” or “Sino-Thai” in terms of descent and degree of assimilation into Thai society (Skinner 1957; Coughlin 1960), Bao argues for understanding Sino-Thai ethnic identity in terms of ethics and morality, by which she means “(...) the rules and actions of moral conduct derived from Thai Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism” (Bao 1995: 62). Sino-Thai identify with ethics and ritual symbols derived from both Chinese and Thai culture. “For family or business affiliations, the Sino-Thai tend to stress Confucian beliefs, such as filial piety, diligence and thriftiness. But when it comes to politics or proper social demeanour, the Sino-Thai emphasise their loyalty to the Thai monarchy, belief in accumulating merit and emulate the polite Thai manner in posture and speech” (ibid.). It is this combination of elements of Thai Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism around which Sino-Thai ethnic identity is constructed.

Bao’s insights regarding the importance of ethics and morality in the construction of Sino-Thai ethnic identity help us to understand why engagement in religious activities is important for this group and why several of the cults and religious ceremonies that have recently become popular throughout Thailand have an explicitly Sino-Thai background. In this respect, the cult of Chao Mae Kuan Im (Kuan Yin), the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, and the annual Vegetarian Food Festival (thesakan kin che) deserve particular mention, as well as the cult of King Taksin. However, where the worship of Chao Mae Kuan Im and participation in the Vegetarian Food Festival are based upon Mahayana Buddhist concepts of purification of the body through ascetic practices, in particular abstinence from meat. Sino-Thai worship King Taksin (r. 1767–81) because the king’s father was Chinese. This king is also worshipped as a spiritual patron at his equestrian statue in Bangkok (Evans 2002: 169),
but — as some of the material presented in this study will demonstrate — the cult is not limited to this location or to Bangkok alone. Moreover, since King Taksin is remembered as an important saviour of Thai independence — he defeated the invading Burmese in 1767 — the cult is also an articulation of concerns with “Thainess”, in which respect it parallels the King Chulalongkorn cult and is not limited to Sino-Thai circles. However, the scale and intensity of the cult around King Taksin is not comparable with the King Chulalongkorn cult.

As an object of worship, though, Chao Mae Kuan does come close to King Chulalongkorn, as Nithi (1994) was the first to observe. Since the Chao Mae Kuan Im cult lies outside the scope of this study, I will confine myself here to noting that certain Sino-Thai interpretations and practices have become intrinsic elements of the King Chulalongkorn cult too, most notably Mahayana Buddhist perceptions of the king as a this-worldly acting Bodhisattva and associations of worshipping the king with abstinence from beef.

The appeal of Sino-Thai culture for other urban Thai can partly be explained by the inclination of people longing for middle class status to adopt “tokens” of middle class culture, which, by implication, are distinctive elements of Sino-Thai culture, in particular Sino-Thai ethics. This helps us understand why present-day cults and other religious phenomena appeal to the wide group of Thai with a “Chinese” or “Sino-Thai” background, as well as to large numbers of Thai who do not belong to this group. People participating in rituals, ceremonies, or cults interpret for themselves whether their engagement is an act of merit-making (a “Thai” interpretation), an act of purification (a “Chinese” interpretation), or both (a “syncretic” interpretation). The differences or contradictions in interpretation or motivation are irrelevant: overt engagement in religious activities has become an urban Thai cultural style, which is well exemplified by the King Chulalongkorn cult.

Elusive Religiosity

In the opening article of the first issue of the Public Culture Bulletin, Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge argue for “public culture” as a field of study “for those concerned with modernity as a global phenomenon” (1988: 5). Public cultures — arenas of cultural debate where “other types, forms and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways” (ibid.: 6) — are
paradoxical: they are cosmopolitan in form (shaped by mass media, market and mobility), but insular and idiosyncratic in content and meaning. The study of public cultures gives empirical substance to modernity as a multi-directional and open-ended project, while at the same time raising the problem of how to theorise modernity. Appadurai and Breckenridge suggest the term “public culture” because of its relative liberty from the old dichotomies that bias the idea of “popular culture”, such as rural versus urban, authentic versus industrial, folk versus mass, or subaltern versus elite culture. The concept of public culture provides a perspective in which the King Chulalongkorn cult can be studied as a junction of many processes, patterns and spaces where current Thai political, religious, and social issues are articulated. Occasionally, I will use the word “popular”, but only to draw a distinction with “official” matters.

The King Chulalongkorn cult is but one among many “junctions” that make up Thai public culture today. In Thailand, the emergence of a new cult is nothing exceptional. Since the 1960s and particularly in the 1980s, the Thai religious realm has been flooded by a wave of cults around (historical) kings, queens, monks, local heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses. The number of magic monks, spirit mediums, astrologers and fortune-tellers is continuously on the rise, with people spending increasing amounts of money for their services. These new cults and the accompanying growth of the numbers of spirit mediums largely are urban or semi-urban phenomena (Irvine 1982, 1984; Jackson 1999a, 1999b; Morris 2000, 2002; Mulder 1997: 324–8; Pattana 2005; Tambiah [1984] 1988; Tanabe 2002). A parallel development in the realm of religion is the emergence of well-organised, independent reform movements that also draw support mainly from urban Thai (Apinya 1993; Jackson 1989; Suwanna 1990; Zehner 1990). The rise both of cults and of reform movements for a large part reflects increasing individual preoccupations with acquiring and consolidating wealth. The practices of the various new religious movements may be reckoned among what Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) have termed “occult economies”.

Clearly, the effervescence of the Thai religious realm should be understood in the wider context of the global proliferation of religious movements that characterised the final decades of the twentieth century. Recent anthropological studies, addressing various parts of the world, refute the Weberian notion that the disenchantment that goes with modernity should restrain the public articulation of religion (Behrend and Luig 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Geschiere 1997; Meyer
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1999; Meyer and Pels 2003; Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering 2001; Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999; Weller 2001). The force of religious motivation as a significant driver of human action is not only manifested locally and within the boundary of individual political and cultural particularities. Global politics increasingly confronts religiously motivated political action, and major conflicts often find expression in religious terms. This is not to deny that political and economic frustrations and ambitions are part of almost any religious upheaval or conflict, but the tendency of local frustrations and ambitions to be expressed in religious terms requires inclusion of the study of religion in the study of society. Moreover, the observation that new religious movements are a worldwide phenomenon provides an extra argument for discussing “religion” or religious phenomena in a study of how people articulate and rework local idiom in reflecting on their own and their country’s position in a globalising world.

For the Thai case new religious movements need to be positioned in relation to the kingdom’s official religious institution: the Buddhist sangha (the order of monks). The history of the sangha is partly a history of active oppression of, what is called, “irrational” or “false” religious beliefs and practices, sometimes within the institution itself, a challenge that hovers over any modern cult or reform movement. To fight “superstition”, the sangha is equipped with the juridical authority to intervene whenever this is considered necessary. The Council of Elders (supreme council of monks, mahatherasamakhom) has, for example, the authority to punish or even defrock monks who do not adhere to the monk’s code of conduct (the vinaya). However, juridical authority in religious affairs does not lie with the sangha alone. The sangha falls directly under the authority of the Department of Religious Affairs, which is a department of the Ministry of Education, although a close connection between the two is assured because of the Director General of the Department of Religious Affairs, also serves as Secretary General of the Council of Elders (Tambiah 1977: 253–4). The Department of Religious Affairs is authorised to arrest people and has a special Religious Police at its service. State control over the sangha has become formal rather than actual, however (Jackson 1999a: 28). In the 1980s and 1990s, the Council of Elders used its power a number of times in cases against monks accused of involvement in corrupt practices, sexual misconduct or dissemination of misleading religious teachings. The latter accusation was made, for example, in 1998 against one of the major modern reform movements, the Thammakai,
in particular against the organisation’s teachings concentrating on an “unorthodox” mixture of meditation and miracles, in combination with soliciting large donations from the public. The organisation’s founder was eventually defrocked and sentenced to jail on the grounds of embezzlement and misuse of religious authority. That the conviction did not seriously affect the existence of the Thammakai, illustrates the limited scope of the moral and religious authority of the sangha. It will be clear that less structured religious phenomena, such as cults, are even further beyond control (see also Pattana 2005: 465–6).

The current proliferation of new religious movements, however, cannot solely be attributed to a general distrust in the sangha or its lack of power. The need of most urban and semi-urban city dwellers for individually oriented solutions to their modern concerns with prosperity and security has led many to engage in a wide variety of alternative practices. These engagements, however, do not affect their self-perceptions of being pious Buddhists. Although new meaning is created, the pool of ideas and practices upon which these new religious movements draw is perceived as genuinely Thai Buddhist. Drawing upon the same pool, the new movements are closely interrelated and in constant flux, evolving from one form into another. Followers may come from virtually all walks of (urban) life, from the highest elite levels to the poorest of the urban poor. To differentiate these various elusive expressions of non-doctrinal religiosity from official Buddhism, I will use the generic term “popular Thai religiosity”, which I understand as belonging to the domain of “public” culture. The King Chulalongkorn cult, then, is a junction where religious and secular parts of this domain meet.

The Research

The urban and middle class character of the King Chulalongkorn cult does not imply that there is no veneration of King Chulalongkorn in rural areas. At village schools, in the offices of local officials, and in private houses “King Chulalongkorn portraits” may be found. King Chulalongkorn, that is, the king’s image, has reached every nook and cranny of the kingdom by now but the dissemination of the royal image, through television programs, magazines and mass reproduction of portraits is an urban and middle class affair. And it is in towns and cities that, without exaggeration, his image is omnipresent. As soon as one leaves the village for the provincial town, King Chulalongkorn is there. This situation led
me to conduct my field research along two different but related paths, first studying urban worshippers and second focusing on King Chulalongkorn products of “public culture”.

The research was carried out in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai is the main town of Northern Thailand and lies 600 kilometres north of Bangkok. From September 1996 until December 1997 I lived in Chiang Mai, with occasional visits to Bangkok. In October 1998 I returned for another two months of additional fieldwork. The financial crisis of July 1997 occurred in the middle of the field research period. Somewhat to my surprise, the crisis did not substantially affect the daily routines at the locations where I did most of my research, and it did not become a separate topic in this study.

Selecting interviewees was not as matter-of-course as it might seem. In spite of its immense scale, the King Chulalongkorn cult proved to be highly fragmented. This brought the kind of practical problems that are probably intrinsic to any urban anthropological research project. There are no limitations in terms of location or the number of people who might be included in the research: since almost everybody in any city worships King Chulalongkorn to some extent, the research could, in principle, have been conducted in any town among any population set. Nevertheless, to avoid the danger of drowning in an excess of information, a selection had to be made in terms of location or degree of involvement with the cult.

To demarcate the research in Chiang Mai, I began by looking at material objects of public culture. The King Chulalongkorn cult is manifested by a huge output of “King Chulalongkorn products”, objects bearing portraits, statuettes, coins, leaflets, tapes, videos, magazines, advertisements, television programs, and books. Initially, I concentrated on portraits displayed in shops, assuming that this would teach me something about the owners’ motivations and preferences, and how portraits generally are obtained. I chose shops because they are easily accessible, and there is a reasonable chance of getting engaged in a conversation with the owner or shop keeper. These initial investigations made it clear that quite a few portraits came from the same source: a temple located at the outskirts of the city. This temple, Wat Doi Chang, turned out to be a centre of King Chulalongkorn worship. Subsequently, Wat Doi Chang — the abbot, its visitors, its festivals — became a major focus of my research. I regularly attended the daily morning and afternoon sessions, in which the abbot received lay people who had come to consult him. Much
of my understanding of the King Chulalongkorn cult I owe to my own discussions with the abbot, his conversations with temple visitors, and my own exchanges with the visitors. Apart from these daily interactions, the temple's festivals were of great significance for my research.  

As my circle of contacts expanded, I learned that, as with the portraits, there was one major source for coins with the image of the king, a spirit medium named Mae Wan who lived some ten kilometres outside the city. She was regularly possessed by King Chulalongkorn’s spirit, usually on Sundays. My research at her residence followed the same pattern as that at the temple. I regularly attended Mae Wan’s spirit medium sessions, and not just the “Sunday King Chulalongkorn sessions”. During the week other spirits possessed Mae Wan, and almost every day people came to consult her. I attended these sessions to listen to the conversations between the possessed medium and her audience, and also was in the position to engage in conversations with the visitors myself. Some of the possessing spirits — unlike the spirit of King Chulalongkorn — were hard for me to follow as they only spoke in Northern Thai, the local language. Many times, people in the audience as well as the medium herself willingly explained to me the conversation’s content afterwards.

In Chiang Mai, the temple and the spirit medium were the major sources for research. In addition, I spoke with people not particularly involved with these “King Chulalongkorn cult centres”, people I met in rather random situations, or when visiting a shop or another place where images of the king were on display. My focus on the public culture around King Chulalongkorn also led me to artisans making King Chulalongkorn portraits, to authors of King Chulalongkorn books and to places where King Chulalongkorn products were for sale (photo shops and artisans’ markets), both in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The interviews with these producers and sellers of King Chulalongkorn products introduced me to the cult’s artistic and commercial dimensions.

The central position of the equestrian statue in the cult gave the research in Bangkok a spatial focus. Apart from the gatherings around Chulalongkorn Day, people came to worship King Chulalongkorn at the equestrian statue on specific days of the week. There were two important evenings, with a third developing: gatherings of individual worshippers on Tuesday evenings; gatherings dominated by an organisation named the “Prayers Society” on Thursday evenings; and gatherings on Saturday evenings that resembled those on Tuesdays but attracted fewer people.
The Royal Plaza gatherings made me aware of dimensions of the cult that were absent or remained invisible in Chiang Mai. Here I only mention the predominance of the equestrian statue over any other image of King Chulalongkorn, and the significance of the public aspects of the cult. The Royal Plaza showed me a different face of the cult as well. Along with a controlled, devotional atmosphere of worship, not unlike that at Wat Doi Chang or the spirit medium sessions, there was something ominous in the air. Amidst the well-to-do worshippers, large numbers of urban poor — street vendors, disabled, and beggars — competed to make a living. Rival street vendors regularly created minor disturbances, and on some evenings the ostentatious presence of police and other officials contributed to the tense atmosphere. During my research period, the police stepped up their efforts to ban marginal elements from the square. Another harsh reality was the traffic. The gatherings took place on a traffic island with a continuous flow of cars and motorbikes moving at high speeds on both sides. In the dark, crossing from the pedestrian area along the square to the safety within the fenced area in the middle was dangerous, and sometimes almost impossible. Late on Saturday evenings, youngsters on motorbikes used to compete around the fenced area at high speed. Sometime in 1997 the police put an end to this practice, and when I returned in 1998, the square was closed for traffic on Tuesday evenings.

In contrast with my experience at the cult centres in Chiang Mai, where the situation allowed the establishment of more permanent contacts with regular visitors, I did not have repeated contact with Tuesday and Saturday worshippers. The Thursday gatherings, however, provided different contact opportunities. The Prayers Society was well-organised, well-equipped and easily accessible, and I was able to establish a more lasting relationship with this organisation and several of its members. I participated in its entire program of prayer sessions, which apart from the Thursday sessions at the equestrian statue included evening praying sessions throughout the week, at other royal monuments and the organisation’s headquarters. My contacts with the Prayers Society contributed significantly to my research because they provided insight into the relationship between the King Chulalongkorn cult and other cults. In addition, this part of the research sheds light on the influence of such groups on the appearance, discourse and contents of the King Chulalongkorn cult.
The Great Beloved King

King Chulalongkorn is the subject of a number of narratives that circulate in Thailand, and nearly all Thais have at least a basic knowledge of his life, his personality, and his achievements. Mainly through the school history curriculum, a general body of knowledge on King Chulalongkorn exists, that is shared at least by those who have followed secondary education.1 But, which processes have led to the present worshipping of the king as a divine being? What circumstances have made the perception shift from an important historical king to a powerful spirit? Or, in case these ideas could be traced back to an earlier period, why have they come to the fore so massively only recently? It will be difficult to provide an absolute answer to these questions. It is possible, however, to delineate several aspects of the complex interactions between popular religiosity, mass media, economic and political developments, and the influence of certain groups or even certain individuals in society that have contributed to the cult’s present form and scale. This chapter will highlight the singular narratives, their construction, dissemination and appropriation as one particular dimension of these societal interactions.

To analyse the King Chulalongkorn cult by taking the narratives about King Chulalongkorn as a starting point implies also the question of their authorship or intellectual ownership. As this study will demonstrate, the body of narratives is a Thai collective construct. What is the implication of this “collective authorship” for the narratives’ meaning? And how to portray it? The social realities of the participants in the King Chulalongkorn cult differ widely, and participation in reception and production of the imagination around the king varies equally between as well as within different groups in society. Furthermore, “King Chulalongkorn” does not have the same meaning for everybody sharing in the veneration
for the king. Following others who have dealt with the problem that “collective” involves implicitly social consensus, I will use the term “social” instead (cf. Burke 1997: 43–7; Connerton 1989).

Within the different social strata with a significant impact on the cult, urban and elite elements predominate, and it is tempting to approach the cult from a Weberian perspective. Weber emphasised in his work on society and religion in China and India the importance of intellectuals or literati in the development of religious ideas (Gerth and Mills 1991 [1948]: 416–44). Indeed, many aspects of the King Chulalongkorn cult — including ideas on Buddhist kingship and the narratives about the king’s life — can be traced back to the thought and writings of contemporary intellectuals, for the most part close relatives of the king, and even to the king himself (cf. Barmé 1993; Murashima 1988; Reynolds 1973b). The image of King Chulalongkorn that emerges from these elite products may explain the veneration for King Chulalongkorn. These efforts, however, are insufficient to explain how this veneration turned into a mass cult in the last decade of the twentieth century.

**Media and Censorship**

Max Weber’s insight into the significance of the elite in producing religious ideas fits the social situation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Siam very well. In present-day Thailand, however, literacy as such no longer is the largely exclusive domain of the elite (Hamilton 1993; Reynolds 1973b). Print has become a mass medium, and as a consequence opportunities to publish and access to literature have replaced the importance of mere literacy in the spread of ideas, in this particular case, ideas about King Chulalongkorn. Moreover, productions featuring the king are not limited to literary media, but appear equally frequently in other mass media like television, video, and cassette tapes. This situation gives rise to several questions. First, which organisations, groups, institutions or mere individuals do disseminate ideas or information about King Chulalongkorn? Second, what is the nature of these messages? And third, how are the messages received and appropriated by audiences? To answer the last question would require a thorough audience survey, which is beyond the scope of this study. Instead I have chosen to study the products of the different media to provide an impression of how the King Chulalongkorn cult is shaped and expressed through mass media.

In Thailand radio and television broadcasting are under strict military and government control. Before airing, programmes are subjected to
strict censorship “to ensure that nothing is broadcast that would threaten the peace and unity of the nation, jeopardise the country’s relationship with other nations, or aid the glorification of criminals and criminal behaviour” (Hamilton 1993b: 518–9), although the news, live broadcasts, and government-produced documentary programmes are not censored in advance (ibid.: 519). These regulations and prohibitions apply equally to everything published in print. Irrespective of the fact that this censorship system continues to exist, however, it is impossible to keep pace with the content and impact of the printed media, and even of radio and television. In the Thai arena of modern mass media today, there is no single dominant player.

The loosening of media control from official agencies took off in the second half of the 1980s, when mass media became big business. Large media conglomerates developed alongside the existing media ventures (like newspapers) and attracted huge amounts of advertising revenue by establishing magazines, business newspapers, and satellite channels, launching music and television stars, and marketing albums, video's and live concerts (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 47–9). Their market was not only Thailand’s expanding middle class but also the country’s rural population. The rapid increase of TV ownership has been fundamental in this development. In 1985 almost the entire urban population and already half of the rural households owned a television, and 20 years later virtually every home had a television set (ibid.: 162–5). The commitment of successive governments to economic liberalisation and privatisation inevitably brought more and more breaches in the army and government monopoly over the media. To compete with the privately owned companies, government and army channels launched their own programmes directed at the general public, featuring soap operas, dramas, talk shows and phone-ins. Private companies produced these programmes. At the time of my research there were two government television channels, two army channels and two commercial channels. The military controlled their own television channels and radio stations, while all of the several hundred other radio stations fell under the Mass Communications Organisation of Thailand, part of the government's Department of Public Relations.

In terms of censorship, live programmes with public participation, such as talk shows or phone-ins, are problematic. The development of such programmes demonstrates the desire for a more liberal policy on freedom of speech and for a wider, more democratic access to the electronic media. The relationship between government, media, and the public
is constantly scrutinised by societal groups like academics, NGO’s, and women organisations demanding progressive reforms.

In times of economic or political crisis, the first reaction of the army and the government is to repress the broadcasting of “potentially subversive” shows.\(^4\) In the late 1990s repression, including intimidation and assaults on critical journalists or other opponents, still was a common practise to protect the economic and political interests of those in charge. This atmosphere induces a considerable amount of self-censorship. Particularly the strict legislation on *lese-majesté* is a mechanism to prevent any unwelcome reporting on the monarchy (cf. Hamilton 1993: 520). In addition, there is no change yet in the old-time army and government policy of using (electronic) media as a major means for the propagation of government policies, as well as ideas on national security, religious topics and the monarchy.

**King Chulalongkorn Publicity**

The many mini documentaries devoted to him are prime examples of government-controlled publicity regarding King Chulalongkorn. These mini documentaries are part of a wider category of small, propagandistic TV productions. I will describe this general category with special emphasis on the way King Chulalongkorn is featured in them.

In the context of the dynamic commercialisation that has drastically reshaped the form and content of the Thai media-scape over the last two decades, the prime-time programming of army and government channels seems anachronistic. Around the 8 PM evening news, Thailand’s most densely viewed television programme, short documentaries featuring King Chulalongkorn are among the kind of programmes that one might encounter. “King Chulalongkorn programmes” fit the above-mentioned category of “government-produced documentary”, and are part of the daily repertoire on royalty. Some of the “documentaries” I have seen have a particular form: they were too long to be just “advertisements”, and too short to be documentaries or serious attempts at covering the topic concerned. In the period I conducted my research, Channel 9 (one of the government channels), broadcast a seemingly endless daily three-minute series on Vimanmek Mansion — one of King Chulalongkorn’s palaces in Bangkok that is presently used as a museum — and the royal objects on display in the building. In 1982 Queen Sirikit (the present queen) took the initiative to restore the building and to make it a museum as a means
to commemorate King Chulalongkorn. The programme, a long advertisement for the museum that gave detailed information on the numerous “King Chulalongkorn objects” at display, was produced by one of Thailand’s many private media companies (World Wide Vision) and sponsored by Thai Airways, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and Yim Sayam (another private company). Thai Airways and EGAT are, together with other (semi) government departments and organisations like the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Telephone Organisation of Thailand and the National Energy Policy Office, major sponsors of a daily stream of brief educational programmes on royal history, safety, good behaviour, arts and culture, and environmental issues.

Another example of a daily mini series on royal history, which was usually broadcast immediately after the Vimanmek series, is Thoranin Thin Thai (Sovereigns of the Thai Realm). This series recounted Thai history by focussing on the nation’s major heroes, a point of view which in the Thai case implies automatically an almost solid focus on historical kings. The programme’s starting point was usually the most important statue of a particular king, and while the screen switched to other sites connected with this king, such as a palace, temple shrine or other statues, a powerful male voice-over reported in a few lines the hero’s most important deeds. The programme was a combined production of the Military Social Welfare Department and Alphatec Group, another private media company.

A second kind of programme consisted of historical documentaries broadcast on the anniversary days of people or institutions, where royalty was involved in one way or the other. This kind of documentary, aired usually by all government and army channels, could encompass a wide range of topics. Good examples are the documentaries commemorating the 100th anniversaries of government-related institutions like the Red Cross and the national health care, of which Queen Sirikit is the patron. As many of these (semi) government institutions were established during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the documentaries deal also with the reign of this king. Again, Thai Airways often is a major sponsor of these documentaries.

Programmes such as these offer a pictorial recounting of the history of King Chulalongkorn that parallels the presentation in through the school curriculum. They also connect the present with the past by direct linking the present royal family with their illustrious ancestor. Something similar can be said of books published under patronage of highly placed figures in the military, the government, political parties and private
businesses, sometimes even with the sanction of the highest representative of the Buddhist clergy (the supreme patriarch or sangharat), a further demonstration of the strong linkages among these power groups. Such books may be published on the occasion of commemorative events, to raise funds for charity, or simply to express a linkage with King Chulalongkorn or with the present royal family.

Access to the printed media is clearly not limited to the elite or bourgeois strata of society. Along with the few, relatively expensive and pretentious publications that fill the “King Chulalongkorn” shelves in bookstores, the market is flooded with a great many cheap, popular booklets, written, compiled and published by journalists, quasi-historians or organisations whose identity is unclear.6

Similarly, King Chulalongkorn appears regularly as a topic in Thai and English-language local magazines and newspapers (cf. Hong 1998). In addition, large quantities of religious publications with King Chulalongkorn as a major topic are for sale everywhere. The borderline between “history” and “religion” in a book quoting bits and pieces of the king’s written or spoken words as a moral life-guide is of course difficult to draw. But next to this somewhat fuzzy category, religious publishing houses produce booklets and tapes featuring magical prayers to address King Chulalongkorn, and millions of portraits reproduced in all available techniques (see Chapter II). In the immensely popular religious magazines, like Saksit, Maha Phot, or Kamnot Kam, King Chulalongkorn and his magical, spiritual powers are as much a topic as are famous monks and their powers. Judging from my own experiences at significant places of worship, such as the Royal Plaza (see Introduction), numerous individuals or companies have produced vast quantities of leaflets or booklets with instructions (tamra) on “how to worship King Chulalongkorn” for free distribution.

As the material in this study will demonstrate, the social imaginary around King Chulalongkorn is influenced by ideas and practices of the lower and middle strata of society, and the body of meaning centred on “King Chulalongkorn” includes elements of social or political critique. The high literacy rate and the general access to modern mass media of large groups of modern consumers are an important element in this “bottom-up” influence, as is the fact that the impact of these media no longer can be controlled by select groups. Moreover, while the earlier self-evident, monolithic control of governmental and military authorities and other elite groups7 has declined, these groups have become involved
in the cult themselves, too. In other words, the increasing accessibility of
the modern media has liberalised public culture into an arena where the
middle class contests the thinking of political and religious authorities
(Eickelman and Anderson 1999).

**Buddhist Kingship**

Acknowledging both the importance of mass media in the dissemination
of ideas, and the dispersed and indefinite ways media messages influence
audiences, it is time to look in detail at the narratives. Because of their
repetitive character, the continuous recounting of the same details, events
and heroic moments, and because of their constant mutual reference,
individual King Chulalongkorn narratives must be understood as compo-
ents of a greater whole. Together they constitute the myth and hagi-
ography of one particular Buddhist king. The biographical details and
deeds highlighted in the narratives recount not merely the personal
qualities of King Chulalongkorn, however, but qualities that are in
general indicative for a “righteous ruler” (thammarat). Such kings are
said to be guided by the teachings (tham) of the Buddha and to rule in
accordance with the “Ten Kingly Virtues” (thotsaphit ratchatham). These
virtues are charity, morality, self-sacrifice, rectitude, gentleness, self-
restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction.8
The Buddha provides the exemplary background of the thammarat con-
cept, the “Ten Kingly Virtues” being similar to the Ten Perfections of
the Buddha.9 Before reaching enlightenment the Buddha is believed to
have been reborn as a king. Such beliefs are well within the tradition
of Buddhist hagiography (Tambiah 1984: 124–8; 1985: 326–7). I will
elaborate on the implications of popular Thai ideas on Buddhist king-
ship in Chapter II. Here it is my intention to discuss the King Chula-
longkorn narratives as a form of transfer of knowledge of the past. The
social imaginary surrounding the king rests on stories everybody has been
brought up with, and in the processes of transfer these stories have grown
in meaning as they have become interlinked with prevailing ideas and
emotions (Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering 2004: 123, 278–9).

The King Chulalongkorn narratives build on ancient Theravada Bud-
dhist conceptions of kingship, but they are incorporated in a powerful
modern nationalist ideology. As an ideology the King Chulalongkorn
myth derives its potency, to follow Kapferer, from being based on vital
elements of an “ontology” shared by those in power and the general
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populace (1988: 79–84). In Thai Buddhist ontology power relationships are ordered in a hierarchical system, with the king at the apex. As Kapferer argues for Sri Lanka, another Theravada Buddhist nation, in the Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalist ideology:

[t]he nation is encompassed by the state symbolised in the kingship. These in turn are encompassed by the Buddhist religion or the Triple Gem (Buddha, dharma [tham, the teachings], sangha [the clergy]). In this unity of the whole is the integrity of the parts. The nation or the people who compose a hierarchically interrelated social order discover their unity in the power of the state (…) (ibid.: 12).

For the Thai case a similar observation can be made. Thai nationalist ideology is founded on the intrinsic linkages between nation, kingship, and religion: the virtuous Buddhist king is the benevolent power that unites and sustains the nation, and therefore there is no principal difference between king and state. In the final part of this chapter, I will elaborate on the implications this ideology — as it is expressed in the King Chulalongkorn myth — has for the way Thai people relate to their state.

A Cult of Narratives

Knowledge about King Chulalongkorn circulates in the form of stories. Thai people know these stories very well. These narratives are taught in school as part of the history curriculum, they appear time and again in popular magazines and books, and they are retold in radio and television broadcasts. Of equal importance is their reconfirmation in the daily experiences of many of the more dedicated worshippers. With regard to the latter, I refer in particular to spiritual encounters with the king, which are rather common experiences among his worshippers. In the course of such encounters the king always acts and speaks in accordance with the patterns established in the narratives, as the cases presented in this study will demonstrate.

The corpus of King Chulalongkorn stories consists of several major narratives, each representing a different theme of the king’s biography and addressing particular emotions. As will be discussed in detail below, these narratives are endlessly reproduced in all sorts of media. Since each of these narratives, so to speak, depicts the king in one of his particular capacities, they can be regarded as “narrated portraits”. The portraits
reveal which aspects of the king’s life and personality are of such significance for the Thai people that they generally refer to him as *somdet phra piya maharat* or the Great Beloved King. I will introduce the King Chulalongkorn myth by presenting four narrated portraits:

(a) King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside
(b) King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery
(c) King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony
(d) King Chulalongkorn modernised Thai society

This selection reflects my belief that each narrated portrait expresses a part of what most Thai would consider the significance of King Chulalongkorn. I realise that this selection is influenced by my own interpretation of the King Chulalongkorn myth, and these narratives might be presented from a different perspective for equally sound reasons, considering the king’s qualities, for instance, instead of his deeds. Numerous King Chulalongkorn stories, details and variations circulate. My selection is not intended to be exhaustive, but I consider it consistent with the principal answers people give when asked why they worship King Chulalongkorn. These answers more or less follow the issues taught in standard history books at school. Yet, in contrast with the effect compulsory subject matter generally has, touching upon the subject of King Chulalongkorn and his achievements inspires such strong feelings of awe that it may literally give people goose bumps.

**King Chulalongkorn Visited the Countryside**

The narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside” addresses the universal topic of the fatherly king, the benevolent ruler, caring for each of his subjects. The portrait narrates how King Chulalongkorn was the first Siamese king to go into the countryside incognito to learn *in person* about his subjects’ needs and problems. In other parts of the world, similar stories are told about historical figures like Charlemagne and the illustrious caliph of the Arabian Nights. The recently crowned kings of Morocco (Mohammed VI) and Jordan (Abdallah II) acquired instantaneous popularity through a policy of widely publicized incognito inspections of their kingdoms.

To analyse this portrait I will present a story, which was told to me by different people several times in late October and early November
The Great Beloved King

1998, and which turned out to be derived from a television broadcast on Chulalongkorn Day of that year, which I had not seen personally.

In this programme a farmer from the province of Ayutthaya told the story of the precious gun owned by his family. Some hundred years ago, the grandfather of this farmer had received a group of strangers visiting his village. The leader of the strangers, clearly somebody wealthy and powerful, had been very friendly. He had shown a great interest in the farmer’s grandfather and in the village in general, and had a meal at the grandfather’s house. At a certain moment the grandfather had expressed his admiration for the stranger’s beautiful gun. The stranger said that, as he had been welcomed so warmly, he would like to present him such a gun on another occasion. If the grandfather ever had the opportunity to come to Bangkok, he would be received warmly. Before he left, the stranger wrote down his address and gave it to the farmer’s grandfather.

Some months later the grandfather did have to go to Bangkok, and he took the address with him. He had no idea in which part of the city the stranger lived, but upon asking everybody seemed to know in which direction he had to walk. To his astonishment he ended up at the royal palace. The guards, of course, had no intention of letting him enter the palace even though he could show the paper the stranger had given him. But just as he was about to give up, the gate opened and amidst a large following the stranger came out. He recognised the grandfather immediately and invited him to come closer. The grandfather was shocked to realise that his kind visitor had been the king himself. Moreover, King Chulalongkorn did as he had promised and gave the grandfather a magnificent gun. The gun carried the cypher of the king: CH.P.R. [Chulalongkorn Paramaphithai Ratchathirat].

What does this story of the king’s visit to Ayutthaya show? What kind of man do we see? What ideas and sentiments does the story appeal to? There are several important elements in the story. Firstly, the king went into the countryside incognito. He was recognised as a person of importance, but his true identity remained hidden. Secondly, he was interested in the life and needs of the people he met. He wanted to see how people lived and he shared their meals. Thirdly, he treated his subjects with respect. He invited people in return and kept his promises. These are the steady ingredients of stories about the king visiting the countryside (see for instance also Chula 1960: 229–30).

The story of the precious gun is but one example of a story that says the king loved his subjects so much that he decided to go and see
with his own eyes how they lived, what their needs were and how he could improve their circumstances. The king interacted with his subjects in an intimate manner (yang klai chit). The king did so because he did not want to rely solely on the accounts of possibly selfish government officials. He wanted to find out for himself what was “good (khwam di) and what was bad (mai di) of provincial officials”.

To be certain that the situations he would meet would cover reality, it was necessary to travel unrecognised. The additions of the grandfather’s astonishment and the extraordinary gift give the story an extra entertaining dimension, but basically the story reconfirms the image of King Chulalongkorn as a benevolent and concerned ruler.

There is an expression that refers specifically to these incognito trips into the countryside: sadet praphat ton, which could be translated as “a person of royal descent making an ordinary (leisure) tour or visit”. Although the expression thus may be used for an informal visit of any member of the royal family, in actual use it generally refers to King Chulalongkorn. Moreover, the popular usage includes two connotations specifically connected with the king. First, the aspect of informality has been modified to embrace moving about incognito and the surprise character of the trip. Second, the purpose — entertainment — has been replaced by the king’s desire to learn about his country and subjects. To demonstrate how the narrative “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside” has come into being — and because similar processes operate in connection with the other narrated portraits — I will analyse the history of the expression sadet praphat ton in detail.

Although King Chulalongkorn made tours from the early years of his reign — even before the regency period had ended — the expression sadet praphat ton specifically related to two excursions made in 1904 and 1906. Prince Damrong, who accompanied the king on both occasions, published a diary of the first trip in the form of seven letters written to “fictional father” (pho pradit) in 1905. In these letters Prince Damrong emphasised repeatedly that nobody should know who the visitors were, and how important it was for the king to have the opportunity to see everything with his own eyes. In Letter III (20 July 1904) Prince Damrong described a discussion they had had that day about the meaning of the name of a boat they had bought along the way. The boat was called ruea (boat) ton. Some members of the company believed that the name was derived from khrueang ton, literally “things a king eats”, but there were also other interpretations. Prince Damrong concluded the paragraph on
this topic by saying that he remained uncertain about the meaning, but that since that day the royal company used the expression *sadet praphat ton* when referring to that particular trip (Damrong 1976 [1912]: 8).

Thanks to Prince Damrong’s diary — the letters have been reprinted many times since — *sadet praphat ton* became the common expression applied to the king’s countryside tours in general. School history books and other, more elaborate books on the reign of King Chulalongkorn without exception contain a chapter titled *sadet praphat ton* that links the expression with the 1904 and 1906 trips, although Prince Damrong’s explanation concerning the name of the boat is generally left out, or replaced by another explanation by the prince, which he wrote many years later (see below).  

Before *sadet praphat ton* became common usage one spoke of *sadet praphat hua muang*, “royalty touring up-country”. In *sadet praphat ton* materials this expression still may be used to refer the excursions made before 1904. As nineteenth-century Siam had no major roads, “upcountry trips” as well as *sadet praphat ton* excursions were made by boat. Numerous canals and minor streams connected villages to larger waterways, and the king and his entourage used small paddle boats (1960: 229). However, the *sadet praphat ton* trips involved travel by steamer and sometimes by train. At night they stayed in temples. Prince Damrong often mentions the pleasant (*sanuk*) character of these excursions.

For his visits to the islands in the Gulf of Siam and the southern coastal provinces the king used the royal yacht and gunboat Maha Chakri, which he had ordered from England in 1892 (Chula 1960: 228–9). Compared to official public visits, which were laden with pomp and circumstance, *sadet praphat hua mueang* excursions were low-profile. During these journeys the king and his royal company dressed casually, and stopped for picnics and excursions at nice places *en route*. From these occasions quite a few photographs exist — some taken by the king himself — depicting the royal group on their way by boat, or having a picnic (*piknik*). In particular the photographs of the king and his company bathing at Than Sadet Waterfall at Phangan Island (1889), and those with the king and his following seated on large rock formations taken on his visit to the southern provinces in the same year, are widely known and can be found in many books. At these and other places, such as the kingdom’s sacred rocks and caves (Munier 1998), the king had his initials — the royal monogram — inscribed on the rocks, and such places have become famous sites visited regularly by Thai tourists.
Along with the photographs, these inscriptions are material evidence of the king’s visits to the countryside.

**Styling History**

The narrative of *sadet praphat ton* is expressed in stories elaborating, more or less freely, on the material mainly provided by Prince Damrong and may be illustrated with contemporary pictures. That Prince Damrong’s personal accounts have acquired the status of “history” is no coincidence. Prince Damrong is generally known and widely respected as the “Father of Thai History”. Inspired by the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) — “the father of modern historical scholarship” (Barmé 1993: 59, note 40) — the prince rewrote the history of Siam. According to Von Ranke, universal or modern and rational history could be written by linking together “historical units of time or epochs, which (…) possess a ‘unique essence’. Such historical research ‘should above all benefit [one’s] own nation’” (Barmé 1993: 47). In Prince Damrong’s perspective, Thai history is the linear development from King Ramkhamhaeng, the founder of the thirteenth-century Kingdom of Sukhothai, to contemporary Thailand. Although Prince Damrong’s interpretation of Thai history has received much criticism from both Thai and foreign historians, for the general public the power of expression of his work has not weakened. Within the prince’s focus on kingship, the *sadet praphat ton* accounts may be seen as an early attempt to depict King Chulalongkorn as an accessible king. Accessibility is one of the prerequisites of Buddhist kingship, for which the benevolent and fatherly King Ramkhamhaeng has become the archetype in the works of Prince Damrong, King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, r. 1910–25), and the influential playwright Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898–1962) (see Barmé 1993; Thongchai 1994; Vella 1976).

To understand the pervasive power of the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside”, the historical accuracy of Prince Damrong’s *sadet praphat ton* accounts and his intentions in publishing them are unimportant. What matters is that they are directly and indirectly the main source for the portrait as it is narrated today. Their appeal stems from both the prince’s — deliberate — colloquial style, and the indubitable credibility of his writings, which is guaranteed by Prince Damrong’s status as an intimate brother of King Chulalongkorn, as a prince, as the “Father of Thai History”, and, last but not least, as an eyewitness. Thanks to this aspect of “indubitable credibility”. Prince
Damrong’s letters serve not only as a source of the content but also of the truth of the narrated portrait as it appears in recent stories. In my view, a major key to appreciating the appeal of the narrative portraits of King Chulalongkorn lies in this aspect of “acquired truth”. D.P. Spence’s ideas on the meaning of narratives in psychotherapy as developed in his book *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (1982) provide a tool for understanding this process.

**Narrative Truth**

Narrative truth, says Spence, elaborating on Freud’s ideas on the importance of convincing narratives in psychoanalysis, is the compelling persuasive power of a good story. This truth is a truth in its own right:

> Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that *one* solution to a mystery must be true. Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth (Spence 1982: 31, italics in original).

To achieve narrative truth, a narrative needs to be consistent, coherent and comprehensive, and — to a certain extent — historically accurate. In the case of the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside”, as demonstrated above, Prince Damrong’s *sadet praphat ton* accounts provide the requisite historical accuracy. To this substratum, new elements, specific details, elaborations, or new interpretations may be added if they meet the criteria of consistency, coherence and comprehensiveness. When such criteria are met, Spence speaks of “narrative fit”. His main concerns are how the narrative fit of the therapist’s interpretation may render the patient’s biography as a restored and understandable whole, and the problematic character of the relationship between the narrative truth established during the therapeutic process and the actual historical truth of the reconstructed biography. In my argument, however, the concepts of narrative fit and narrative truth will help resolve the dilemma that arises when one attempts to explain the persuasive power of the narrated portraits of the king *vis-à-vis* the — sometimes meagre — historical evidence. The concept of narrative fit explains how the addition of extra detail may enhance a story’s persuasiveness, and how a whole body of stories becomes more compelling when all stories become geared to each other. I will use the story of “the king’s visit to
Ayutthaya, the grandfather and the gun” as an example to demonstrate how narrative fit produces narrative truth.

In 1912, Prince Damrong’s 1904 and 1906 diaries for the first time were published in one volume. For this publication Prince Damrong wrote an extra letter as an addition to the 1904 diary. In that letter — letter VIII, dated 23 October (Chulalongkorn Day!) 1912 — Prince Damrong introduces the expression of phuean ton, short for phuean (friends) sadet praphat ton. The prince writes that phuean ton — “men and women from almost all provinces the king had visited” (1976: 33) — came regularly to Bangkok, and that the king granted audiences to these people. Prince Damrong then continues how the king on his 1907 voyage to Europe (see below) bought gifts, like walking-sticks, for the phuean ton. The walking-sticks were insignia of rank (khrueang yot) for those among the group (phuak) of phuean ton who came to seek audience with the king upon his return from Europe. Upon King Chulalongkorn’s death, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) commanded that the phuak phuean ton attending the king’s cremation would receive a walking-stick, inscribed with King Chulalongkorn’s initials as a memento (Damrong 1976: 33).

No elaborate present-day account on sadet praphat ton fails to mention that the king called people he befriended during these journeys phuean ton. This specific detail well fits the narrative of sadet praphat ton, as it once more emphasises the close relationship between king and subjects. A further example of a better story by narrative fit is the following quote from a recent account of walking-sticks. On his 1907 journey to Europe “the King bought walking-sticks, engraved with his initials, to give to each of his Phuan Ton friends upon his return” (my emphasis). Not only is the content altered slightly (the addition of the engraving, borrowed from the later funeral gifts), but there are also some subtle changes in word use. Speaking about the intention to give walking-sticks to each individual friend (thuk khon) makes the purchase much more personal than Prince Damrong’s use of the word group (phuak), when he speaks about the phuean ton.

It is clear now how the story of “King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Ayutthaya, the grandfather and the gun” is a detailed and personal retelling and interpretation of Prince Damrong’s accounts of sadet praphat ton and phuean ton. The story improves on all the important elements in the original accounts. First, an unknown and thus more impersonal, phuean ton has now a name, face and place: the grandfather of an identified farmer in Ayutthaya. Second, the truth, the importance and the conse-
quences of the incognito element are reconfirmed and made recognisable by putting in (entertaining) details of the interactions between the king and the grandfather, both in the village and at the palace. Third, the magnitude of the gift, superseding that of a walking-stick by far, only strengthens the motive of the king’s integrity and his interest in his subjects, regardless their background. The addition of the gun makes the story better because it fits so well within the whole story, told with so many details by this real farmer. And, last but not least, its physical presentation serves as the ultimate proof of the story’s historical accuracy.

In its turn, the narrative truth of “King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Ayutthaya, the grandfather and the gun” adds to the narrative truth of other sadet praphat ton and phuean ton accounts. At the same time, the enhanced strength of such stories further enforces transfer of knowledge of the past, and highlights essential ideas and emotions of the social imaginary around King Chulalongkorn. In this sense it is crucial to realise that Prince Damrong’s 1912 letter was added many years later. Prince Damrong’s details and additions on phuean ton are also examples of narrative fit in the same way as recent modifications of the story. In the 1912 letter Prince Damrong elaborated in greater detail on King Chulalongkorn’s accessibility and interest in his subjects, adding to the narrative truth of the image of King Chulalongkorn as an accessible Buddhist king.

**King Chulalongkorn Abolished Slavery**

The “abolition of slavery” is celebrated as one of King Chulalongkorn’s major achievements. The corresponding narrated portrait, however, differs from “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside”. The topic of sadet praphat ton was either mentioned to me as a simple fact proving the interest of the king in his subjects or recounted in the form of “old stories told, still good to hear”. The narrated portrait of “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery”, however, was often related in a manner indicating the direct relevance of this long-ago history to the daily life of the worshippers. The following quotations illustrate this point very well:

Arun, a designer of jewellery living in Chiang Mai, when I asked him what King Chulalongkorn meant for him, told me that the king was like a patron (thi phueng), so that he felt never lonely. Arun then continued that King Chulalongkorn had turned Thailand into a developed
country, and that of all the things he had done the abolition of slavery had been the most significant, making King Chulalongkorn someone comparable to the American President Abraham Lincoln. “By abolishing slavery the king gave the people of Thailand actually a new life and that is the king’s most important accomplishment. That the king ever did this is the very reason I am now living in liberty (isara). King Chulalongkorn was the first king who did not consider his own interests but instead thought of ordinary people. One can never be sure whether any king after King Chulalongkorn would have done the same thing.”

Suphachai, a former student in sociology, ran a small shop selling visiting or business cards and stickers in Chiang Mai, including Chulalongkorn stickers. Upon my asking whether these stickers actually sold, he answered in the affirmative, adding that this was a matter of course as King Chulalongkorn had done so much for the country. Subsequently, he mentioned several of the king’s modernising accomplishments, and then told me that he considered the abolition of slavery his ultimate achievement: “No other king has done something like that for the people before, and it is not certain whether any other (later) king would have done a similar thing. This deed of the king is particularly relevant to my own life: born into an ordinary family, I would probably have been a slave now if slavery would have not been abolished yet. Thanks to King Chulalongkorn I have the liberty (isara) to do the kind of work I like to do.”

Bun, the owner of a gold and jewellery shop at the Night Market in Chiang Mai, told me, in response to my question about why he had so many King Chulalongkorn portraits in his shop, that he worshipped the king because of his support for trade and traders. When I subsequently asked him why he thought this was so, Bun said that King Chulalongkorn had made Thailand charoen (prosperous) and therefore could bring charoen to anybody. Thereupon Bun continued his argument by saying: “Probably the most significant deed of the king has been the abolition of slavery. If the king hand not done that, I would almost certainly have been a slave instead of being the owner of this shop. But I am no slave, I am free (pen thai). I had the opportunity to select my own profession and I had the opportunity of education.”

Like sadet praphat ton, the abolition (kan loek) of slavery (that, literally slave or slaves) is an important topic in almost every book on the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Accounts differ, particularly in discussing the (complex) situation of slavery in nineteenth century Siam. Actually, apart
from slavery, King Chulalongkorn abolished the coexisting corvée system (the sakdina system) as well. In order to understand the narrative, it is necessary to present both systems briefly.

From its origins up to the early twentieth century — when the final steps in the gradual abolition of slavery were made — the Siamese social constellation should be perceived as a direct result of a very low population density, a general characteristic for mainland Southeast Asia. The main problem for all kingdoms in the area was a chronic lack of manpower. Competition for control over people was a major reason for the almost continuous warfare. The winners had usually no interest in the conquered territories, but instead resettled the inhabitants forcibly in their own kingdom (Akin 1969: 15–9).

At least as early as in the fourteenth century, the shortage of people gave rise to an extensive registration system. In the nineteenth century this system had developed as follows. Commoners (phrai, of which there were three categories) were registered by officials and nobles (nai) to facilitate the recruitment of men in times of war or for corvée labour. People who did not register had to conceal themselves and could not count on any protection. When arrested, they were punished. They were made phrai luang or “the king’s man”. Every year, each phrai luang spent three to six months — depending on the period in history — working for the king. Most often he had also to serve the nai under whom he was registered. The position of the phrai som, another category of commoners, was better because they had only to work for their nai. The third category, the phrai suai, worked more or less independently, producing vital products such as tin and gun powder, of which they had to hand over a fixed quantity annually. One could pay off a corvée obligation at a fixed price. In case a phrai became dissatisfied with his nai it was not difficult to escape into the jungle. Most escaped phrai eventually registered somewhere else under another nai, since it was very difficult to live without a nai. For phrai luang, this was a popular way to get phrai som status. To counter the drain of phrai luang, from the late eighteenth century more and more phrai were tattooed on the wrist with the name of their nai and place of residence.24 When not engaged in labour service, phrai lived as peasants, growing rice. The land cultivated by phrai had to be registered by a nai, another reason for the dependency of phrai on nai (ibid.: 20–35; 86–9).

Alongside this feudal nai-phrai system, a system of slavery based on property relationships existed. While the labour of phrai — particularly
that of *phrai luang* — was also used for public construction works, slaves worked solely for the benefit of their owners. There were seven categories of slaves, six being various forms of debt bondage, the seventh being war captives. These categories referred not to different kind of duties of the slaves, as in the case of *phrai*, but to the different ways of becoming a slave. Male commoners were entitled to sell themselves and their wives and children into slavery. It was not uncommon for *phrai*, again in particular for *phrai luang*, to sell themselves into slavery, in order to escape corvée. Another advantage of being a slave above being a *phrai* was that slaves were not recruited as soldiers in times of war. Furthermore, Siamese slaves (ideally) were entitled to redeem themselves, to own and inherit property, to enter a contract and had access to court. The master was obliged to take good care of the slave and his family (Akin 1969: 104–112; see also Feeny 1989: 289–94).

Where one volume on King Chulalongkorn gives a detailed overview of the slavery system and leaves out the corvée system completely, other books mention both systems without elaborating further on the difference between categories of slaves or between *that* and *phrai*. Similarly, descriptions of the process of abolition vary in their level of detail. But, regardless of the differences, all versions of the narrative of the abolition of slavery contribute to a consistent image of the king, his intentions and purposes.

I will start my investigation of this image and the narratives behind it by discussing one particular pictorial elaboration: the exhibition on the theme of the abolition of slavery in the Thai Human Imagery Museum (*phiphitthaphan hun khi phueng thai*) in Bangkok: a Thai Madame Tussaud’s. The Thai Human Imagery Museum mainly displays Thai scenes: famous monks, the kings of the Chakri dynasty, tableaux from the story “Phra Aphaimani”, one of the most famous works of Thai literature, old Siamese children’s games and, last but not least: “*Somdet Phra Piya Maharat Kab Kan Loek That*” or “The Beloved Great King and the Abolition of Slavery”.

The exhibition on “The Beloved Great King and the Abolition of Slavery” was inaugurated officially on Chulalongkorn Day 1990, by no less than the Supreme Patriarch. This confirms the importance attributed to the exhibition in official circles, and also demonstrates the religious and moral dimension of the narrative. Only after visiting the museum did I realise how often its displays are used to illustrate books, articles and television broadcasts on Thai historical or religious subjects. Generally,
neither the museum nor the fact that the illustrations depict “wax” images is mentioned. The photographs of the “true-to-life” scenes and persons of the past exhibited in the museum, make up for the lack of authentic pictures, or for the meagre quality of the few extant originals. Moreover, the wax images are precisely executed after existing ideas on features, pose or expression, and hence always meet expectations.

The Wax Exhibition

The exhibition on “The Beloved Great King and the Abolition of Slavery” is divided into three subjects: (a) slavery throughout history all over the world, (b) King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery, and (c) the personal misery slavery used to cause in ancient Siam. Several elements within these subjects merit closer examination.

The exhibition on “slavery throughout history all over the world” makes it clear that the evil of slavery was not limited to historical Siam, but has been part of the history of all civilised countries. The opening scene consists of a group of physically strong but mentally broken, chained black slaves. There is also a wax scene depicting two fighting Roman gladiators, the agony on the face of the gladiator about to die clearly expressed. On the wall, behind the heads of the black slaves, a world map in subtle grey tones depicts the sailing routes of the European slave-trade, and the locations of important societies based on slavery, like ancient Greece or the Roman empire. Thailand’s place on the map catches the eye: its surface is covered by a gold painted miniature of the wax scene — still ahead — depicting King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery. Texts, brief explanations about foreign and ancient slavery systems, cover the walls. A time table on ‘nations and the year slavery was abolished’ ranks Thailand (abolition of slavery in 1905) between Brazil (abolition of slavery in 1888) and Afghanistan (abolition of slavery in 1923). Having seen this exhibition one cannot but conclude that slavery is a phase in the universal development of humanity towards civilisation.

The next subject of the exhibition, “King Chulalongkorn abolishes slavery”, consists also of two wax displays: a group of Siamese slaves engaged in their daily tasks such as cooking and making baskets, and — the climax of the entire exhibition — the actual scene “King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery”. The king is seated on his throne with a group of grateful slaves just set free kneeling in front of him. This depiction of “the abolition of slavery” as a single momentary act is not an idea
that originated in the Human Imagery Museum. The “source” behind this visualisation, to my opinion, is the fresco “King Chulalongkorn Abolishing Slavery” in one of the domes of the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall (presently the parliament building), painted by Galileo Chini, at the time a well-known Italian artist. The fresco is also illustrated in the museum’s brochure on “King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery”.

On his second visit to Europe in 1907 (see also below) King Chulalongkorn had seen murals of Chini, which he appreciated very much. Later the king invited the artist to come to Siam to decorate the throne hall. The throne hall’s principal paintings are the frescoes in the domes, depicting important achievements of kings of the Chakri dynasty. In 1913 Chini finished the fresco “King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery”. The background of the mural depicts a busy harbour scene on the left and the throne hall under construction on the right, symbolising free trade with other countries (Apinan 1992bII: 280) as well as the transformation from the “old economy” based on slavery, to a “new economy” based on labour. In the foreground, the king stands on marble stairs surrounded by “joy-full liberated slaves” (ibid.: 280–2). The painting received much criticism, particularly from Prince Naris, a half-brother of King Chulalongkorn and a renowned artist himself. He found the fresco inappropriate, and “criticised the monarch’s awkward posture and the presence of half-naked men and women surrounding him on the steps of the marble throne hall. To place the sovereign among the plebeians was, in his view, indecorous and in bad taste” (Apinan 1992a : 22).

Prince Naris’ critique provides a key to the present-day appeal of the scene: it is exactly this closeness between king and slaves that forms the essence of the narrative of “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery”. Modern interpretations of the scene bring the slaves even closer. The display in the Human Imaginary Museum depicts the slaves kneeling in front of the king seated on his throne, as if they were even in his palace. Another popular painting, reproduced for instance on a school poster on the achievements of King Chulalongkorn, shows the slaves kneeling at the feet of the king, although in this case the artist has situated “the abolition” in what is clearly a rural setting. The king is standing in the middle of a humble village, his face expressing loving-kindness. For those who know the stories, the painting combines both the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside” and “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery”. The ever-lasting protective powers of the king’s spirit in this full-colour composition are visualised with the addi-
tion of a large, sepia hued, portrait of the king’s face, shown rising from the earth.

The final section of the exhibition in the Thai Human Imagery Museum, the “misery slavery used to cause in ancient Siam”, displays a scene of mean-faced men gambling. The loser is being forced to pay his debt by selling his child, and the desperate mother is not in a position to stop her husband. The scene is inspired by a contemporary photograph of people gambling that is included in the museum’s brochure as well as in many other accounts on kan loek that (the abolition of slavery). The next display shows a slave who has been badly beaten by his master, with his family trying to cure and comfort him, while the final scene depicts a happy family of former slaves (man, woman, boy, girl), carrying the tools King Chulalongkorn distributed to help former slaves to start a new life. The implied message seems to be that the nuclear family arose in tandem with the liberation of slaves.

Throughout the exhibition runs an additional, well-known, theme: Siamese/Thai superiority vis-à-vis the United States of America. In this particular exhibition the theme is more or less hidden in an historical overview of how King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery. Other accounts on kan loek that often start with the statement that, contrary to what happened in the United States (in this context Russia is also often mentioned), slavery in Siam was abolished without civil war. This, according to the narrative, was due to the king’s ingenious policy not to abolish slavery immediately, but very gradually. Both exhibition and catalogue give a detailed overview of the king’s policy, and this persuasive combination of historical facts and details of the King’s personal considerations provides another good example of narrative fit. First some important data are presented: between 1874 and 1905 King Chulalongkorn issued five royal edicts directed toward ending slavery. The 1874 edict prescribed that the prices for children of slaves born after October 1868 (the month of the king’s first coronation) would gradually decrease. Upon reaching the age of 21 these children would be free. The final edict — a total prohibition of slavery — was issued in 1905. With this careful policy, King Chulalongkorn was able to avoid a (violent) confrontation with the nobility, whose power depended largely on the system.

Of course, the narrative continues, King Chulalongkorn’s progressive ideas met strong opposition. In particular, at the beginning of his reign, when the king’s position still very much depended on the consent of the conservative elite, he had little opportunity to proceed with the
abolition. Between 1874 and 1890 no edicts or laws were issued, but the king's commitment to do away with this social injustice was always clear, even during this period. On the occasion of his 24th birthday in 1877, the king made a donation of one baht for every day of his life, a total amount of 8,767 baht (the story emphasises the fact that it was all his own money, no government money) to improve the well-being of a number of slaves. He used part of the money to free 45 slaves. The remainder was used to provide the freed slaves with houses, household utensils (baskets, betel utensils) and tools (knives, axes) to enable them to make a living. Furthermore, to oppose slavery resulting from people forced to sell themselves and their family due to gambling debts, King Chulalongkorn issued a proclamation in 1883 that led to the closure of hundreds of gambling dens in subsequent years.

How is the discrepancy between the detailed narrative of King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery gradually throughout his reign and the pictorial rendering of the abolition as being one single act to be understood? Nithi, in his interpretation of the same scene, states rightly that the image presented in the exhibition is meant to be a display of the ultimate act of compassion and loving-kindness of the king towards his subjects. But for Nithi this image of the abolition of slavery is the exact depiction of people's imagination concerning the issue (1993: 22). In my view, it is the other way around. The image of the act of the abolition of slavery, the icon par excellence of the king's ultimate love, can only be that icon because the Thai beholders already know the narratives in which it is embedded. People know that it took the king almost his entire reign to abolish slavery, and that it was a difficult and risky endeavour. The king's perseverance again demonstrates the greatness of his loving-kindness.

The un-Thainess of Slavery

Apart from tapping into the narratives expressing the king's ultimate love, "the king abolishes slavery" draws equally on narratives demonstrating the superiority of the Thai nation and the unique qualities of its monarchs. To demonstrate the significance and interconnectedness of this body of narratives it is necessary to examine in more detail the interpretation of slavery as — in the end — being one single phenomenon.

Again the starting point is Prince Damrong, whose views on slavery still dominate the present-day narrative. Prince Damrong's writings on slavery combined three perspectives. First, he rationalised the occurrence
of slavery by placing Siamese slavery in a comparative context of global history. Second, he coined the word “that” as the equivalent of the English “slave” and contrasted it with the notion of “free” (thai). Third, he argued that the system of slavery had come to Siam through Khmer-influence in the early Ayutthaya period (thirteenth century) and thus was actually alien to traditional Siamese culture (Thanet 1996: 36–8). With the latter addition Prince Damrong created a theodicy to resolve the paradox that slavery existed while it was essentially very un-Thai. Fundamental here is Prince Damrong’s coinage of the word that, even though the Thai language already had a variety of other words (see Thida 1997a: 43) meaning “slave”. The prince assigned the word that three different meanings. The first is “slave”, in the sense of a person who is somebody else’s property. The second is “slavery” as a general concept, as in kan loek that: “the abolition of slavery”, which presents that as a social system involving both masters and slaves. Finally, in the prince’s progressionist perspective on social history, that means the stage of cultural development in which slavery occurs, and hence “barbaric” (pa thuean) (for the latter meaning see Thida: ibid.).

By introducing the word that, Prince Damrong could write about the Siamese social constellation without having to discuss the complexities of control over labour and people that existed both in the slavery system and the corvée system. This simplification gives the narrative of “the abolition of slavery” the comprehensiveness a convincing, powerful narrative needs: the evil, un-Thai system of slavery was abolished and the slaves were set free thanks to the strong determination of a compassionate Buddhist king. But when it concerns the significance of the moral conduct of King Chulalongkorn — as in the story of the slaves freed on the king’s twenty-fourth birthday — it is the addition of detail that enhances the narrative’s truth.

The un-Thai status of that enabled Prince Damrong to place the abolition in a context of progress and modernity. That, according to Prince Damrong a phenomenon of Khmer origin, was of the past and a symbol for being uncivilised (Thanet 1996: 37). By implication, its abolition made Siam a member of the league of civilised nations (araya prathet). There is, however, an ambiguous dimension in this narrative. On the one hand the abolition of slavery is understood as one of the most important steps towards modernisation, with the West, particularly the United States, serving as the calibration standard of civilisation. On the other hand, in the end, Siam is superior as slavery was abolished without violence, an
indication that King Chulalongkorn was a true *thammarat* (a righteous ruler). As will be discussed later, the “abolition of slavery” is also staged as a token of civilisation and modernity in the context of the narrated portrait of King Chulalongkorn as great moderniser.

Finally, the usage of the word *thai* (free) needs closer examination. Prince Damrong’s development of the word parallels his various usages of *that*. On the level of the individual it means “free” in the sense of having the right of self-determination. As a general concept it means “freedom” and “independence”. Prince Damrong used *thai* not only to refer to freed *that*, but also to Siam as an independent nation. Since Siam and its inhabitants were *thai*, *that* became also associated with colonial subordination (Thanet 1996: 37). On 26 May 1911, King Vajiravudh delivered a speech in which he explained that the word *thai* had a dual meaning. Next to the general meaning of “free” it meant ethnic Thai:

(...) the term was used to refer to longstanding, culturally similar groupings of individuals, who through their military capability and social cohesion, were able to maintain their independence in the face of more powerful and expansive groups. Eventually, these independent communities merged and consolidated, becoming a single political unit, the Thai nation (*Chat Thai*) which had survived for many centuries to the present day (Barmé 1993: 27).

In another lecture (27 June 1911) King Vajiravudh argued that Thais who rejected Buddhism would bring “disunity, which would inevitably undermine the nation’s independence. On the other hand, a true Thai, or who loved freedom above all else, would do nothing to cause the nation to lose its “Thainess” (that is, independence)” (Barmé 1993: 30). It was thus King Vajiravudh, while further elaborating on Prince Damrong’s ideas on the meaning of *thai*, who introduced the notion of Thainess as “independence”. It is this notion of Thai identity that forms the core of the next narrated portrait to be presented: “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony”.

**The Ultimate Patron**

The theme of liberation in the iconic abolition of slavery reflects a need for civic freedom and the certainty that goes with civic society, as illustrated by the cases cited where they touch on individual freedom of choice in matters of work and education. The relatively well-to-do
situation in which many people find themselves at present is, of course, strongly related to the economic prosperity Thailand experienced during the last two decades. People are strongly aware that their rural or modest background lies not far behind them (“I could have been a slave”). But, they connect their social progress not so much with processes of economic growth, or with the increasing opportunities for education, but with the personal commitments of a historical king. In my view this demonstrates that although there is a general awareness that civic rights and social certainties ought to be part and parcel of modern life, present-day Thai politics and government are too unreliable. People searching for a patron whose protection can help them through. King Chulalongkorn can fulfil this role because of his image of benevolence, compassion and closeness. How personal relations between worshippers (clients) and king (patron) are created will be elaborated in the following chapters. What remains to be said here is that the depiction of the abolition of slavery as one single act highlights a paradox: in his most emancipatory act King Chulalongkorn is depicted as the ultimate patron.

**King Chulalongkorn Saved Thailand from Becoming a Colony**

I will present and analyse the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony” mainly by focussing on the narrative covering the two voyages of King Chulalongkorn to Europe. In 1997, the centenary of the first voyage was commemorated with tremendous public interest in both voyages. This is not as obvious as it might seem. The 1907 voyage received at least as much attention as that undertaken in 1897. In the popular perspective the two voyages have become fused into one major event, or more accurately, into a single epic, recounting the king’s mission and genius. I will start this presentation with a short overview of the two journeys and their background.

Over a hundred years ago King Chulalongkorn made the first of his two trips to Europe. The king left on 7 April 1897, to return on 16 December of the same year. Never before had a Siamese monarch visited Europe. King Chulalongkorn, who had travelled to Java, Singapore, and India on earlier journeys, was the first Siamese King ever to go abroad. Ten years after his first visit to Europe, the king went again. This time he was away for approximately eight months, from 27 March to 6 November 1907. Since the king arrived in Europe via the Suez-canal, both tours
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started in Italy. King Chulalongkorn liked Italy (in particular because of his interest in Italian and Roman art, see Apinan 1992a, 1992b), and in 1897, as well as in 1907, he toured extensively the country’s most famous cities. There were more overlaps between the two journeys: he visited the cities of Paris, London, Geneva, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Frankfurt, to mention the most important ones, on both occasions. But there were also some significant differences. The 1897 journey included a visit to Russia. King Chulalongkorn stayed for about ten days with Tsar Nicolas II in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 1907 Russia was not on the programme. The king’s decision not to visit Russia during his second trip was certainly politically motivated. In that period the position of the Tsar had already become compromised, and Russia’s prestige had been seriously damaged by the country’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905). Another difference was that in 1907 he visited Norway, and made a tourist trip to the North Cape. He spent also much more time in Germany, in particular in the health resort Baden-Baden, to experience the effect of its medicinal baths. This was motivated by his physical condition. Actually, the king’s health had been an important motivation for the whole undertaking, which was more of a private trip (cf. Chula 1960: 254) than his first journey.

From European newspapers of that time it is clear that the Siamese king made a positive impression on the European leaders and public. The Dutch daily newspaper Het Nieuws van den Dag of 7 September 1897, for instance, wrote: 37

The King of Siam, who honours our country with a short visit (...) — by many wrongfully considered a kind of Negro King — is a highly civilised and enlightened Asian Monarch, who in development and statemanship should be of a higher standing than the Mikado of Japan, and, like him, is determined to ensure his country the benefactions of Western civilisation (...). He is fluent in English and French, and so can go everywhere without an interpreter. Furthermore he managed, wherever he came, to make himself beloved through his friendliness and courtesy.

His fluency in English, his pleasant appearance, and his sophisticated manners were not expected in Europe. But irrespective of these positive responses, hardly any European today knows that King Chulalongkorn visited Europe. 38 In Thailand, on the contrary, the European journeys are remembered and celebrated as great events of Thai history. What is
significant here is the merging of the narratives on the 1897 and the 1907 voyages into the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony”. The following sections will illustrate how the 1997 commemorations elaborated on this compelling narrative.

**One Single Epic**

During his life King Chulalongkorn kept a diary for ten years (between 1877 and 1887). He wrote also hundreds of letters to his wives, children, and subordinates. After his death the diaries and a substantial part of his letters were published. Much of the material has been reprinted many times since, and so history — to some extent — has become determined by “his story”, just as the writings of Prince Damrong influence present-day perspectives on King Chulalongkorn. During both voyages the king wrote letters home. The 1897 letters were mainly to his first queen, Queen Saovabha Phongsri (1864–1919) or “Mae Lek” as the king used to call her, who was appointed regent during his absence. These letters were first published in the form of a cremation book (nangsue sop) on the occasion of Queen Saovabha’s death on 20 October 1919. A special edition was published on the occasion of the 60th birthday of the present Queen (Queen Sirikit) in 1992. The letters the king wrote during the second journey to his daughter Princess Nibha Nobhadol have become particularly popular and are still widely read. These letters were published for the first time in 1923, in the form of a diary under the title *Klai Ban* (phra ratchaniphon rueang klai ban) or “Far from Home (The royal writings of the story Far from Home)”.

Apart from publications of the king’s letters in book form, numerous, mostly popular, publications on the life of the king have appeared during the last decades. The authors of these books draw heavily phrases derived from the published letters, with *Klai Ban* as a major source. This genre of popularised books on King Chulalongkorn addresses a wide variety of subjects: the king’s favourite wives; his favourite food; his sense of humour; his writings; his interest in, opinions on, and attitude towards Western innovations (like cars or canned food); his way of ruling; his manners in dealing with people; and his love and concern for his people and country. Altogether, these books present the reader with an image of the king as both a very compassionate and a very human person. The same letters are often quoted, and hence the stories have the same essence in whatever media they appear.
In my experience, Klai Ban is the ultimate example of the repetitious character of King Chulalongkorn stories. Much of the 1997 centennial public culture leaned on Klai Ban: numerous columns, magazine covers, broadcasts and books with titles such as Ratchakan thi ha sadet praphat tang prathet (The Visits to Foreign Countries of King Rama the Fifth) or Tam sadet klai ban (Follow His Majesty Far From Home) appeared. The climax of the interest in “Far from Home” was a series of twelve (!) video tapes launched in 1997, also titled Klai Ban, that explored and elaborated upon every single detail of the king’s second visit to Europe. The participation in this series of the respected historian Charnvit Kasetsiri illustrates the involvement of the academic world involved in disseminating and reaffirming the King Chulalongkorn narratives.

Another example of academic involvement is offered by Professor Apiyan Posayanon of Chulalongkorn University, the foremost expert on Thai art and history, who organised an exhibition at the University Library “to mark the epoch-making royal trip” (Bangkok Post, 22 November 1997). Furthermore, the Centennial provided the impetus for a King Chulalongkorn conference involving both the Siam Society and the European Studies Programme of Chulalongkorn University. The European Studies Programme also published a commemorative book — entitled “Far from Home” — with the letters written in 1907 from Germany in Thai and German, those from England in Thai and English, and the letters from France in Thai and French. As stated in the foreword by the director of the programme, this selection of the letters was only determined by the availability of translators in these languages. No statement is made to clarify the programme’s choice of “Far from Home”, instead of a selection of the letters written by the king in 1897.

The two voyages have become one single event to the extent that, even among academics, this choice is self-evident. The common acceptance of this merging could not be illustrated better than with the first sentence of the Deputy Director of the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education’s foreword to this book: “The year 1997 is the centenary of His Majesty King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Europe in 1907.”

The 1893 Crisis

To understand the background of the ongoing and increasing interest in the king’s voyages, it is necessary to look in some detail at the circumstances that motivated the king to undertake the journeys.
In spite of the enormous effort involved in the Chakri Reformation and its great internal impact, the foreign threat to Siam’s sovereignty continued. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn the Siamese were forced several times to cede territory to the French and to the British (see Introduction, note 10). The period’s low point was the so-called “Pak Nam” incident of 1893. In a border skirmish with the French near the Mekhong River, a French officer had been killed. Thereupon, in July of the same year, the French sent their gunboats up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, holding the Grand Palace at gunpoint for days. The incident was very humiliating for the Siamese as they were forced to accept the French demands, which included cession of the left bank of the Mekhong to France, punishment of the Siamese officers involved, and payment of the huge sum of three million francs (Battye 1974: 365; Chula 1960: 250). The Siamese were not only shocked by their easy defeat, but also by the fact that counting on British support had been a terrible miscalculation. The British did not want to be involved at all, and even “urged Siam to meet the French demand for the left bank of the Mekhong” (Battye 1974: 364). The 1893 crisis was, as Thongchai (1994: 141) says, a rupture, or in the words of Battye, a “crisis of the morale” (1974: 390). Siam after 1893 was a different place. But why?

Thongchai considers the 1893 crisis to be the birth of Siam in its present geo-body, and describes attempts to project the map of present-day Thailand over Siamese history as efforts to heal the 1893 disruption. From another perspective, however, the reverse can be said to be happening: meaning and continuity are created by projecting the past over the present through stories. This need for continuity, demonstrated by the present-day interest in King Chulalongkorn, indicates a modern crisis of Thai identity. But before exploring this point, I will analyse the significance of the Pak Nam crisis in more detail.

The tremendous effect of 1893 on the self-perception of the Siamese elite cannot be underestimated. From an ancient centre of wide-reaching power, regularly receiving representatives of its many tributaries to pay their respects, Siam found itself an insignificant kingdom in the periphery of foreign power play overnight. The self-esteem of the Siamese court was completely undermined, which explain why King Chulalongkorn was deeply affected over a long period:

The king, who had been ill throughout the crisis, suffered a physical and moral collapse. He lost some forty-two pounds in weight between August and November and openly declared his loss of interest in life:
“Ashamed to look men in the face. I will close my eyes and look upon the void” (Battye 1974: 369).

The Pak Nam incident is important for my argument as it has become a powerful symbol for any foreign threat to the Thai independence, and because in the King Chulalongkorn myth the incident is regarded as the primary impetus for the king’s voyages to Europe (cf. Thongchai 2000: 538). My first encounter with the Pak Nam incident illustrates how King Chulalongkorn stories elaborate on the incident. When I visited the headquarters of the Prayers Society, a Bangkok based ultra-nationalist religious organisation centred around a spirit medium (see Chapter IV), the president of the Prayers Society, Dr Pichai Tovivich, Associate Professor in Pharmaceutical Chemistry at Chulalongkorn University (who is not the spirit medium), spontaneously told me two stories about how the Siamese at the time dealt with the French.

The Magnum Guns

In the time when King Chulalongkorn was still very young, Siam was governed by a regent. Also in these days there were already many problems with the French. The regent consulted a famous monk, named Somdet To [described in popular history as the spiritual teacher of King Chulalongkorn; see also chapter 4]. Somdet To suggested making a large number of exceptionally bit fake guns, and having Siamese soldiers patrol the river bank with these guns. That would scare the French off.

The hostile boats were already on the river and a very short distance away, but when the French noticed the huge guns they were scared indeed and did not dare to attack. Instead, they sent a delegation, which was received by the regent in the royal palace. At a certain moment one of the members of the delegation asked the regent about the guns: what were they made of? The regent had no answer to that, of course, and quickly consulted Somdet To. The monk instructed the regent to tell the French that the guns were made of magnum.

Here, the Professor interrupted his story to explain to me that magnum is a nonsense word, but sounds as if it could be a kind of metal. The French did clearly think so. They left without any further signs of aggression, very impressed by the huge Siamese magnum guns.

The Rocking Boat

When the French sent their boats up the Chao Phraya River, King Chulalongkorn asked Somdet To which strategy to follow. Somdet To
taught the king a magic formula (*katha*) in Pali. Then he told the king to honour the French with a visit, but before going aboard the king should recite the *katha*, and subsequently not just step aboard but jump instead. King Chulalongkorn did as he was told. To every Frenchman’s surprise and shock, the ship rocked heavily when the king jumped aboard. The French were so impressed and frightened by the king’s powerful appearance that they stopped their aggression and withdrew their gunboats.

Asked how he came to know these stories, the professor said that he heard them from Somdet To himself, as the spirit of Somdet To regularly possesses the spirit medium of the Prayers Society. Both stories, perhaps only known in the Prayers Society context, are clearly situated in Pak Nam-like incidents — with French aggression and a threat to Siam by boat on the Chao Phraya River — and could therefore be interpreted as articulations of current concerns with Thai independence. That the Pak Nam crisis appears this way in the organisation’s spirit medium sessions illustrates how firmly the crisis is embedded in Thai social memory.

**The European Voyages and the King’s Image**

Why did the king visit Europe? Eventually, King Chulalongkorn recovered from his 1893 depression and was able to take up his responsibilities again. In the king’s opinion, the crisis had made it clear that the country could only deal with the colonial power play if Siam, or better the Siamese court, were to establish its own friendly relations with the European powers. An era of entirely new diplomacy now got underway, described by the king as “the advancement of royal friendships” (*kan charoen phra ratchamatri*). In brief (according both to popular and to more academic views) the king had three major reasons go to Europe: 1) to make Siam known in Europe and to establish friendly relationships with influential European leaders of his time; 2) to acquire insights into those aspects of modernisation and development that could utilized by Siam, such as the modernisation of the administrative service, education, defence, and law; and 3) to solve the political problems between Siam and France (Thida 1997b: 94–7).

According to popular, present-day Thai interpretation of these voyages the king fulfilled his mission. By showing the European leaders that the king of Siam was a civilised and enlightened monarch and that the country was open to progress and civilisation, King Chulalongkorn
was able to lessen the colonial threat. The king’s newly established personal contacts counterbalanced the threat that the British and the French presented to an independent, but powerless, Siam.

I will now present two stories recounting how King Chulalongkorn accomplished this. They show the importance of the special personal qualities of King Chulalongkorn.

**The Picture that changed the course of Thai history**

In 1891 Tsar Nicolas II, at that time still the Crown Prince, visited Siam, at which occasion he was also received by the king. This was the beginning of a cordial and lasting friendship between the two men. When the king went to Europe in 1897, one of the first countries to visit was Russia. In one of his many popular semi-historical books on King Chulalongkorn, Phaladisai Sithithankit\(^{41}\) quotes some sentences from one of the king’s letters, demonstrating how warmly the king was received by the Romanovs:

> The mother of the Tsar even calls me “my son” and I told her that she was like my mother. She gives me a kiss every day and today I really feel like being her son, so I offered her my cheek to be kissed (quoted in Phaladisai 1994: 46, original in Thai).

It was during this visit that “The Picture” was taken: a photograph of King Chulalongkorn together with Tsar Nicolas II (see Figure 2). Phaladisai then quotes from another letter, which tells us that the king personally considered “The Picture” quite important. The king will have “The Picture” printed (ibid). Phaladisai then continues that ‘The Picture’ was printed across the continent indeed. Since then the European nations have accepted Siam as a befriended nation, equal to themselves.

Phaladisai’s rendering of the story thus tells us that it was the king’s intention to have “The Picture” published in all countries he was going to visit. “The Picture” would show “the world”, particularly France, that Siam was not just a small country somewhere in the Far East, but that it had its own bonds with Europe, and that its king maintained a close friendship with one of the great European powers and could count on the support of that friend. The story shows us how bright the king was, and the greatness of his diplomatic insight and skills. He took the right action to prevent further aggression towards Siam.
The story is supported by a large amount of historical evidence, all meeting the criteria of “narrative fit” as formulated by Spence. Tsar Nicolas had visited Siam in 1891; King Chulalongkorn went to Europe to establish good relationships with European leaders; one of his major purposes was to solve the problems with France; King Chulalongkorn went to Russia first and his letter is evidence of the close relationship between the king and the Russian court; and even more importantly, “The Picture” was certainly taken and the king considered it to be an important picture.

Again, it is not my intention to find out the actual historical impact of “The Picture”. What is important here is to understand the story’s compelling nature, and how it has acquired a truth of its own. This will contribute to an understanding of the broader meaning of the story of this picture. Although I have cited here only from one particular, quite popular, book (reprinted four times between 1994 and 1996), the essence of the story — thanks to this picture Thailand was saved from becoming a colony — is widely known.

The 1997 centennial of the king’s first visit to Europe was extensively covered by all media. Apart from television broadcasts and newspaper articles, glossy magazines also reported on the voyages. The cover story of the April issue of the Thai language magazine Sinlapa Watthanatham/Art & Culture was devoted to the 1897 visit. In six extensive sections many different aspects of the voyages were covered: the king’s daily schedule; the places visited; the dignitaries he met; the Pak Nam crisis; and the ins and outs of the Maha Chakri, the royal yacht that carried the king to Europe. The article contains many pictures, including photographs of turn-of-the-century Paris, printed alongside recent pictures of the city, portraits of the king painted by European artists, and many reproductions of illustrations from contemporary European newspapers and magazines depicting scenes from the king’s tour. However, the famous picture with Tsar Nicolas II is absent, suggesting that it was not widely distributed.

The expensive, glossy style of Sinlapa Watthanatham caters to the taste, life-style and interests of urban middle-class consumers (cf. Hong 1996: 137). The same can be said of the travel magazine Siam Horizon/ Khop Fa Sayam, which is published both in Thai and (very basic) English. The first issue appeared in 1997, and one of its articles is titled: “King Chulalongkorn’s Memorable Voyage to Europe”. Two-thirds of the space
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is occupied by well-known pictures, one being the Tsar Nicolas II–King Chulalongkorn picture. The accompanying text is very meagre. The only thing said is that the two rulers became close friends during the Tsar’s visit to Bangkok, adding that Russia’s power and influence in Europe at the time was omnipotent. Apparently, for the Thai audience the message is clear or already known. The text then switches to the king’s arrival at the Gare du Nord in Paris, where he was received by a crowd of people shouting: “Vive le Roi du Siam”. The article then ends with the addition that thanks to this personal visit of King Chulalongkorn, who was given the name “The Great Beloved King” (phra piya maharat) by the Thai populace, Siam was able to establish firm relationships with the civilised countries of Europe. The emphasis is again on the king’s diplomatic qualities, but equally important is that even in France he was warmly welcomed as a reigning monarch.

Another example of a glossy magazine covering the voyages is Hi-class, despite its English name and English slogan (“The Magazine for People with Taste for Good Life”) a monthly magazine written entirely in Thai. The October 1997 issue commemorated the king’s first journey with an article entitled: “A Relationship of Hundred Years between Thailand and Russia”. The article begins with a small reproduction of “The Picture” and a photograph of the king, his entourage and the Tsar’s family, followed immediately by several pictures of significant places in present-day Moscow and St. Petersburg, some of them explicitly linked to the king’s visit. Thus far the article, like many other accounts of the king’s journeys, is more or less a form of pictorial sight-seeing. However, in the second part of the article the reporter follows the king’s itinerary in Russia, citing passages from the king’s letters and describing what has changed in Russia over the course of time. Significantly, “The Picture” goes with the caption “the historical picture”.

How King Chulalongkorn tamed the Wild Horse

A second story about how the king managed to impress the Europeans recounts how he visited the Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha before leaving for Europe. The patriarch asked a very famous monk (Phra Athikan Lam) to be present as well. His magical powers made this monk the best adviser the king could have, and enabled him to bless the king’s travel and predict its outcome. On that occasion Phra Athikan Lam spoke the following words:
The voyage abroad will be long this time
it will be successful in every aspect
but at one occasion, in one of these countries,
the leader [of that country] will bring a four legged animal
it has bad habits and looks dangerous
it will be brought to be mounted
and the king will ride this recalcitrant animal safely.  

Then the monk taught the king a magic formula (khatha) to protect himself. When the king was in France, a French nobleman (chao chai) invited the king to join him to a polo match. The match was followed by a rodeo. Two or three cowboys fell regularly off the horses. It was all very exciting. But there was one big horse which was extremely wild and ferocious. None of the cowboys was able to ride it. The French nobleman asked King Chulalongkorn whether there were any horses in Siam and if the king could ride a horse, suggesting that the king should try to ride that particular, dangerous horse. King Chulalongkorn hesitated, but suddenly he remembered the khatha of Phra Athikan Iam. The king rose from his chair and went down to the arena very calmly. Arriving at the arena he picked a bundle of grass, held it before his mouth, and whispered the khatha. Then he approached the horse, which awaited him without showing any sign of aggression. The king fed the grass to the horse, jumped on its back, and, to the great surprise of the audience, rode away. He could make the horse do whatever he wanted, leaving the people of Paris deeply impressed.

People liked to tell me this story to demonstrate how King Chulalongkorn — as a king and as a Buddhist — was more powerful than any foreigner. The taming of the wild horse shows the moral superiority of Siam over France. The kingdom’s religion proved powerful and its king brave. King Chulalongkorn succeeded where the French nobleman even did not dare to try: taming the wild horse. Also in this story we see how narrative truth is created by means of historical facts that fit the narrative. The king did visit Paris, but there is no indication at all that he ever attended a polo match, a rodeo or anything of that sort.

Tom, a former jazz musician from Bangkok who now sells cookies and sweets at a Chiang Mai market, told me the same story (which he learned from his father: “He was a teacher, so he knew a lot about history.”) with an addition:

When the king left France, the French presented the wild horse to the king to express their admiration. And that is why the monument at the Royal Plaza depicts the king on horseback: it is his French horse!
This addition is a good “fit” for the story. The introduction of the equestrian statue adds “substantial evidence” and it gives the story a stronger point because it provides an explanation for the statue’s design (which is not at all obvious in the Thai context, since Siamese kings traditionally rode on elephants). A successful rearrangement of elements known from history, with newly added details and interpretations, makes the story more compelling. The story also helps to explain why some people offer bundles of grass to the horse of the equestrian statue and why the vendor started to sell grass bundles (see the Introduction). Although for many people I met the grass was just another offering, some relate it explicitly to the bundle of grass in the story.

King Chulalongkorn Modernised Thai Society

“King Chulalongkorn modernised Thai society” is different from the other narratives. It can actually be seen as a master narrative because it permeates all other narratives about the king’s achievements and his personal qualities, and gears the other narratives to the image of the king as a great moderniser, thus enhancing the narrative fit of the whole body of stories. It should be noted, however, that the designation “Great Moderniser” is based on my own interpretation, and the Thai refer to King Chulalongkorn as the “Great Beloved King” (phra piya maharat). Actually, Thai accounts of King Chulalongkorn and his achievements seldom use the Thai words for “modern” (than samai, samai mai) and modernity (khawm samai mai). Nevertheless, “King Chulalongkorn modernised Thai society” unfolds inevitably in the table of contents of any book about King Chulalongkorn. In these books the history of the Fifth Reign breaks down into a long list of topics on the introduction of technological innovations and the reorganisations of administrative, educational, monetary, military, and judicial institutions. And when people speak about the importance of King Chulalongkorn, their accounts often boil down to an enumeration of his various concrete achievements that strongly resemble the tables of contents of such books.

As the achievements recounted encompass virtually everything associated with modernisation, it is difficult to avoid rendering “King Chulalongkorn modernised Thai society” as a mere compilation of concrete achievements. I have chosen to outline modernity as it appears in the narratives about the king’s contribution in the achievement of the state. Here the idea of modernity revolves around two, closely related, almost
interchangeable, terms: “progress/prosperity” (charoen) and “civilisation” (siwilai). As will be illustrated in detail below, charoen and siwilai are intrinsically connected with the image of King Chulalongkorn and everything the king has done. Since some of the major achievements and deeds of the king have already been presented in the three narrated portraits above, I will discuss progress and civilisation in the context of the three earlier portraits.

A Buddhist King

The importance of charoen in the narratives about King Chulalongkorn should be understood in the light of Thai (Theravada) Buddhist ideas about the salutary effects meritorious kings have on their subjects and kingdom. Kings who live and rule in accordance with the “Ten Kingly Virtues” bring prosperity to their subjects and protect their kingdom from danger. Buddhist beliefs in individual karma and meritorious conduct imply that personal achievement is more fundamental than inheritance (Tambiah 1985: 326). Some men have accumulated such an enormous reservoir of merit (bun or bun barami) in their successive lives that they are reborn to become kings. Throughout the history of Thailand (and other Theravada Buddhist countries), individuals of ordinary lineage have seized power — or attempted to do so — contesting the position of a ruling king by claiming to be a “person with merit” (phu mi bun) (Keyes 1977: 288; Chatthip 1984: 112, 123–7). The truth of such claims and the right of such persons to be king has to be proven continuously. The amount of merit and the virtue of kings are also measured by their virtuous acts, which traditionally include the building and embellishment of temples (wat) and stupas (chedi), and donations to the Sangha and public welfare (Tambiah 1985: 326). King Chulalongkorn’s meritorious conduct went beyond tradition by modernising the kingdom and saving its independence for the benefit of all Thai.

King Chulalongkorn thus was a meritorious Buddhist king who brought prosperity. But there is one more aspect to charoen that associates the concept with King Chulalongkorn in a particular way. In an attempt to balance the increasing threat of Western colonialism and out of a genuine desire to emulate Western things and ways (Thongchai 2000: 532), members of the Siamese elite gradually familiarised themselves with Western concepts and thoughts. The idea that Western societies were “civilised” and “developed” as opposed to others that were “uncivilised”
and “primitive” became part of the Siamese perception of the relationships between states and people (Barmé 1993: 18). For the key notions in this Western perspective, progress and civilisation, the Thai language had no proper equivalents.

King Mongkut’s (Rama IV) use of the expression *siwilai* in a speech following his coronation in 1851 is a good example of the influence of Western political and historical thinking. In this speech the king urged his officials to wear upper garments when attending a royal audience, as all civilised peoples do. He distinguished between “civilised peoples” (such as the Siamese, who thus ought to wear upper garments) and “uncivilised peoples” (such as the forest dwellers in Laos, “who do not use clothing”). “But since Siam is a civilised country and understands civilised ways, we should not cling to the ancient ways of our forefathers who were forest people” (Speech of King Mongkut, quoted in Barmé 1993: 19).

*Siwilai*, as used by King Mongkut, thus has the connotations of both “an achieved state versus barbarism, and a continuing process of development” (ibid.). During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the term *charoen* began to be used to refer to the latter meaning of civilisation — continuing development and advancement, *Charoen* and *siwilai* remained important ideological concepts, also after the end of the absolute monarchy (1932), especially in the writing and thought of Luang Wichit Withakan (ibid.: 51–3).

Throughout the narrated portraits of King Chulalongkorn, *charoen* refers both to “progress” — a rational, originally Western, concept indicating a qualitative improvement of general conditions, and to “prosperity” — a concept imbued with religious connotations about Buddhist kingship. As an example of this dual meaning, the serial *Thorainin Thin Thai* (Sovereigns of the Thai Realm) included an episode about the achievements of King Chulalongkorn in which the king is quoted as follows: “The existence of slavery (*that*) is an obstacle for the country’s *khwam charoen*.”

*Siwilai* is the word often used to indicate Siam’s position vis-à-vis the West or neighbouring countries. In the epic of the European tours the king’s presentation of Siam as “civilised” is a leading topic. The king, through his own personality, could show the West that Siam was not just an exotic, archaic or even “barbarian” kingdom, but a country governed by an “enlightened”, “civilised” monarch open to progress. A few telling examples recount the king’s sacrifices to meet the Western standards of a civilised appearance.
One sacrifice was that King Chulalongkorn had to give up the habit of betel chewing, as the sight of chewing and spitting the red-black betel quid was known to upset Westerners. *Thai Kitchen*, a book on traditional Thai cuisine, quotes one of the king’s letters in *Klai Ban*:

> Today I have to endure two sufferings. The first, after dinner my longing for betel will not just go away. Second, I keep taking tea, cigarette, milk, fruits, and candy, yet I still yearn for betel.46

Worse, years of betel chewing had left black stains on the king’s teeth, and these stains had “to be removed by digging it away with a knife”,47 before he even could depart to Europe.48 Another sacrifice was the daily confrontation with Western food, which in those days was rather opulent. During the first visit “he often complained that it made him sick”.49 There were days that King Chulalongkorn had to consume three lavish meals served in his honour, and every time had to display the appropriate appreciation. Irrespective of the fact that the king learned to appreciate European food, he missed the easy-to-digest fresh and spicy Siamese dishes. The owner of a large collection of menus preserved from the European tours recalled the king’s letters in *Klai Ban* in a *Bangkok Post* feature: “He wrote to his children that, while he was eating all the truffled fowl and *sauce Béarnaise*, visions of *nam phrik* (chili dip sauce) were floating before his eyes.”50

The crux of the narrative is of course that King Chulalongkorn succeeded in making a civilised impression on his Western hosts. The king spoke English, knew Western manners, appreciated Western art and craftsmanship, and had a keen interest in technological innovations. He was so well prepared for this visit because of his early realisation of the importance of the West and Western knowledge. His first visits abroad, to British Singapore and Dutch Java in 1871, where he visited many modern institutions, like schools, post and telegraph offices, hospitals and railway stations, stimulated his desire to modernise the kingdom. Upon his return he was convinced that English-language skills were the key to progress. Education would be a prerequisite. He established a school within the Grand Palace for the sons of princes and noblemen, and appointed private English teachers for his (half)-brothers and sons (Chula 1960: 224). In the 1880s schools were established for children of officials. Moreover, in the course of time, many of his younger brothers and sons, in particular the princes of the highest rank (the *chao fa* or...
celestial princes), were sent to Europe for their education. This was the first impetus of a policy to make education available to everybody.\textsuperscript{51} He hired also Western advisers and engineers for the many projects he initiated. Here the narrative of “King Chulalongkorn visited the countryside” fits the image of the king modernising his country. For he could only develop his vision on how to modernise the kingdom after learning about the needs of his subjects by visiting them in person, and the knowledge of these needs motivated the king to modernise his kingdom.

The narrative emphasises that the king did not unthinkingly follow Western paths towards progress; fully aware of the importance of preserving Thai singularity, he developed a selective, adaptive policy.\textsuperscript{52} In the words of political scientist Kullada Ketboonchu in a Bangkok Post feature: “After he had observed what was happening there [in Europe] he brought the concepts back and applied them in Thailand. These imported and adapted ideas extended into the realm of economics. It was after that, that we began to export agricultural commodities like rice and timber.”\textsuperscript{53} The National Identity Office\textsuperscript{54} formulates the essence of the king’s policy and attitude as follows: “King Chulalongkorn [was] eager to learn about Western ideas and inventions, positively working towards Western-style “progress” while at the same time resisting Western rule, (...) … he strove to uphold Thai cultural, artistic and religious values” (1991: 23, 26).

The king’s own writings give proof of this awareness. Extracts from letters to his sons in Europe in which he tells them never to forget that they are Thai, and not to behave differently upon their return, and to speak Thai, not English, are frequently quoted. The sincerity of the king when it comes to his own attitudes and conduct is demonstrated by a ceremony before his departure in 1897, in which he made three vows: first, during his voyage he would not embrace any other religion than Buddhism; second, he would not become engaged in any sexual relationship with women; and third he would abstain from alcoholic drinks, except only in those situations where refusing would be impolite, and never take so much that it would influence his mind or body. In an exhibition organised in the National Museum in Bangkok (December 1998/January 1999) to commemorate the 1897 tour, the king’s written and spoken comments about the trip, including his opinions about Western influences, were a special topic. The text of the oath, to be found in almost any of the more detailed popular accounts of the king’s first European tour,\textsuperscript{55} also featured in the exhibit.
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Founding Father, Meritorious King

An advertisement regularly broadcast in August/September 1997, immediately after the economic breakdown, illustrates the vitality and versatility of the King Chulalongkorn narratives and their capacity to deliver a message.

The Thai tricolour fills the screen. In the centre of the flag shimmers a portrait of King Chulalongkorn seated on his throne, a photograph taken towards the end of his reign. A male voice-over tells the audience in an ominous tone that in Thailand slavery was abolished during the fifth reign, ninety years ago. In the meantime — the flag still flying — the image in the centre is replaced by the popular composition of “King Chulalongkorn abolishing slavery”, first focussing on the king, then on the slaves. Subsequently, we see the wax display of “King Chulalongkorn abolishes slavery” from the Human Imaginary Museum. Then the screen shifts to what for a long time has been regarded as one of the worst excesses of modern society: Bangkok’s overfull highways, with their noise and clearly visible pollution; a text in large font reads: “BUT NOWADAYS” (tae patchuban). While close-ups of people in a fast food restaurant are shown, the voice-over continues: “The Thai have fallen back into being slaves (khon thai klap tok pen that), of things, of nappa leather this time.”

Next we see Thai customers in a modern leather shop gazing at shoes and handbags. The advertisement continues with images of several Thai handicap products (like bamboo bags and baskets, silverware) and ends with a heap of Thai money. The voice-over encourages everybody to spend Thai money on Thai products, as “that will help the nation and all Thai”.

The message of the advertisement is not merely that the economic crisis may be countered by buying Thai goods. The inclusion of the scenes from the King Chulalongkorn narratives adds an extra moral element. Connecting the excesses of modernity with slavery, the advertisement suggests that if the Thai would be as selective about modernity as King Chulalongkorn was, the path to modernity would be much smoother, and that the way Thai live today is contrary to the king’s vision of a
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modern Thai society. Furthermore, for everybody who knows with how much love, care and sacrifice the king modernised his country, the connection of the king’s legacy with doing something for the nation in times of crisis implies a moral obligation to co-operate.

The advertisement leans also on another image of King Chulalongkorn: the king as the founding father of the nation, an image as much part of the interpretation of the king as Great Moderniser as is the image of King Chulalongkorn as a Buddhist king. The tables of contents with their lists of concrete technological achievements and governmental reformations trace the origins of the modern nation-state to the king. The equation of the ruler with the state, or a personalised perspective on the origin of the state, is not a phenomenon exclusively limited to Thailand. Although Thailand has never been colonised, this perception can be regarded as part of a post-colonial global phenomenon that occurred wherever new, non-Western nation-states arose “between the dusk of colonialism and the dawn of independence” (Kirk-Greene 1991: 167). Good examples of such founding fathers are of course internationally renowned national leaders such as Nasser or Gandhi, but also Latin American heroes like the Venezuelan “Great Liberator” Bolivar (see Sanchez 1994). Kirk-Greene, in an overview article of modern African states and their leaders, speaks in this respect of the “concept of instant synonymity”: “the country is the man and the man is the country (ibid.). In the Thai case, however, the confluence of the image of King Chulalongkorn as founding father with the image of King Chulalongkorn as meritorious king, gives the image an extra powerful dimension.

The strong potential of the founding-father image is illustrated by its ability to fit even a problematic aspect of the king’s biography into the hagiography: his more than 150 wives. The king’s polygamy — something definitively perceived as immoral today — is explained as wise domestic politics. In a conversation on whether King Chulalongkorn could be considered handsome, Arun — the jewellery designer in Chiang Mai quoted above — formulated this well-known view as follows:

He was handsome and that explains why he had so many wives. But, you know, the king had actually another reason for marrying so many wives. At the time Thailand was not really one country yet. By marrying the daughters of all important families, he tied all these families to him and that is how King Chulalongkorn was able to unite the country. This was a really clever policy (chalat mak, nayobai keng mak loei).
One book elaborates on the issue, on the positive consequences (financially and in terms of status) for families of having one of their daughters married to the king, and on the willingness of these daughters to marry the king, and also deals with the inherent problem that royal polygamy could have made it difficult for the king to present himself as a civilised monarch in Europe.\textsuperscript{56} The book recounts how, although everybody was curious with regard to this subject, most European rulers were very polite and did not touch upon it except on one occasion, during his visit to Denmark (1897), when Princess Marie dared to ask the king why he had so many wives. The king’s witty response “because I did not meet you earlier” left the princess embarrassed.\textsuperscript{57} This story gives another proof of the king’s ultimate superiority and his ability to deal with delicate situations caused by the indiscretion of others.

The powerful image of King Chulalongkorn as the founding father enables present-day narrators to interpret Thai democracy as originating from a deliberate policy of King Chulalongkorn — although he was actually the most absolute Siamese king ever. School books state plainly that King Chulalongkorn initiated (\textit{ri roem}) and laid the basis (\textit{wang rakthan}) for democracy.\textsuperscript{58} Mrs. Prasi, a retired \textit{Bangkok Post} reporter living in Chiang Mai, told me that “democracy in fact was introduced by King Chulalongkorn, because by abolishing slavery he made everybody equal”. A large variety of portraits depict the king in combination with the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, presently used as the parliament building. In my view such portraits visualise the perception of King Chulalongkorn as the founder of the Thai democratic state (see Figure 3).

What does the myth of King Chulalongkorn, of this “Great Beloved King” (\textit{phra piya maharat}) tell us so far? It has become clear that the epithet denotes a truly meritorious Buddhist king, who, through compassion for his subjects, his great vision and extraordinary qualities, founded the Thai nation as an independent and modern state. Within this perspective, “modernisation” is of utmost significance: first, as a means to save the country’s independence, and second, as a way to improve the general well-being of the Thai people.

The following chapters will deal in more detail with the way individuals relate the achievements and dedication of King Chulalongkorn to their personal lives. In the remainder of this chapter I will elaborate on the consequences of the image of King Chulalongkorn as founder of the Thai nation-state for Thai perceptions of the state.
The King and the State

The master narrative of King Chulalongkorn the Great Moderniser rests on two images of the king: first, King Chulalongkorn, the meritorious Buddhist king, and second, King Chulalongkorn, the founding father of the modern nation-state. The convergence of these two images in the same person has several consequences. In the beginning of this chapter I touched upon the Theravada Buddhist conception of the embodiment of the state by the king, but this model leaves a widely acknowledged problem, namely, what is meant by “the state”? In his well-known essay “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State” (1988), Philip Abrams draws a distinctions between a state-system (“a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in the government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society”) and a state-idea (which is “projected, purveyed and variously believed in different societies at different times”) (1988: 82). “The state”, argues Abrams, as concrete or abstract object of study should be abandoned in favour of “the state” as an idea, or an ideological construct. The idea of the state masks and legitimates the domination and moral regulation exerted by the institutions of the state-system and associated interest groups by presenting intervention and control as fundamental for upholding the general interest (ibid.: 75–7). Accordingly, a basic concern is to understand how power is legitimated through the ideological potential of the idea of the state. To accomplish this, it is necessary to unravel the Thai idea of the state.

In formal Theravada Buddhist conceptions of kingship and society, only the virtuous conduct of the king can bring justice and order. Thus the legitimacy of the worldly power of Buddhist kings is embedded in the Buddhist cosmology. The ideal king is righteous because he follows the thammasat, the Buddhist Law. Through his righteousness the king even may become a chakravatin, or universal ruler (Tambiah 1985: 326). Then “[a]ll the rival Kings [...] give him welcome and beg for his teachings” (Dhani 1946: 96). The present-day Thai nation with its modern administrative, educational and judicial agencies, its parliament, and its constitutional monarchy, has only faint echoes of this ancient notion of the Theravada Buddhist kingdom, but the King Chulalongkorn narratives demonstrate how vigorous the image of “the true Buddhist king” still is. In the current Thai perception, therefore, the worldly power of King Chulalongkorn finds its legitimacy in Buddhist cosmology. At the same time, King Chulalongkorn is regarded as the founder of the modern
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Thai nation-state. Since this creation of a modern nation was a voluntary act of this legitimate, virtuous king, the present Thai state is legitimate and can only be good. Here the King Chulalongkorn myth appears as an ideology, solving the problem of the legitimacy of the modern, secular Thai state by placing it within the framework of Buddhist cosmology. The state originated from the wisdom of the king and his compassion for the people.

Univocal and hegemonic as the ideology might seem at first glance, its implications are, ultimately, ambiguous. On the one hand, the presentation of King Chulalongkorn as the ultimate source of legitimacy for the Thai state affirms the authority of bureaucrats, policy makers, and other representatives of the state-system. The official commemoration of King Chulalongkorn, the subject of Chapter III, illustrates how this affirmation works. But what conclusion is to be drawn from the following cases in which representatives of the state-system seek protection by the king against decisions disadvantageous for them, decisions made within this same system?

On 16 October 1993, the then Police General Sawat Amonwiwat, fearing his imminent dismissal, went to the equestrian statue to ask King Chulalongkorn for support. He climbed the statue with a ladder until he reached the feet of the king (Hauser 1996: 204-5). The reason behind his dismissal was his inability (or unwillingness?) to solve the “Saudi Gem Case”.  

On 5 September 1997, 20,000 sub-district and village headmen (kamnan and phu yai ban) from all over the country arrived in hundreds of busses in Bangkok to protest the new draft constitution. They gathered at the Royal Plaza, where they paid respect to the Equestrian Statue and sang the National Anthem. Their protest was directed against a clause proposing the direct election of Subdistrict Administration Members and excluding the participation of kamnan and phu yai ban (subdistrict headmen and village headmen). Their protests were twofold: they were afraid to lose part of their power, and they feared that such a change would affect the power of the monarchy. “Our institute was founded by King Rama V. We must protect our nation, religion and monarchy. We will not let anyone do anything which will affect the institution of the monarchy. We are willing to sacrifice our lives”.  

On 2 July 1998 railway employees and caddies rallied against turning a golf course, owned by the State Railway Company, into a public
The protesters — afraid to lose their jobs — barricaded a railway, carrying many portraits of King Chulalongkorn under whose reign the first railway was established.\footnote{This paradox — in which people experiencing a wrong involving the state seek refuge with the founder of that same state — can be resolved by taking the myth not only as a legitimizing device but also as a secular theodicy. It leaves room for the existence of evil within the state while maintaining its essential goodness: King Chulalongkorn is not the embodiment of the Thai state as such, but of the ideal Thai state. In this perspective the ideal state — that is, the state as the king intended it to be — may be opposed to the degraded state it has become. In the words of Kai, an elder rickshaw driver in Chiang Mai, complaining while we were stuck in a traffic jam:

You see these cars? This is what they call \textit{khwam charoen}, these days. But what \textit{khwam charoen}? It’s madness (\textit{ba}). King Chulalongkorn brought \textit{khwam charoen}. He knew what was good and not good. But now, this government does not know anything. They only think of money.}

Son, the owner of a mid-sized bookstore in Chiang Mai, formulates her view on the discrepancy as follows:

King Chulalongkorn has abolished slavery, but what has happened is that rich people have at present become very rich while the poor hardly benefit from economic development. On the contrary: poor people are now again tied to the power and wishes of the rich. Poor people have become slaves again. I think this is not in accordance with King Chulalongkorn’s intentions.

Kaew, a Thai woman living abroad where she works as sworn translator, told me the following story about one of the most traumatic periods for Thai society in recent history:

Three days before the violent suppression of the student protests in 1976,\footnote{Three days before the violent suppression of the student protests in 1976,\textsuperscript{63} early in the morning, the horse of the equestrian statue screamed. It screamed so loudly that everybody in Bangkok could hear it. King Chulalongkorn foresaw the violence about to happen, and that it could threaten the stability and continuity of the country because it could end in a civil war. According to Kaew the news (under the headline: The Horse Neighs (\textit{ma rong})) had appeared in all Thai daily newspapers the next day.\textsuperscript{64}}
Being, in one and the same instance, the founding father of the Thai secular nation and a meritorious Buddhist king caring for each of his subjects and bringing prosperity to his kingdom, King Chulalongkorn is a figure ambiguous enough that almost anybody can seek refuge with him, at least in the urban or semi-urban environment where the myth is produced and resonates. The multiple facets of the king's image helps to explain why the King Chulalongkorn myth is so appealing that a cult could evolve around the king. The myth of King Chulalongkorn presents the image of the king as “the god of the government” (Akin 1993), while leaving sufficient space for personalised perceptions of his benevolence. Paul Connerton speaks of mythic material as a “reservoir of meanings” with a large potential of variance, reworking and reinterpretation (1989: 56–7). Throughout the following chapters the process of reworking the myth by individual worshippers and groups will be a main focus. It is my purpose to clarify how in the course of this process the role of the king in the social imaginary has shifted from problem solver in history to problem solver in the daily lives of his individual worshippers at present.
To the eye, the cult of King Chulalongkorn is manifested mainly through the innumerable quantity of King Chulalongkorn portraits. The king’s portraits are found all over the country, particularly in urban areas. Wherever one goes — offices, restaurants, shops, private homes, temples, spirit shrines, railway stations, or other public buildings — there is always an image of the king, generally in the form of a portrait or statuette.

Although King Chulalongkorn died 90 years ago, were he alive, travelling incognito (as in the sadet praphat ton narrative) would be out of the question at present. He soon would be recognised, as so many Thai own his portrait. Portraits may be obtained, for instance, at one of the many “portrait shops” selling framed copies of photographs and paintings of historical kings, members of the present royal family, and famous monks. In the city of Chiang Mai, I counted 20 such “portrait shops”, with many existing even in the smallest provincial towns. Within these shops, portraits of King Chulalongkorn are more abundant than those of any other king or monk. Furthermore, a wide range of objects are available as well, including clocks, necklaces, coffee pots, key rings, stickers, embroidery patterns, and even jigsaws bearing the image of the king (see Figures 4 and 5). King Chulalongkorn objects are found at markets, bookstores, department stores, fancy fairs, temple shops and amulet markets. But they are also available through many door-to-door statuette vendors, children selling home-made King Chulalongkorn stickers in restaurants, and mail-order catalogues. In addition, semi-governmental organisations, such as banks and the army, regularly issue “King Chulalongkorn images” in a variety of forms, be it a new series of King Chulalongkorn commemorative coins or statuettes that may be either sold or freely distributed at special events. One may wonder
whether the scale of production of the portraits reflects a general desire for them. Do most portraits find an owner? To give a first impression of the sphere of desire, production, and purchase, I will start this chapter by sketching one of the many King Chulalongkorn portrait owners I met during my research.

**Bun’s King Chulalongkorn Portraits**

Bun is the owner of a well-known flower shop in Chiang Mai. His small shop — which he runs with his sister — is famous for the quality of its flowers, as well as its flower decorations and garlands. Chiang Mai’s elite order their flowers from Bun, particularly on occasions which carry a formal “national” character, such as a visit of the queen\(^1\) to Chiang Mai or Chulalongkorn Day.\(^2\) Bun himself is strongly devoted to King Chulalongkorn. This is partly expressed in the eight portraits of the king decorating both the shop and the private upper floor. Most portraits were presented as gifts to commemorate occasions including the opening of the present shop, Bun’s birthday, and the New Year. Furthermore, Bun owns a King Chulalongkorn portrait book entitled *Pramuan Phraboromchhai Lakson/Best of the Best. The Great Collection of King Rama V.*\(^3\)

Bun’s most precious King Chulalongkorn portrait is not on display: an original Fifth Reign coin, carried always on his body underneath his clothes. An aunt had given him the coin around 1990. Since then, Bun has taken great effort to make the coin into a precious medallion (*lokket*).\(^4\) The coin is encased in elaborately worked gold. Its chain is also made of heavy gold. A small ruby decorates the medallion’s top, with two rows of small diamonds (brought from Belgium) set along the left side and an emerald below. The process of embellishing the medallion is executed bit by bit. Every time Bun has some money, or comes across a nice stone, additions are made to his design.\(^5\) In its present state (1997) the *lokket* would cost about 100,000 baht. But Bun, of course, has no intention to sell this unique *lokket*.

Bun owns several other King Chulalongkorn coins and medallions. These objects were, however, newly produced on the occasion of commemorative events or for charities. Occasionally, he buys these items from organisations or vendors. In 1996, Bun
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purchased ten such medallions at prices ranging between 1,000 and 2,000 baht. Four of the medallions he has kept for himself; the other six were gifts. Thus, Bun owns a wide array of King Chulalongkorn portraits and objects. His desire for portraits, however, seems to be never entirely satisfied. Once he told me that there is one particular King Chulalongkorn portrait that he would really like to add to his collection: a good photograph of the equestrian statue. As Bun explained, there is a fundamental difference between the statue and other portraits. The equestrian statue is a portrait of the king as phra phuttha chao luang, while the other portraits depict him as sadet pho (royal father). The equestrian statue is the “highest” portrait of King Chulalongkorn because it was erected on the occasion of his 40th year on the throne: no other king in Thai history had ever ruled as long. This portrait therefore depicts King Chulalongkorn at the peak of his import and power.

Bun’s case touches upon many subjects which feature in this chapter: the many ways in which people come to own a variety of portraits; King Chulalongkorn portraits as a gift; the desire to own one or more very special and personal portraits; the occasions on which King Chulalongkorn objects are produced and distributed, including the elements of charity and fund raising; and the special meaning of the equestrian statue among the portraits of the king.

The profusion of King Chulalongkorn portraits raises a question regarding the needs they satisfy. Why do so many Thai possess King Chulalongkorn portraits? Leaving aside for a moment the scale and influence of production and other commercial aspects of the “King Chulalongkorn portrait trade” (which will be dealt with more specifically below), I will first attempt to provide insight into the meaning King Chulalongkorn images carry for those who possess them. The terms “portrait” and “image” will be used interchangeably when referring to depictions of the king in the form of painted portraits, statuettes, photographs, bank notes, postage stamps, coins, sculptures, and so forth.

It is the objective of this chapter to highlight the role of King Chulalongkorn portraits in the cult, additionally showing that the role and meaning of pictorial portraits can be understood only in the context of the narrated portraits. The intrinsic connection between the two will therefore be one of the major themes explored. As will be seen, such connections
also exist on the individual level, offering a key to understanding the individual's desire for the portraits.

**Buddhist Kings and their Images**

The discussion of the significance of King Chulalongkorn portraits in the development of the cult starts with the recognition that it is far from self-evident that such portraits exist, let alone so many of them. For a long time, Siam had no tradition of portraiture of kings, alive or deceased, in the sense of a true-to-life depiction of their features. During the first millennium, Indian traders and missionaries settling in Siam and Cambodia introduced Hinduism, Brahmanism and Buddhism to the area. Early in the thirteenth century, when the heydays of the Khmer empire were over, the Siamese court established extensive religious contacts with Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka and made Siam a centre of Theravada Buddhism (Wales 1992 [1931]: 12–5). Following this, Buddha statues representing Siamese kings were made. However, different from other Buddha statues, these statues were adorned with a royal crown, attire and regalia. The statues were often life-size, or, more precisely, made to the actual size of the king’s body (Apinan 1992b:l: 336). This coinciding of Buddha and king fits the Theravada Buddhist concept that kings are future Buddhas (Bodhisattvas). Additionally, the early Chakri kings had such images made as objects of homage for the general public, dedicating the statues to themselves or to their ancestors. In addition to these public images, other divine figures symbolising the kings were made following the end of each reign. These images were solely objects of worship for members of the royal household (ibid.), combining deification with ancestor worship (cf. Wales 1992: 169).

Portraiture of royal persons started no earlier than the reign of King Mongkut, or Rama IV (r. 1851–68), the father of King Chulalongkorn. According to both Apinan and Wales, portraiture of persons was earlier considered harmful to the person depicted because of possible misuse of black magic (Apinan 1992bl: 336; Wales 1992: 173). Wales adds that in the mid-nineteenth century this idea was “officially discountenanced” (ibid.) During the fourth reign the intensified diplomatic relations between Siam and the West also led to an intensification of contacts between the Siamese and Western courts. In Europe, the exchange of portraits and photographs of kings, queens, royal families and important statesmen between the courts and governments was a diplomatic means of
establishing foreign relations. Consequently, many portraits of European monarchs arrived at the court of Siam and were displayed there. This display was a sign of respect, and should not be understood in terms of worship, as was the case with the Buddha images representing Siamese kings (Apinan 1992bI: 339, 344).

As a consequence of the inescapable diplomatic relations with the West (see Introduction), King Mongkut decided to have himself photographed in order to send gifts in return. The significance of this decision should not be underestimated. By having himself portrayed several times, King Mongkut was the first Siamese king to radically break with the magical fears around portraiture, demonstrating, as Apinan correctly observes, the impact of Western thought (Apinan 1992bI: 339). Thus, King Chulalongkorn, from the beginning of his reign onward, had himself portrayed abundantly and in all techniques available.

The King’s Merit and Grace

Investigation of the role of portraits in the King Chulalongkorn cult will start with an analysis of Thai concepts of the power and supernatural qualities of Buddhist Kings, which still are, or have even increasingly become, part of popular imaginations about kingship. In the course of Chapter I, the contours of King Chulalongkorn as a “righteous ruler” were made visible. The king’s intentions and deeds as they appear in the narrated portraits testify that King Chulalongkorn ruled in accordance with the “Ten Kingly Virtues”. The importance attributed to the king’s adherence to the “Ten Kingly Virtues” is the first clue to the Thai conception of kingship and its fundamentally religious nature. In this conception, such adherence is inseparable from possessing *barami* (grace, virtue), a “charismatic power” with auspicious qualities. Equally important is the idea that a king is a man who has accumulated so much merit (*bun*) in his previous lives, that he is reborn to become a king. Merit and reincarnation are central concepts in Theravada Buddhism. It is a person’s karma (*kam*) that determines one’s rebirth. This, however, does not imply a fatalistic attitude towards one’s condition. On the contrary, according to the “law of karma”, every action generates a consequence. Actions in accordance with Buddhist morals will produce merit and contribute to good karma. The more merit accumulated, the better one’s karma, and, accordingly, the better one’s present or future existence. Most Thai, therefore, are continuously engaged in a “quest for merit”, primarily
through religious activities (Keyes 1983: 267). Morally contemptible deeds, on the other hand, will result in demerit (*bap*), which in its turn causes bad karma and an unpleasant rebirth (cf. Akin 1969: 11–2; Spiro 1982: 67). As the king stands at the apex of Thai society, he is perceived as the person with the greatest reservoir of accumulated merit (Akin 1969: 47; Keyes 1977: 288).

For the Thai people, the “merit and grace”, or *bun barami*, of the king are important matters, as they are believed to influence the course that society might take as well as the individual’s well-being. It is generally accepted that when a virtuous king rules the kingdom, his *bun barami* makes the kingdom prosper and its inhabitants live in happiness and peace. Although *bun* and *barami* overlap, they are not exactly the same: they work and are experienced differently. The idea that the merit of a king works for the good of all is based on the belief that merit can be transferred. Monks transfer a share of their accumulated merit to the laity in public ceremonies or in certain rituals. Laymen particularly share their merit with deceased relatives or ancestors (Terwiel 1994: 101–2). Through the merit-making ceremony, any extra merit a deceased person may receive from his relatives may contribute to a better rebirth (Spiro 1982: 124–5). A king is believed to have accumulated so much merit that through his compassion it can be shared with and transferred to anyone connected with him (Keyes 1977: 287–9). Obviously, a king is connected to all his subjects, explaining the immediate beneficial effect his merit is believed to exert on his kingdom and its people. This belief also implies, however, that disaster or misfortune can be understood as a weakening of the king’s merit and its meritorious effect. Kings therefore are required to continue to earn merit. In particular, this takes the form of almsgiving to the Sangha and the construction of Buddhist monuments (i.e. Buddha statues, stupas and temples), especially in times of crisis. Akin recalls the actions taken by King Rama III in 1849 when Siam was hit by a serious cholera epidemic:

(...) King Rama III took a vow to keep the precepts and spent a great deal of money on buying animals and setting them free. He also told the people to make merit and set free imprisoned animals in the belief that through the acts of making merit the epidemic would subside (1969: 46).

In this context it is not difficult to understand why the meritorious conduct of Thailand’s present monarch is considered to be of utmost
importance. King Bhumibol is, so to speak, “obliged” to engage in continuous merit-making to counterbalance all kinds of misfortune and crises confronting the kingdom. Through his observance of the “Ten Kingly Virtues”, which by definition implies meritorious conduct, King Bhumibol accumulates merit.

The case of King Chulalongkorn, however, concerns a deceased monarch. The king is believed to have been reborn in one of the heavenly abodes as a divine being, a guardian angel (thep, thewada or deva). Through his compassion he still cares for the well-being of his kingdom and its inhabitants (see also below). And although this again leads to further accumulation of merit, which contributes to both King Chulalongkorn’s personal salvation and the welfare of the Thai Nation, the emphasis in the cult is placed on the beneficent effect of the king’s barami. Different from merit, where the auspicious effect is unpredictable, the effect of the king’s barami is direct and can be experienced in his immediate proximity. The popular use of the word barami thus also refers to those effects of the king’s observance of the “Ten Kingly Virtues” that may be experienced personally (cf. note 7). One could translate barami in its popular conception as “grace”, since it is considered to be a perceivable aspect of majesty. As we will see, this same barami may also be experienced as emanating from King Chulalongkorn’s portraits. For the objective of this chapter, seeking an answer to the question of why Thai people desire to own portraits of King Chulalongkorn, I will discuss the working of barami and its beneficent effects in more detail.

The Equestrian Statue

King Chulalongkorn’s most significant and impressive portrait is the equestrian statue at the Royal Plaza. To understand the specific position of the statue in the King Chulalongkorn cult and the role of barami, the narrative of its creation must be considered. This will directly involve the writings of Prince Damrong once more.

In the letter of 23 October 1912, added to the sadet praphat ton diary of 1904 (see Chapter I), Prince Damrong writes:

(…) knowing the story of this statue makes one understand that the statue belongs to the people of Siam, irrespective of class, ranks or place (…). It was a joint effort in which everyone shared the same feeling. More then 1.000.000 Baht was collected — five times more than the amount needed to erect the statue (…). Many, many people, from
everywhere, showed their love and loyalty towards the King (Damrong 1976 [1912]: 35, translation IS).15

The equestrian statue was erected in 1908 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the king’s accession to the throne (*ratchamangkhla phisek*).16 The unveiling of the statue on 11 November 1908, was the high point of the celebrations and still lives on in social memory through well-known photographs. The series of commemorative stamps issued that day, featuring an engraving of the statue, has not only become a valued collectors item,17 but depictions of the stamp on new stamps, posters, or the cover of stamp albums, are part of the usual repertoire of King Chulalongkorn objects (see Figure 3).

The account of the erection of the equestrian statue, which was enabled by the liberal contributions of the people of Siam, regardless of their birth or background, is widely known through the popular *saded praphat ton* diary of Prince Damrong. It is also inscribed on a plaque on the base of the statue itself. Books on King Chulalongkorn typically feature a photograph of the statue — either a recent picture or one of the photographs taken during its unveiling — and a short account on how the funds were collected. Prince Damrong’s quote or the text of the plaque is also commonly included. The essence of the statue narrative is that it is a present from the Thai people to their king, with the size of the funds collected indicative of the dimensions of their love.

Significantly, the inscription on the plaque is the first text that refers to the king as *piya maharat*, or the “Beloved Great King” of the people.18 I have not found any direct account of Prince Damrong himself on this matter, but the idea is commonly accepted that the epithet originated from the mind of the prince himself.19 As the prince was also one of the members of the central committee charged with organising the jubilee (as was Crown Prince Vajiravudh), it is not implausible to attribute the plaque inscription to him. The idea to erect an equestrian statue, however, came from the king himself. Prince Damrong writes that after the king’s departure to Europe the committee was left to quickly come up with an appropriate plan for the jubilee. They then received a message from the king, writing from France, in which he expressed his appreciation for the equestrian statue of Le Roi Soleil (Louis XIV) in Versailles. The equestrian statue stands on the square in front of Versailles Palace, at the end of the long avenue leading to the palace. In Bangkok, a square (*Suan Amphon*, the Royal Plaza) was similarly situated between the end
of Ratchadamnoennok Avenue [modelled after the Champs Elysée, completed in 1907 (cf. Apinan 1992a: 15)] and the planned Anantha Samakkhom Throne Hall [a mixture of St. Peter’s and St. Paul’s cathedrals (cf. ibid.)]. It was therefore considered to be very appropriate to continue the European style by erecting an equestrian statue on the Royal Plaza.\textsuperscript{20}

The suggestion of the king to have an equestrian statue made for the occasion was probably not totally unexpected, as it was known that in 1897 — on his first journey to Europe — the king had been impressed by the equestrian monuments of King George III at Windsor, Emperor Marcus Aurelius in Rome, and Bartolomeo Colleoni in Venice. As the craftsmanship for the required sculpture and casting was not available in Siam, the order was placed in Paris, where the king posed for Georges Saulo, a renowned French sculptor at the time (Apinan 1992a: 15–6). The money needed was collected through the sale of occasional stamps featuring a preliminary drawing of the statue.

The idea for collecting donations at large was possibly inspired by the construction of the Albert Memorial in London, which was financed by donations from the British populace. More contemporary rulers are known to have financed, or at least to have attempted to finance, their monument through donations. Certainly, a monument erected after a successful campaign for funds may serve to give testimony to the legitimacy of the ruler. In the Thai case it made the creation of the statue an act of formalising and formulating the love of “the people” for their king. Unlike the Albert Memorial, which narrowly escaped destruction in the 1990s, the equestrian statue has increased in significance throughout the years. But why and for whom exactly? As will be seen below, for worshippers of King Chulalongkorn the equestrian statue gives testimony to the unique and intensive relationship between the king and his subjects, of which the “creation narrative” is but another confirmation.

The importance of the equestrian statue as a focus for popular sentiments of King Chulalongkorn became apparent in the late 1980s. In that period an increasing number of people came to worship the king at the statue on Tuesdays. Tuesday is an important day in the cult. King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday and many believe that every Tuesday night, at 10 PM, the spirit of the king descends from heaven to enter the statue. In September 1992, the famous movie star Bin Banluerit sparked further interest in the cult by publicly declaring (both in the \textit{Thai Rath}, Thailand’s most popular newspaper, and on television) that he had survived a terrible car accident thanks to the protective power of
the original King Chulalongkorn coin (*rian*), worn by him as an amulet. After Bin’s declaration, the number of people worshipping the king at the statue increased drastically, while — as my own research indicates (see below) — elsewhere in the country other centres of King Chulalongkorn worship arose. During my research, thousands of people were coming to the statue every week — particularly on Tuesday evenings, but now also on Thursday and Saturdays evenings, to pay their respects to the king. They present him offerings (as described in the Introduction) and ask him for spiritual support in all kinds of worldly problems, as will be seen below.

A Cult of Portraits

For an understanding of the omnipresence of the king’s portraits, another important aspect of the cult needs to be introduced. People explained their worship of King Chulalongkorn, almost without exception, as stemming from a need for a *thi phueng* (patron, refuge), or a *thi phueng thang chai* (a spiritual patron). Sometimes the expressions *yut nieo* (a belief one can adhere to) or *lak nieo* (a principle or a basis one can adhere to) were used. These expressions indicate a need for someone who can always be turned to or relied upon. The colloquial forms used to address the king in prayers or when speaking about the king — *sadet pho* (royal father), *sadet pu* (royal grandfather), *phra piya* (beloved highness) or *pho piya* (beloved father) — demonstrate how worshippers perceive and experience their relation with him in terms of an intimate father-child relationship. Such perceptions, of course, are elaborations of the image of King Chulalongkorn as an accessible, fatherly ruler (the ideal Buddhist king), as depicted by Prince Damrong and others.

This interpretation of King Chulalongkorn explains in part why people long to be physically close to him. In the narrated portraits of Chapter I, this longing is expressed in the recurring theme of the immediate presence and approachability of the king among his subjects during his lifetime. The abundance of portraits may be regarded as the material expression of the same longing for his presence. It is difficult to find a single worshipper of the king who does not own at least one King Chulalongkorn portrait. Among all the portraits, however, the equestrian statue is singular in the power of the meanings it carries. This is because the idea of the king’s spirit descending from heaven into the statue makes the statue, at least on Tuesdays at 10 PM, indistinguishable from
the king. The statue is embedded in social memory as “a gift from the people” and regarded as belonging to the people, while the square where it is situated has become a place of the people. These more or less explicit ideas about the statue are important in understanding why, in terms of barami, the statue is considered to be extra powerful, and why people make an effort to come to the statue to worship the king. For them, King Chulalongkorn’s barami emanates directly from the statue, radiating equally to everyone, and leaving an immediate and lasting positive effect.

Nearly everyone who comes to the statue brings along one or more images of King Chulalongkorn. The portraits are placed amidst each person’s offerings and become (re)charged with the king’s charismatic power. In this way the statue’s barami, with its protective and auspicious qualities, can be taken home or, in the case of coins and amulets, carried on the person. Nithi rightly compares this transfer of the king’s charismatic power into the objects at the square with the sacralisation of objects (pluk sek) in consecration ceremonies (phiithi pluk sek, phutthaphisek) at temples (1993: 27). In such ceremonies, people also bring their images (whether these be Buddhist amulets, statuettes of monks or portraits of Thai kings) to have them sacralised and charged with beneficial power. The fundamental difference, though, is that in the King Chulalongkorn cult people do not depend on expert intermediaries, such as monks (ibid.). In a phutthaphisek ceremony, objects are sacralised through beneficial power, generated by the monks’ chanting of Pali formulae (khatha) for several hours. The objects, which are placed close to the temple’s main Buddha statue, are connected with the monks and the Buddha statue through a white cotton thread (sai sin). The power generated is distributed to the objects through the sai sin, as if it were a kind of electricity. In the words of Tambiah, the process can be understood as a “sedimentation of power” (1988 [1984]: 208, 339).

The huge piles of bags, boxes, statues, and portraits intended to undergo the ceremony make the most sacred place of the temple (the bot) look more like a religious warehouse during such occasions. The storage of the objects in the direct vicinity of the Buddha statue is analogous to the conception of the equestrian statue in the King Chulalongkorn cult. Buddha statues are also believed to contain beneficial power. Although this is contradictory with Theravada Buddhist teachings, such statues are thought by some to derive their power not from the Buddha himself, but from the guardian angel (thewada) protecting and empowering that
particular statue (cf. Akin 1969: 11). This explanation applies precisely to
the power of the equestrian statue: as a thewada, King Chulalongkorn’s
spirit protects and empowers his own statue.

In the phutthaphisek ceremony, the sai sin can thus be interpreted
as transferring either the beneficial power generated by the monks, the
power residing in the Buddha statue, or both (see also Swearer 2004:
80). Significantly, at the equestrian statue neither sai sin nor monks
are needed to consecrate the objects: the physical vicinity of the statue
is sufficient. People are capable of doing this entirely on their own,
without the need for a collective ceremony. Leaflets, booklets and tapes
providing the required knowledge about offerings, rituals and magic
formulae (khattha) are widely available. Nithi points to the role of such
tamra (literally, textbooks or manuals) in enabling individual worshippers
to establish direct contact with the king. Consequently, he argues people
can do equally well without spirit mediums — the usual expert inter-
mediaries in cults. Clearly, a significant dimension of the King Chula-
longkorn cult is the fact that direct access to the divine is open to all and
is not controlled by an esoteric inner circle. Nithi therefore concludes
that the King Chulalongkorn cult is the first that “belongs to the masses”
(pen khong mueanchon), contesting official Buddhism as well as the
numerous other non-Buddhist cults prevalent in Thai society (1993: 27).
A thorough analysis of Nithi’s conclusion requires a more detailed study
of the dynamics taking place in the King Chulalongkorn cult itself, as
well as an examination of how the cult is embedded in Thai popular
religiosity. These matters will be investigated in Chapters III and IV. For
the objective of this chapter, understanding the role of portraits in the
cult, the observation that any individual can personally establish a direct
link with the king is important.

There is no doubt about the special meaning of the equestrian statue,
or its importance as a source of barami. Yet, for people who lack the time
or live far away, the king’s barami may also be experienced through any
of his portraits. Opinions on this matter differ widely, but without any
resulting conflict or schism. Some people I have spoken with had bought
a King Chulalongkorn image at the square, but have had it consecrated
in a temple ceremony elsewhere. Other people had never had their King
Chulalongkorn portraits consecrated in any way, but were convinced
of the strength of the portraits’ auspicious power solely because of the
king’s effigy. But wherever people obtained their King Chulalongkorn
objects, and whether they had them sacralised at the statue, in local
temple ceremonies, in spirit medium sessions, or not at all, the general opinion was that only the individual’s attachment to the object and his personal intentions really mattered. The latter implies, however, that a portrait’s beneficent powers will work only for those who behave morally and work hard, as the king desires.27

The need to be as close to the king as possible stems from the feeling that this enables a more direct appeal to the king and his barami for support on individual matters. A portrait opens up or increases the possibility of the worshipper establishing direct contact with the king. The equestrian statue is but one portrait through which such individual contact can be established, despite the fact that it is an extraordinary portrait and “shared” by the worshippers at the square. It is irrelevant that the motivation for approaching the king is purely individual and, in fact, reasons vary greatly. Many come to the statue to seek help: students calling upon the king for help in passing their examinations, shop owners striving to increase their sales, employees wanting to be promoted, and people seeking relief for a particular grief or some general distress. Of course these worshippers have their own personal King Chulalongkorn portraits. The lion's share of the King Chulalongkorn portraits belong to individuals and are kept in the private sphere, in shops and offices. The next passage demonstrates that this phenomenon predates the weekly worshipping of King Chulalongkorn at the equestrian statue:

One more method of paying homage to deceased kings in Siam remains to be mentioned: the setting of a photograph or lithograph of the particular king on a table, before which are made the usual offering of lighted candles, flowers, and incense. This is now a very popular custom, both in government institutions and private houses, since every Siamese home possesses at least a cheap lithograph and can thus show its loyalty in this easy and practical manner. But it is of course quite a new custom, since the making of royal portraits only came into fashion after the middle of the last century, after the belief that this was harmful to the person represented had been officially discountenanced. Indeed, the supposition that some part of the royal “soul” (if one may be permitted to use this loose term) might possibly inhabit the portrait, would be an added stimulus to paying homage before it. It is also a modern means of expressing what remains of the worship of the living King [King Rama VII, r.1925–32], for whenever it is desired to honour him, especially on the occasions of a royal procession, portraits of the King set up on tables may be seen at almost every Siamese doorway along the route (Wales 1992 [1931]: 173).
Wales, when speaking of “deceased kings”, must be referring to portraits of King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh, as the mass-production of portraits only began during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (see also below). Apparently, then, “contact with the divine without a need for intermediaries” was already an aspect of the worshipping of kings in the early twentieth century.

**Portraits out of the Ordinary**

In conversations with devotees, the significance of personally owned portraits in their relationship with the king was an ever present topic. This section will present four cases to illustrate the importance of this linkage. Although the interpretation and moulding of one’s relationship with the king is, to a certain extent, highly personal, these relationships may also be characterised by three recurring themes. The first theme is that of a person who originally had no interest or belief in King Chulalongkorn and his powers until the king unexpectedly manifested himself. The second theme is one in which certain experiences involving the king or his image occurred during an especially emotional incident or episode (whether positive or negative) in the person’s life. The third theme involves the role of a material token with the king’s image as proof or reconfirmation of the special relation the new devotee has with King Chulalongkorn. I will start my presentation with the experiences of restaurant owner Nui.

**Nui’s Smiling Portrait**

Nui had never had any special thoughts of King Chulalongkorn until the day he bought his current restaurant in 1989. At the time, Nui was 33 years old. The former owner had left a portrait of the king in the restaurant. It was King Chulalongkorn in red uniform, with a small clock mounted in the upper right corner of the portrait. On his first day as the restaurant’s new owner, Nui happened to look at the portrait and to his surprise the king seemed to smile at him. That night Nui dreamed about King Chulalongkorn and the king not only smiled again, but also gently tapped Nui’s head with his hand. This experience changed Nui’s attitude towards the king substantially. He hung a copy of a famous photograph of “the king cooking a meal” (see Figure 7) next to the old portrait, which at the time of my visit had faded into a palish blue,
while the clock was broken. An altar with monk statuettes, also left in the restaurant, was transformed into a King Chulalongkorn altar. The monk statuettes were moved to the restaurant office. At the time of my interview with Nui, three portraits, a statuette, and a large plaster copy of a King Chulalongkorn coin filled the altar. “That is how things go,” Nui told me, “once you have one portrait, you will automatically get more.” When friends learned about Nui’s faith in King Chulalongkorn, they began giving him portraits and other objects bearing the king’s image, particularly as birthday gifts (*khong khwan*).

To Nui it is no coincidence that King Chulalongkorn smiled at him when he bought the restaurant. As he explained to me: “the king’s *barami* supports traders and other people in business in particular, since the king was in fact a trader (*pho kha*) himself. During his reign King Chulalongkorn established many business relationships with foreign countries. The king enjoyed (*chop*) trading.”

Given his newly found faith, Nui wanted to own a King Chulalongkorn coin (*rian*). According to Nui, such coins are particularly renowned for their protective powers during travelling. Although Nui anxiously wanted such a coin, he could not afford to buy one as they are relatively scarce and expensive.

One day an amulet vendor came to his restaurant. The man offered him a one-baht coin for 1,500 baht. Nui found the price too expensive and made a counter offer of 500 baht. The vendor rejected the offer and left the restaurant. Nui turned to King Chulalongkorn for help and 15 days later the vendor returned. He had changed his mind and agreed to sell the coin to Nui for a mere 500 baht. Some years later, the vendor returned to ask if he could buy the coin back, offering 40,000 baht. Nui refused to sell the coin.

A miraculous escape from a car accident further confirmed Nui’s belief in the protective powers of King Chulalongkorn coins. While he always carries the one-baht coin with him, he has another coin permanently attached to one of the sunshades of his car. This coin is generally known as the “coin with the three-headed elephant”. Nui bought it while in a hill-tribe village not far from Chiang Mai city. In contrast to the implicit importance attributed to the genuineness of the one-baht coin, Nui said in reference to this coin: “it does not matter whether the coin is a real old coin or a recent copy. The only thing that matters is that it bears the image of the king.” During the course of a near-car accident Nui believes King Chulalongkorn saved his life three times. The first
saving occurred when, while driving 120 kilometres per hour, he did not crash into an accident that had just happened in front of him. Instead, by turning sharply, he managed to avoid the accident. To his surprise he then found himself headed directly towards a nearby river. Just before the car would have driven into the water, Nui regained control of his car and, making another sharp turn, was saved again. But then, just as he re-entered the highway, a car suddenly appeared in front of him, driving in his lane and in the wrong direction. “It is really amazing,” Nui said, “that I also escaped from a frontal collision with this car. The king had saved my life again.”

**Sombun’s Turning Fate**

Sombun’s first remarks upon hearing about my topic of research were, “those who worship King Chulalongkorn feel desperate”, and “worshipping King Chulalongkorn is a psychological thing”. This made me think that he was not an active King Chulalongkorn worshipper himself. To my surprise, however, Sombun, an architect and contractor, turned out to be a strong believer in the powers of King Chulalongkorn. This was not always the case, though.

In January 1991 a vendor of King Chulalongkorn statuettes came to Sombun’s office. At first Sombun had no intention of buying a statuette. But when the vendor said: “Just buy one. For you, I will make the price very low,” Sombun decided to purchase a plaster replica of the equestrian statue. Later he asked his friends where would be the right place to put the statuette, how to make an altar and what offerings to make. Two weeks later he sold a parcel of land he had been trying to sell for a very long time. Although this was during a time when Thailand was experiencing a real estate boom, he had been previously unable to find a buyer. Sombun: “Thus without working I earned 100,000 baht. I bought immediately a bottle of Hennessy to present it as an offer to the king.” In a later conversation it was revealed that Sombun and his wife had begun business as architects and contractors one year earlier and were doing very badly at the time Sombun bought the statuette. Sombun: “it was after I started to worship King Chulalongkorn that we always had enough orders.” When asked about his earlier remark that “King Chulalongkorn is for the desperate”, Sombun said that he does not consider himself to be desperate, although he did not feel well at the time he bought the statuette.
**Num’s New Job**

Num, a woman in her early thirties, works as an official at the Land and Water Management Department at Mae Rim, a small town in the province of Chiang Mai. Num owns a 24-carat golden medallion (*lokket*) with the image of King Chulalongkorn. She was eager to tell me how she became the owner.

After finishing her studies in water management, Num started to work for a private company. Her parents regretted this, as they had hoped she would become a government official. In order to do this in Thailand, one has to take an examination. The examination results are valid for only two years and it is during that period that a job in government service must be located. Otherwise, the examination must be taken and passed again. Encouraged by her parents, Num took the examination, but she could not find a government job and had to stay with her company. Approximately two months before the exam’s expiration date, she had a disagreement at work. She now wanted to leave more than ever and began to look urgently for a job as a government official, but again without success. Seeking help with this problem, her father, without her knowledge, consulted a spirit medium (*khon song chao*). Without ever having met Num, the spirit medium was able to tell her father many things about her which were true, particularly that she was a woman with many “male characteristics”. Num had never thought about visiting a spirit medium, but after hearing this she felt that she could trust the medium and joined her father for another visit. The medium told her that in her last life she had been a soldier of King Chulalongkorn. As a soldier she had killed many people and the accumulated sin (*bap*) had resulted in her rebirth as a woman. But much of the soldier of the former life had remained in her; in her heart she was a *nakleng* (macho). The medium told her that if she wanted a job as a government official she must pray to King Chulalongkorn as had she been his soldier.\(^{28}\)

After the session Num turned to the king on a daily basis. She prayed: “If I have really been your soldier, then please help me now.” With only one week remaining until her examination expired, she received a message that there was a position for her at the Land and Water Management Department.

Because the king had fulfilled her wish, she felt she wanted to have something special of him. Portraits and statuettes of King Chulalongkorn were plentiful, but these all seemed very ordinary to her, so she did not
buy one. In her new position, Num made a friend who had a beautiful golden King Chulalongkorn medallion. When with her new friend, Num dared never to tell her how much she admired the medallion. Num found the medallion special for two reasons: it was made in a famous temple and the king was not, as on most medallions, portrayed in profile, but full face.

One day Num noticed her friend was wearing a different King Chulalongkorn medallion and she asked about this change. The friend said that it was very clear to her that it was Num who should be wearing the golden medallion. When she offered to sell it to her, Num could not believe her ears. But a question remained: how much would her friend ask for the medallion? Num dared not ask the price, as she feared it would be at least 7,000 baht — an amount she could not afford. She asked the king to see that the price would not be beyond her reach and to her great surprise her friend asked only 1,000 baht.

Num owns the desired portrait now, and does not intend to acquire any more. This medallion is all she wants. At home she has no portraits and no altar: she believes (napthue) with her heart. She does cross-stitched, sepia-hued portraits of the king, a small one taking two or three months to complete. She does not keep these portraits herself, but makes them as gifts for friends.

**Renu’s Direct Encounter**

On a Sunday morning many years ago, Renu, then a secretary at the main office of Shell Oil in Bangkok, visited the weekend market at Sanam Luang. It was a windy day. While she walked down the street along Wat Mahatat (a famous temple), a crumpled piece of paper passed by, blown by the wind. It danced just in front of her feet, behind her feet and in front of her feet again. Every time she walked past it, it seemed to pursue her even faster. Finally, she stopped to pick it up and to see what was on the paper. It turned out to be a portrait of King Chulalongkorn, dressed in purple clothes. Although she had never had any specific feelings or ideas one way or the other with regard to the king, Renu decided to keep the portrait. She ironed it, bought a 50 baht frame, and took it to the restaurant owned by her family.

On the very same day the portrait was hung, a robber entered the restaurant. Renu’s brother, a soldier, was standing next to the cashier. The robber pointed his gun at her brother and told the cashier to hand
over all the money. But suddenly, without any apparent reason, the man dropped his gun and ran off. A few streets further down he was caught and arrested by the police.

Renu later heard this story from her brother. While he was being held at gun point, he could see the portrait of King Chulalongkorn. He prayed to the king: "If I have to die, please let it happen in war while defending my country, but not this way." The king then raised his hand from the portrait and with an enormous power knocked the gun out of the robber's hand. The cook standing nearby had also seen the king's hand.

This event made it very clear to Renu that it was no coincidence that she had come across that particular piece of paper. The king had come to her through the portrait to save her brother. She had experienced, as she calls it, a direct encounter (prasopkan trong) with the king. Of course, the portrait is no longer housed in a fifty baht frame. Immediately after the incident it was re-framed in a beautiful, gilded wooden frame.

From these narratives it becomes clear how each of the three recurring themes contributes to the narrative truth in its own way. The initial lack of interest in King Chulalongkorn (the first theme) makes the associated events more notable, highlighting that the involvement with King Chulalongkorn is not a fancy. Simultaneously, the initiative for the relationship is placed as coming from the king, implying that the resulting relationship is genuinely mutual. A crisis situation (the second theme) makes the king's intervention plausible and helps to demonstrate the beneficent effect of his involvement. The particular King Chulalongkorn portraits figuring in the stories (the third theme) not only serve to illustrate and confirm the particular relationships between the narrators and the king, but also provide tangible evidence of each story's truth, hence providing an indispensable element in the narrative. The stories also show how mass-produced portraits of the king can become objects with great personal value, a process that will be examined in detail in the next section of this chapter. At the same time we see how the King Chulalongkorn myth provides a "reservoir of meanings" (Connerton 1989: 56) from which one may draw to (re)interpret and (re)tell one's personal history in terms of a generally accepted frame. The personal stories "borrow" narrative truth from the general myth. For instance, both Num and Renu's brother justly escape misery and danger, because they had placed their lives in the context of defending Thailand's independence.
as a soldier, whether now or in the past. Sombun’s story shows us how entry into the world of Thainess — in his case mainly by conducting appropriately — is rewarded instantly. Nui’s story reworks King Chulalongkorn’s international activities in trading, thereby giving his own business a place in the moral order of Thainess. As a second track, his story follows that of the movie star Bin Banlerut, whose experiences have become part of the general body of King Chulalongkorn stories. Finally, on the level of understanding the social imagination, such individual elaborations can be seen as added details, enhancing the narrative truth of the King Chulalongkorn myth. Such stories are therefore vital elements in the spread of the cult.

The Aura of Portraits

What kind of appeal do King Chulalongkorn portraits have that such images become part of the emotional episodes of individuals’ lives? What is the meaning of King Chulalongkorn images for these people? Before entering into details of the specific meanings King Chulalongkorn portraits may carry, I will first make a more general digression on the particular qualities of portraits.

The relationship that a worshipper of King Chulalongkorn may experience through a portrait of the king only exists for that individual. But what in the portrait makes such a relation possible? To grasp why the King Chulalongkorn cult is, to a large extent, a cult of portraits, it is necessary to pay attention to the complex relationships between the person portrayed, the portrait and its beholder. Here it is helpful to elaborate on Benjamin’s concept of “aura”, as introduced in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1977 [1936]).

According to Benjamin, the “work of art” has its fundamentals in rituals as a magical instrument. In the ritual setting it is the “cult value” that gives such objects their aura. Cult objects are the immediate manifestation of the powers they represent and are themselves unapproachable; through the object, powers that can essentially never be met directly are nevertheless immediately there.

The essentially far-away is the inaccessible. Indeed, inaccessibility is a principal quality of the cult image. According to its nature it remains “far away, how near it may be”. The nearness one may derive from its material substantiality takes nothing away from the far away, which it
Worshipping the Great Moderniser

Although Benjamin’s main concern is the decline of this aura of art in modern mass culture, he makes a valuable remark on the nature of photographic portraiture, which in fact is valid for portraits in general, including mass reproductions. In the midst of empty images, Benjamin claims, portraits retain a degree of aura because they refer to beloved persons deceased or far away (Benjamin 1977: 21). Similar to the function of a cult object, a portrait makes present the person depicted.

In the cult of the remembrance of the beloved far away or deceased the cult value of the image has its last refuge” (ibid.: 21; translation IS).

Thus, according to Benjamin, portraits can have a personal cult value in a “cult of remembrance”. Hence, this cult value exists only for those who know and are emotionally involved with the person portrayed, giving the portrait an aura only for them. The question then arises how the personal cult value of mass-produced portraits — only a weak trace of the cult value of the authentic cult object — in King Chulalongkorn portraits could become powerful enough to make them true cult objects again. For an insight into the cult value of King Chulalongkorn portraits, and the aura this cult value lends to any of his portraits, we have to return to the investigation made in Chapter I. The narrated portraits reveal how Thai people know their king and the kind of emotions involved. Pictorial portraits help people to reconfirm and personalise such knowledge and emotions.

I will visualise the direct link between narrated portraits and pictorial portraits by presenting the cultural biographies of a number of the king’s pictorial portraits — drawing inspiration from Kopytoff’s idea of “the cultural biography of things” (1986). As commodification proves to be a significant element in these biographies, I will also address the apparent paradox that King Chulalongkorn portraits are simultaneously mass products and sacred objects.

Understanding Portraits

A point of departure from Kopytoff’s analysis is the idea that exchange is a universal human feature. In all societies things are exchangeable for something else with a comparable value. As exchangeables, they are
commodities. There are, he adds, no perfect commodities, however. Things that at one moment may appear as exchangeable, may at another moment or in another situation become regarded as unique and unexchangeable. In every culture certain things maintain or acquire uniqueness. Kopytoff calls this process “singularisation”, the opposite of the homogenising tendency of commodification. Reversely, singularised commodities may enter a process of re-commodification (1986: 68–75). In Kopytoff’s “cultural biographies of things” these processes play a central role.

With regard to King Chulalongkorn portraits, it is also possible to make such biographies, in which they appear alternately as commodities or as singularised things with unique qualities. When discussing portraits as things, however, it is important to note that a portrait is distinguishable from other things in one aspect: it always refers to the person depicted. Therefore the nature of portraits as such first needs to be clarified, as well as what is meant by the “cultural biography of a portrait”.

When we look at a portrait we see a thing: it is material and tangible. But we also see the image of the person portrayed. When we are looking at several portraits of one person, we see several separate things but also the image of the same, single person. All these portraits share their relationship with this single “original”: the person depicted. This unity of reference transcends the separate material manifestations.

A similar, even stronger unity exists between a single portrait and its copies: whether we look at the original or its copy, we see exactly the same image of the person depicted in a certain setting at a certain time. For this reason, I suggest not to limit the cultural biography of a particular portrait to this portrait as a single object — that is, the portrait as it is embodied in one of its particular, concrete material carriers — but to allow it to be applied to the portrait in its multiplicity. Only then will the biography be truly able to capture how the original and its replicas have become cult objects. For encompassing cultural biographies of King Chulalongkorn portraits this implies that they should start with the creation of a portrait during the life of the king, followed by a process of commodification through (mass) reproduction of copies of that portrait, and ending with the singularisation of these copies by their individual owners. The narrated dimension of such cultural biographies comes in immediately. Although the creation of a portrait is an undeniable historical fact (“the portrait was made”), this should be distinguished from what people generally know about a portrait’s creation, i.e. from the narrative. The case of the equestrian statue is illustrative in this aspect:
only when one knows the narrative of its creation — which in its turn is embedded in the wider myth of King Chulalongkorn as the Great Beloved King of Siam — is it possible to grasp the emotional significance of a particular portrait.

I will give a cultural biography of three particular portraits of King Chulalongkorn: the “second coronation portrait” (Figure 8), the “Le Petit Journal portrait” (Figure 6), and the portrait of “the king cooking a meal” (Figure 7). These biographies will illustrate the vicissitudes of the portraits in the context of the narratives about the king.

The Second Coronation Portrait

On 16 November 1873, King Chulalongkorn’s second coronation took place, marking the end of the regency period (1868–73). During the ceremony, several photographs of the king were taken. One photograph, depicting the king seated on the throne in royal attire, particularly enjoys a high popularity at present. It is for sale, often coloured, at the kind of portrait shops described earlier and can be found in the many photo books on the king. Additionally, the photograph might be included in the mass-produced religious booklets for the laity that contain a compilation of religious images with their appropriate prayers (for example, holy monks, goddesses, and particular Buddha statues). In short, this picture of the king is generally known and, as is the case with all the king’s portraits, held in high esteem. It is the image of the beloved king at a very young age. But there is also another connotation to it: that of the phra sayam thewathirat, the divinity (deva, thep, thewada) protecting Thailand and its inhabitants.

During his reign King Mongkut had a small (20 cm high) golden image cast of the phra sayam thewathirat. The king had the statuette cast at a time that Siam was experiencing great difficulties, namely increasing pressures from the West and the threat of colonisation. The image is one of the most sacred statuettes of the kingdom. The phra sayam thewathirat is dressed in royal attire and carries a short sword. Thus, although the phra sayam thewathirat is standing and King Chulalongkorn is seated, the coronation portrait shares many significant details with the image of the deity. In booklets containing a variety of religious images, a photo of the phra sayam thewathirat statue is rarely absent. Additionally, pictures (in profile or en face) of the image are available at most portrait shops. The phra sayam thewathirat belongs to the steady
“repertoire” of well-known sacred images, and a picture of it is present at many altars.

In popular imagination, a fusion is taking place between the figure of King Chulalongkorn and the *phra sayam thewathirat*. According to this line of thought the king became the *phra sayam thewathirat* following his death. The idea that deceased kings still protect the kingdom is an ancient notion, as is the idea of a protective deity. King Uthong (r. 1351–69), the founder of Ayutthaya, was worshipped by the later Ayutthaya kings as the forefather and guardian spirit of the kingdom (Charnvit 1976: 53). King Uthong, in his turn, worshipped the legendary Buddhist king Phraya Kraek as a forefather and guardian spirit. Later kings paid homage to both King Uthong and Phraya Kraek before an image representing the respective kings (ibid.: 53, 71).

The fusion between a deceased king and the *phra sayam thewathirat* is not an exclusively recent phenomenon. After his father died, King Chulalongkorn had an image cast, similar to the *phra sayam thewathirat* in size, costume and pose. There was only one important difference: the face of the new image resembled that of King Mongkut. Thus the divinity and King Mongkut were represented by one and the same statue, thereby expressing a fusion between worship of the divine and ancestor worship (Apinan 1992bI: 352).

The fusion of the *phra sayam thewathirat* and King Chulalongkorn is not limited to the coronation portrait but stems from rather general and diffuse ideas about the ever-lasting protective powers of the king. It is precisely the physical resemblance of the two images, however, that may serve as a condensation point where the whole imagination takes shape. The following case shows us the course of such a process, and demonstrates how such imaginations help individuals to singularise certain images and objects.

**The Abbot’s Golden Vision**

One night, in 1992, the abbot of the Wat Doi Chang temple had a magnificent vision: he saw King Chulalongkorn in golden attire, with a golden crown, seated on a golden throne. A voice — that of the king himself — told the abbot that he had to create a statue identical to the scene in the vision. The abbot started to look in photo books on the life of King Chulalongkorn “to see what he had seen”. It was eventually
determined that the vision was of the king during his “second coronation”, as depicted on the photograph.

The temple was poor and thus had to collect donations from visitors in order to finance the creation of the statue. Wat Doi Chang was a very quiet temple at the outskirts of Chiang Mai. It served primarily as a local temple for the nearby villages, rather than attracting more well-to-do people from the city.

But King Chulalongkorn remained with the abbot even after the vision. It was through him that the king could still help his subjects in this world. In this “relationship”, the abbot functions as the servant of the king. The king told the abbot to start a charity project: a relief centre and school for orphan boys from hill tribe villages. These boys’ hardship is twofold: they are both orphans and “backward hill tribe people”. The concern the king’s spirit has for the boys’ well-being well fits the image of the king extending compassion to all his subjects, regardless of their background or ethnic identity.

While the combination of both projects (the intended statue and the orphanage) made people come to the temple, people were also attracted when it became known that King Chulalongkorn often spoke through the abbot. Within a year the temple had raised sufficient funds to have the statue made. During the period of research, five to six years after the abbot had had the vision, worshippers from all over the country, particularly Bangkok, came to Wat Doi Chang regularly to consult the abbot and support the temple and orphanage with large donations in cash or in kind.

The abbot wanted the statue to be very special and he has certainly succeeded in his objective. He had a large (approximately life-size) gilded statue made, which is seated on a red-gold painted throne more than one meter above the floor. Consequently, the king towers above anything else in his vicinity, adding to the already impressive appearance of the statue (see Figure 9). But the secret to the uniqueness of the statue is revealed at the back. There the craftsman has left a piece undressed, leaving proof of the statue’s unique qualities. Namely, the statue is made out of a solid trunk of teak. This “fact” demonstrates the unequalled craftsmanship of Northern Thai woodcarving. Contrary to what one would certainly think at first sight, this is not a cast image. Besides its beauty, its impressive appearance and its exact resemblance to the original picture, it was of utmost importance to the abbot that such a statue had existed nowhere else in Thailand.37
The statue is placed in a *wihan*, usually the temple building with the main Buddha statue(s), which was built especially for the purpose. This does not mean that the *wihan* does not house any other images. On the contrary, a rather large framed photo of the *phra sayam thewathirat* stands on a ledge next to the statue. Though the abbot interprets the king and the divine being to be the same, he does not give much further substantiation to this view, apart from the notion that the *phra sayam thewathirat/king Chulalongkorn will always protect the Thai nation* (*pokkhrong banmuang*). This theme, the protection of the Thai Nation, or more precisely, the maintenance of its independence, is the most important to the abbot.

His pursuit of royal protection, embedded in nationalism, induced the abbot to have two more kingly statues made: a more than life-size wooden statue of King Naresuan (r.1590–1605) and a statue of King Taksin (r. 1767–81), now situated to the left and the right of the King Chulalongkorn statue. With their huge size, their swords and their fierce expressions, these are awe-inspiring images. As these statues are not gilded, their craftsmanship and the wood used are in full view. Nevertheless, the statues are not as impressive as the Chulalongkorn image. The abbot has a similar relationship with King Naresuan and King Taksin as he does with King Chulalongkorn: all three kings influence the abbot's doings, and all might speak through the abbot's mouth.

According to the abbot, these three kings are more important than other kings in Thai history because they have all saved the nation's independence: King Naresuan defeated the Burmese invaders in 1593, as did King Taksin in 1767. Both kings were real warriors. King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from colonisation. In the words of the abbot: “His weapon was not the sword. His policy was his weapon (*nayobai pen awut*): the country could remain independent because of the enormous brightness (*chalat mak*) of King Chulalongkorn.” Together these kings have built and saved the Thai nation.

Here the strong nationalist sentiment that goes with the royal images becomes clear. The three kings were chosen for their successful defence of the Thai nation. King Chulalongkorn and the *phra sayam thewathirat*, let alone their fusion, represent the enduring fostering and protective powers the nation can rely on. The abbot's recounts and his doings demonstrate the importance of royal hagiography in giving meaning and legitimacy to the genesis of the Thai nation, and the vitality of the meaning of Thainess as “independence”. This does not sufficiently
explain, however, why people like the abbot need such statues or portraits and identify so strongly with this ideological construct of Thainess. In the following section we will see how possessing and displaying portraits gives evidence of the owners’ involvement with the king and the conceptual universe of Thainess he represents.

**Tied through History**

Popular interpretations of rebirth and karma enable many dedicated worshippers to establish a personal relationship with their kings. It is believed that certain bonds between people may continue in their future existences. Many of the people who feel that they have a personal relationship with the king told me that these contacts result from a relation with the king during a former life. Often one believes to have been related to the king as one of his soldiers, daughters, wives or (rarely) sisters. I have never met anyone who related him — or herself to King Chulalongkorn as one of his brothers or sons. The latter would imply a more explicit claim of royal lineage, and therefore easily come close to a form of lese majesty, particularly where it would concern one of the more famous princes. Claiming to be the reincarnation of one of the king’s wives or forgotten half-sisters (born from a lesser wife of King Mongkut), is much less problematic, however. To explain the abbot’s involvement with the spirit of the king, quite a few people told me that the abbot had been a monk at a temple frequented by the king. Such a direct link with the king enables an individual to give his personal history a place within the history of the nation. At the same time, one knows oneself to be someone special, cared for or guided by no one less than a king. A good example of how such knowledge can offer consolation or moral support is the case of Num (see above), who was told that she had been a soldier of King Chulalongkorn in a past existence, and therefore could rely on the king’s support now.

The cultural biography of the second coronation portrait shows that the abbot singularised this very popular mass-produced portrait of the king by following two paths. The first way to singularise the portrait was the vision. The creation of the statue was not just an idea of the abbot, but resulted from a special connection between the abbot and the king. The king’s appearance in the vision is evidence of that relationship, and the statue is the material confirmation of both the vision and the relationship. Secondly, the abbot wanted his replica to be a unique statue.
He attributed great importance to exact resemblance with the original picture, and by the addition of some unique qualities the image was upgraded to an authentic “work of art” (though not authentic in the sense of a contemporary portrait). The singularisation of the second coronation portrait in these two ways contributed substantially to the abbot’s policy of attracting a wider and wealthier public to his temple through the incorporation of the King Chulalongkorn cult into his spiritual services. The abbot himself has changed from being just an average abbot of a quiet village temple to a widely respected leader of a cult centre.

Within the whole that constitutes Wat Doi Chang as a cult centre, and the abbot as its leader, there is an endless variety of individual interpretations, imaginations, and ways of involvement, most of which will have escaped my attention. In the section below, I will elaborate on one particular dimension of the abbot’s performance: the features of the abbot’s face, the import of which I only learned to see through the eyes of one of his followers.

A Living Portrait

Jill was a Thai woman in her late thirties. She lived not far from my house and I had been introduced to her some weeks before by my housekeeper. I liked to visit Jill every now and then, partly because she was a bit unusual. She made a living through a small-scale real estate business, lived on her own, and often had Western lovers (hence her Western nickname). Knowing my interest in King Chulalongkorn, she asked one day if I had ever been to Wat Doi Chang. On my confirmation she said: “He looks really similar, and like a real womaniser (chao chu), don’t you think so?” I had no idea about whom she was talking. “The abbot’ said Jill. “The abbot, a womaniser?” Upon seeing my amazement, Jill explained: “Yes, just like King Chulalongkorn. The abbot is exactly the king. And look at his eyes. Womanisers always have those wrinkles around their eyes. He is very attractive.”

The next day I went to the temple to see for myself. Did the abbot really look like the king? When I arrived at the temple, the abbot was in the Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan, as usual receiving people who had come to consult him and present offerings to the temple. I stayed for almost two hours continuously observing the abbot, but I was not yet convinced. Then, at a certain moment, the abbot turned his head to the
left, giving the same pose as that of the king in a photograph placed behind him. This photograph was taken during one of the king’s visits to Europe. The king is dressed in a Western suit and hat, looking more like an Italian movie star than like a Thai king, and certainly nothing reminding one of a Buddhist abbot (see Figure 5). But at the very moment I saw the resemblance, I realised that the photograph could not have been placed behind the abbot by coincidence. Whether the abbot was in the wihan or in the sala, the photograph was always placed behind him. To put this in the proper context, the temple owned an enormous number of King Chulalongkorn portraits, as people continuously presented portraits and statuettes to the abbot. One day the abbot even complained to me that he did not know where to keep all these images. As the Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan was already quite full — the huge portraits in wood almost completely occupying the ledge — most other images were displayed in the sala, except for those around the abbot’s seat.

Another occasion in which the abbot’s physical resemblance to this particular portrait — and the abbot’s awareness of the fact — was reconfirmed was the 1997 kathin ceremony. After the ceremony many people consulted the abbot privately, sometimes offering religious objects, including King Chulalongkorn portraits. The abbot showed no particular interest in any of these objects. But at a certain moment a woman presented him a small cross-stitched copy of the Italian portrait. The abbot, with clear appreciation, placed the portrait next to the other one immediately; it has remained there ever since.

According to the abbot, he is able to help people because it is actually King Chulalongkorn who gives the advice. People hear the abbot speaking, but know that in fact they are listening to the king. However, in terms of Thai popular religiosity, this does not imply that the abbot is a spirit medium. Regardless of the fact that Sangha law forbids monks to act as a spirit medium, an inherent problem would be that monks can only wear robes; in contrast, an important aspect of Thai spirit medium possession is the changing of dress. The audiences identify the possessing spirit by the way the medium is dressed during the ceremony. If a medium is not dressed in accordance with the expected attire of the particular spirit, the medium is either not possessed, or possessed by a different spirit. It is partly the same process that makes a monk a monk. The primary differentiating feature between a monk and a layman is the robe. Only in a robe, a man is a monk. By implication, a monk can never act as a spirit medium, as that would imply he has to literally disrobe.
The abbot’s physical resemblance with the king, supported by the Italian portrait, helped to circumvent the limitations that being a monk imposes on representation of the spirit world. Because of his particular features, the abbot himself, as it were, had become a living portrait of the king. The king’s presence through this particular mimesis comes close to that in a spirit medium session, which will be a subject of Chapter III. The effect is similar as the procedure to identify abbot and king follows essentially the same visual, aesthetic path as that in a spirit medium session. Within the bounds given, the abbot stretched the possibilities of mimicking to the extreme: his mimicking of the king did not require any extra action, which made his performance even the stronger. As it were, the king was always present because there was no longer any distinction between him and the abbot.

**Sacralised Commodities**

The abbot’s way of singularising a portrait by having a copy made with unique material qualities is common practice in Thailand. People may invest considerable amounts in hand-crafted portraits of Kings. As almost every portrait of King Chulalongkorn is widely known and available, to have one made in an unusual manner is the obvious way to make a unique version. In the words of Tui, a chiselwork artist at the Night Bazaar in Chiang Mai who specialises in chiselwork portraits of kings: “Everybody will immediately understand that it is very difficult to make such a portrait. One will also see immediately that one is looking at a portrait of a rare kind. This is because only a few craftsmen are sufficiently gifted to make these portraits. That is why people like to possess such a portrait, even if they have to pay a lot of money for it.”

The other portraits in the wihan at Wat Doi Chang are illustrative of this line of thought. The ledge with the photograph of the *phra sayam thewathirat* image, mentioned before, is lined with fifteen huge portraits of King Chulalongkorn, each carved out of a single block of wood. All portraits copy well-known photographs or paintings of the king. Their size and craftsmanship are the special qualities that distinguish them from the mainstream. The objects are gifts (*thawai*) from benefactors of the temple. On most portraits the donor has had his or her name clearly carved under the image. By offering such an exceptional — and expensive — portrait, the donor also distinguishes him- or herself from the mainstream. Amidst the numerous typical copies surrounding them,
these works of art reflect the permanent Thai competition in obtaining and expressing status.

For those who do not have the financial means to singularise a portrait by having a craft work made, more moderate ways of turning something common into something special remain. For instance, a portrait may be sacralised (*pluk sek*), whether privately by the abbot or in a larger *phutthaphisek* ceremony, as described above. The fact that most King Chulalongkorn objects are mass-produced commodities on the consumer market takes nothing away from their beneficial power. The temple shop of Wat Doi Chang, for instance, sells, among other things, small gold-painted plaster copies of the temple’s King Chulalongkorn statue. The profit is used for the embellishment of the temple and the maintenance of the orphan centre. People who decide to buy the statuette can have it sacralised by the abbot immediately. This implies that those followers who come especially to Wat Doi Chang because of the abbot’s connection with King Chulalongkorn, may, in fact, have their statuette sacralised by the powers of the king himself. The sacralisation of objects at Wat Doi Chang is not limited to replicas of the statue or King Chulalongkorn images: the abbot will sacralise potent objects of any nature wherever they come from.

In this aspect, King Chulalongkorn portraits do not essentially differ from the other easily obtainable potent objects regularly sacralised by monks. These include amulets depicting, among other things, the Buddha, holy monks, deities, magical drawings (*takrut*), etc. Such objects are considered to contain magical power (*saksit*), and are therefore generally referred to as *sing saksit* (potent objects). A King Chulalongkorn object is as much a *sing saksit* as any other potent object. While a *takrut* is said to derive its power from its magical signs, it is the king’s *barami* that is believed to give a King Chulalongkorn object its power. There is, however, a modern tinge to King Chulalongkorn objects, absent in more traditional potent objects. Even stronger, somebody known to wear a *takrut* might be regarded as superstitious in certain groups, while wearing a King Chulalongkorn medallion will more likely be associated with being modern, civilised, and a good Buddhist. These connotations might inspire certain groups or individuals to openly acquaint themselves with King Chulalongkorn, regardless of whether or not their interest in the king includes practises or magical objects generally associated with “superstition”. The abbot of Wat Doi Chang — and many of his clients — fit this latter category of people. As will be described in more detail in
Chapter III, the religious practices of the abbot consist of an amalgam of traditions and beliefs. The questions of how and why people openly demonstrate their belief in King Chulalongkorn by means of the king’s image will also be considered more closely in this same chapter. Here, I will return to the main objective of the present chapter: to demonstrate the close link between narrated portraits and pictorial portraits. The cultural biography of the next portrait specifically addresses the significance of sentiments around Thainess in the King Chulalongkorn cult.

The Le Petit Journal Portrait

The abundance of copies of one particular portrait, the *Le Petit Journal* portrait (Figure 6), can be considered as a material reflection of the present interest in the king’s European voyages. During his journeys, the European press paid a great deal of attention, particularly in 1897 when the king visited Europe, becoming the first Siamese king to do so. On 19 September 1897, during the king’s visit to France, the newspaper *Le Petit Journal* placed a full-page coloured wood engraving of King Chulalongkorn on the front page of its illustrated supplement. Needless to say, an original copy of this supplement is now worth a fortune in Thailand. An owner of a portrait shop estimates its present value to be about US$1,800. A Thai friend told me that his mother’s family possesses such a front page. Years ago they had the lucky opportunity to buy it for only five-hundred baht (US$15). Circulating the engraving among his mother and her sisters solves the problem of how to share the unique object. This is a clear example of the cultural biography of a portrait as a thing: a page of a newspaper, clearly a commodity at the time of production, with virtually no value shortly after publication, re-enters a particular commodity market at the other side of the world almost one century later. Subsequently, it becomes singularised, again de-commodified, by a group of sisters who attribute so much sacral power to it that it has to be shared. Although this biography is already quite informative in the sense that it reveals the importance Thai people attach to King Chulalongkorn portraits, even those from a newspaper, a wider cultural biography of the picture includes additional layers.

The *Le Petit Journal* portrait was modelled after a photograph likely taken by Robert Lenz, a photographer who started a studio in Bangkok around 1890 and who took many pictures of the king and other members of the royal family. For the potential owners of a *Le Petit Journal* portrait
it is irrelevant (and hardly known) that the engraving was modelled after this photograph: for them, this front page has its own authenticity. A feature in *The Bangkok Post* of 23 October 1999, on “King Chulalongkorn memorabilia” and the “flood of fakes”, is revealing in regard to the importance attributed to authenticity. The article recounts how the high price of “genuine antique” *Le Petit Journal* issues has led swindlers to colour-photocopy “an authentic one” before it is “placed in a frame to prevent prospective buyers from touching it, and sold as the real thing for a thousand-odd baht”. Of course, such engravings were mass products at the time, even more so than photographs. However, the mass-produced origin of the original *Le Petit Journal* issues does not detract from its value. The status of authenticity is attributed to the front pages for two reasons: first, their age and rarity as antiques, and second, the fact that they were issued when the king was actually in France.

The latter aspect gives the portrait a special place in the field of the nationalist sentiments that are part of the King Chulalongkorn cult. The gloriousness the visit symbolises gives the *Le Petit Journal* front page its special aura. More than many other portraits, this portrait is a direct material testimony of the king’s achievements during his important and difficult mission, as recounted in the narrated portrait of “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony”. The depiction of their king on the full front page of a French newspaper still fills many people with pride: it is direct proof of the indelible impression the king had made on his hosts (and enemies), an impression that would eventually lead to the saving of the nation from colonisation. This specific biography shows how, far more than its potential to bring Thai beholders closer to their beloved king, the portrait derives its aura particularly from its potential to evoke emotions related to the glorious independence of Thailand.45

Today the 1897 portrait is again a mass product, no longer a wood engraving, however, but an offset print or colour copy. One can find, for instance, either replicas similar in size and colour to an original, miniature replicas as devotional pictures (to be carried on person), and reprints in books, calendars, or as New Year’s greeting cards. The portrait has even inspired a producer of such cards to compose a series of images that simultaneously constitute a composition of narratives. Depicted is another *Le Petit Journal* front page, this time a view from the river of the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The view is partly hidden behind the hand-written page of a diary or letter, representing the writing the king sent home during his trip. Overlaying these two images, however, and
occupying a large portion of the card, is a photograph (or engraving) of King Chulalongkorn. The portrait is different from the 1897 portrait, but shows so many similarities (the same clothing, background and age) with the Robert Lenz photo, that the photograph most likely must have been taken during the same session. In contrast with the 1897 portrait, the king is photographed in profile. Thus, because of the composition of the images, it is as if the king is directing his gaze to Bangkok and the Grand Palace. The composition tells that wherever the king is, his heart is at home. In order to make the message come across even better, the designer has added a picture of the back of a post card sent by the king from Europe, as well as a little photograph of the king with his subjects in a ceremonial setting at home. The greeting card is completed with a drawing of a red rose, “the king’s favourite flower”. Issuing this composition as a greeting card addresses social memory directly, clearly presupposing that the different narratives to which the composition refers are widely known.

**High Commodities**

King Chulalongkorn New Year’s greeting cards are a good example of how the king’s portraits have become mass-produced commodities through the cult. They also symbolise the mutual reinforcement of the cult and the mass production of images. Every year, early November marks the new season of New Year’s greeting cards. Roughly, these cards can be divided into two categories: “ordinary” New Year’s greeting cards, that is, cards with secular illustrations such as cartoons or flowers, and cards depicting venerated monks, kings, and other members of the royal family. Of these “religious” or “spiritual” season’s greeting cards, roughly 50 per cent are cards with portraits of King Chulalongkorn. Why do people send these cards and to whom?

At a department store I meet Kai, a hotel employee in his early twenties, selecting a huge King Chulalongkorn card from the tray of season’s greeting cards. He will send it to his former teacher as a sign of respect, as he does every year. Except for a few ordinary cards to far-away friends, he does not send any other New Year’s greeting card.

At the post office I meet Mr Suk, a retired lecturer from Chulalongkorn University, about to send four King Chulalongkorn
cards to some of his former colleagues and university friends. He sends them King Chulalongkorn cards every year, not only because they all have worked at Chulalongkorn University, but also because it is respectful to do so. He does not send King Chulalongkorn cards to anybody else.

Mr Charoen, a teacher at a vocational college in Chiang Mai, has a framed King Chulalongkorn card on his desk, sent to him “by somebody who respects him”. Since the card was a portrait of King Chulalongkorn, he has decided to have it framed. Mr. Charoen, in his turn, also sends King Chulalongkorn cards: to his parents and to other people he respects or who are in a higher position (phu yai). Others will receive common greeting cards from him.

Another example are Sombun (see above) and his wife, both architects. Since 1991 they have sent King Chulalongkorn New Year’s greeting cards to their friends, relatives and business relations. Each year they have selected a different portrait of the king. Their names and that of their company are listed on the inside next to the usual Thai and English Christmas and New Year’s wishes. Sombun told me in 1997 that the first year they had selected “the portrait of the king printed in a journal when he was in France”. According to Sombun, to send as well as to receive King Chulalongkorn cards is auspicious, which is why it is so important for him to send these cards. Contrary to this consideration — the auspicious aspect — Sombun sent me a quite common New Year’s greeting card in Western design in 1998. He had already warned me in advance: due to the economic crisis, they could not afford to send the more expensive King Chulalongkorn cards.47

To send a King Chulalongkorn card is thus an accepted yearly expression of respect towards teachers, bosses or parents. It is a commodity that remains restricted to the “higher” facets of social life, and is therefore no common commodity. King Chulalongkorn cards are also perfectly fit to send to any customer, as it is always considered respectful. To send these cards is an auspicious deed, and may contribute to one’s own well-being. For the same purposes, a wide range of gift articles bearing the king’s portrait is available. Good examples are wedding mementoes including key rings, pillboxes, miniature portraits, and notebooks. Auspicious
occasions require auspicious gifts. A small token becomes nevertheless something “high” when bearing the king's portrait. The next example will focus on the portrait of “the king cooking a meal” to illustrate how particular King Chulalongkorn portraits are appropriate as gifts for certain auspicious occasions. Additionally, the case will examine how commercial, religious, and ideological aspects become blended into “the cult of King Chulalongkorn”.

The Portrait of “The King Cooking a Meal”

Some King Chulalongkorn portraits have become strongly associated with particular professions. The popularity of “The Picture” (King Chulalongkorn and the Tsar, see Chapter I) among diplomats has already been mentioned. In a similar vein one will frequently see the portrait of “the king in Cambridge gown” in offices of university lecturers. The portrait of “the king in naval uniform” is likewise seen in the offices of navy officers or with people whose work is in one way or another related to ships. The ultimate example of a connection made between profession and one specific King Chulalongkorn portrait is probably the picture of “the king cooking a meal”. This photograph was taken by one of the royal consorts (Chao Chom Eb) at the veranda of Ruan Thon Palace in Bangkok around 1904–1905 (see Figure 7). She portrayed King Chulalongkorn stirring in a wok; hence, this portrait will be found particularly in restaurants. Restaurant owner Nui, for example (see above), bought quite a large copy of the picture for his restaurant. According to Nui, the power of the portrait is not only to attract customers, but also to make them feel at ease in the restaurant. Nui does not feel, however, that the latter power is limited to this particular portrait. “In fact”, he says, “all portraits of King Chulalongkorn have this capacity of making people feel at ease because the king is attractive and charming (sane).”

The portrait finds its way to restaurants not only because of the owners’ initiatives, but because friends, relatives and business relations consider the portrait particularly apt as a gift to a restaurant owner. Toi, the owner of a small travel agency, told me her following experience:

I bought the portrait [of the king cooking a meal] to give it to my friend at the opening of her restaurant. I thought that would be a much better present than flowers, for instance. Later that day, I went to the first floor of the restaurant and there I saw another seven copies of the same portrait, all presents for the opening. Altogether, my friend got eleven of these portraits that day.
Toi asked her friend what she was going to do with the portraits and whether she was going to sell some of them. “But no. She was very happy with the portraits and wanted to keep them all. The restaurant walls are fully covered with this picture now and she has also taken a few home.”

The portrait of “the king cooking a meal” is also found as an illustration in nostalgic books on Thai food. *Thai Kitchen*, published by the Office of the National Culture Commission with the objective “to give a general picture of traditional Thai kitchen, along with the cultural context of things related to Thai cooking and Thai eating habit”, is illustrated with photographs of authentic kitchen utensils and two copies of “the king cooking a meal” portrait (colouring added). The portrait forms the entry to the book and illustrates the “Frying pan and wide spatula” chapter.

This photograph is also featured on the cover of a cookbook of King Chulalongkorn’s favourite dishes (*Menu Prot Sadet Pho* (1997), another publication of Siam Recorder, see Chapter I), and is printed inside the book twice. The book is a mixture of Thai and European recipes (*menu*), as well as quotes on food largely taken from the *Klai Ban* and *Sadet Praphat Ton* diaries, and portraits. One of the first pages shows a picture of the king and his company having a *piknik* next to another picture of the king at lunch in Europe. The introduction describes the king as a connoisseur (*nak chim*), an apt observer (*nak sangkhett*), and finally, as a cook (*pho khrua*) who — as the recipes show — appreciated authentic Thai food (*ahan thai thae thae khong sayam prathet rao ni eng*), which he became acquainted with on his *sadet praphat ton* excursions. Recipes for apple salad (*yam luk aeppen*), sandwiches (*saenwit*), spicy macaroni (*makkaroni phrikphon*) and a stuffed omelette (*ommilet yat sai*) demonstrate how the king was influenced by European food, and how such food was adapted to the Thai taste. Here, the cookbook fits, and further elaborates on, the narrative of the king as a traveller and a selective and adaptive moderniser who knew how to value genuine Thai culture.

**The King’s Portrait as a Marketing Instrument**

How well the status of a commodity and an object of veneration go together becomes even clearer when considering business gifts. A big liquor shop in Chiang Mai displays a New Year’s gift from Hennessy Cognac. It is a small statuette of the king and features the brand name.
For worshippers of King Chulalongkorn, there is a clear connection between Hennessy and the king: just as everyone “knows” that the rose was the king’s favourite flower, everyone “knows” that he — as a civilised monarch — appreciated a glass of good cognac, especially Hennessy Cognac. Consequently, many offerings to the king’s spirit will include a glass of cognac. The importer of Hennessy Cognac was probably well aware that the veneration of King Chulalongkorn might increase sales, and has therefore started to distribute King Chulalongkorn business gifts. In this particular liquor shop, the statuette has received a respectful high place. There it serves as an object expressing veneration for the king as well as an advertisement for Hennessy. For those who believe in the powers of the king, the commercial success of the shop is further proof of these powers.

The involvement of the Siam Commercial Bank (Thanakan Thai Phanit Chamkat) in the King Chulalongkorn cult is also a good example of how commercial enterprises attempt to establish a public linkage with the image of the king through the distribution of King Chulalongkorn business gifts and other objects. The Siam Commercial Bank originated from the first Siamese banking institution, “the Book Club”, which was established in 1904 by Prince Mahit Ratchaharithai (1865–1907) (Brown 192: 93). Prince Mahit was another half-brother of King Chulalongkorn and is known as the “Father of Thai Banking”. In 1996–97 the Siam Commercial Bank celebrated its 90th anniversary. On 23 January 1996, the bank had a large advertising supplement in The Nation, leaving no doubt about its historical linkage with King Chulalongkorn. As the advertisement read: “King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) bestowed a Royal Charter for the incorporation of Bank Siam Karmachon Toon Jamkad or Siam Commercial Bank Ltd in English on 30 January 1906, the official launching date for the first Thai bank.” For the occasion, the bank distributed copper coins freely among its account holders. The coin used an image of King Chulalongkorn and his Royal Emblem, with the name of the bank on the reverse. But there was also an opportunity to buy more exclusive commemorative coins. This series, named “Coins Dedicated to the Successes of King Chulalongkorn”, consisted of ten coins bearing the same images but made of different metals: the front showing the king in profile in a Thai uniform, with the king’s signature, and the reverse showing the king full face in western suit and hat with the Notre Dame and Eiffel Tower in the background. Both portraits are copies of famous photographs of the king (see Figure 5). The addition of the signature
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and the background, however, are inventions of the Siam Commercial Bank. With these additions, the bank evokes the narratives of the king as a moderniser and memories of his triumphant visit to Europe, while simultaneously creating a place for itself within this framework.

Mrs. Sermsee, owner of a small construction material factory, has in her office a sepia-hued portrait of the king in a wooden frame. She did not select the portrait herself, but received it as a New Year’s gift from the Siam Commercial Bank in 1995. Mrs. Sermsee:

What happens is that when I — but such is the case for everyone — receive a King Chulalongkorn portrait, I cannot throw it away, because being a portrait of the king, it is a “high thing” (khong sung). Furthermore it was already framed; I only had to hang it, and so I did. There was no reason for not giving it a place in the office. Had it not been framed, I might have put it in a drawer, but I would never have thrown it away.

The clever move of the Siam Commercial Bank, thus, was to deliver the portrait framed, to enhance its chance of being displayed in the offices of their business relations. Again it serves as an advertisement, as well as an object expressing veneration: the powers of the king and the quality of the bank’s services are both behind the success of the enterprise.

Using King Chulalongkorn portraits in advertising is not restricted to large or prestigious companies, but is instead a widespread phenomenon at all levels of trade and industry. Even on the opening day of a modest noodle shop, the owner may distribute, for instance, King Chulalongkorn key rings to his customers. Of course, such mementoes are auspicious gifts on an auspicious occasion. But, since the receivers cannot but keep the “high object”, the shopkeeper also increases the possibility that his customers will remember his shop in future.

Image and Myth

In this chapter we have encountered the image of King Chulalongkorn, the general face of the King Chulalongkorn cult, both in the form of mass-products and as unique pieces of craftsmanship. Worshippers of the king may singularise any particular portrait to express individual identity and status. In the course of this singularisation, the King Chulalongkorn myth is reworked to fit one’s own life-story, while a person’s experiences are simultaneously reworked to fit the myth. These personal stories, in their turn, reinforce and reconfirm the image of the king as it lives on in the social imagination.
In Benjamin’s concept, a portrait has an aura for those who both know the person portrayed and are emotionally involved with this person. In the context of the King Chulalongkorn cult, it is the myth that provides the contents of “knowing the person portrayed”. Therefore, a worshipper’s emotional involvement actually does not concern the historical king, but rather the king as a father for all Thai and as a symbol of Thainess — interpreted as “independence” and “as being able to modernise selectively and adaptively”. This observation is crucial to understanding the potential of portraits in the King Chulalongkorn cult. Here, portraits appear to connect not only with persons far away in space or time. The immediate presence of King Chulalongkorn through his portraits implies also a simultaneous and equally immediate appeal to ideas and emotions about Thainess, of which the king has become the epitome, and the certainty of a caring agency. The potential to appeal immediately to strong emotions reaching beyond the person portrayed makes portraits such suitable cult objects. And, since any reproduction of a portrait recreates the same image, this particular potential makes mass-produced portraits pre-eminently fit to serve as carriers of a mass cult.

Returning to the main question of this chapter, the above analysis clarifies why so many Thai want a King Chulalongkorn portrait. Owning a portrait of the king provides individual worshippers with direct access to a caring patron and to the world of Thainess. Displaying one’s King Chulalongkorn portraits demonstrates one’s place within this world. Additionally, such a portrait may embody a worshipper’s personal re-working of the King Chulalongkorn narratives. Nevertheless, this personal dimension remains restricted to the private sphere, even when the portrait is on public display. The portraits of the king form the general, public face of the King Chulalongkorn cult, behind which each individual can privately elaborate his personal interpretation of King Chulalongkorn.
Sites which remember of a visit by King Chulalongkorn nowadays have become tourist attractions (photograph courtesy of Sjon Hauser)

‘The Picture’ King Chulalongkorn with Tsar Nicholas, a photograph taken during the king’s first visit to Europe (1897)
Figure 3  A selection of books and objects with the equestrian statue

Figure 4  A selection of King Chulalongkorn amulets, coins, gift items and mementos
Figure 5  A selection of King Chulalongkorn objects. In front a china covered pot marking the centenary of the king’s visit to Europe in 1897, depicting a photograph taken in Italy. The melamine plate behind the pot is decorated in bencharong style. Bencharong is a Thai porcelain strongly associated with Royal arts and King Chulalongkorn.

Figure 6  ‘The Le Petit Journal Portrait’
Figure 7  ‘The King Cooking a Meal’ in the office of a Nakhon Pathom restaurant

Figure 8  A selection of ‘The Second Coronation Portrait’ reproductions, depicting King Chulalongkorn in royal attire during his second coronation (1873). The gilded statuette is a plaster reproduction of the Wat Doi Chang Chulalongkorn statue (figure 9)
Figure 9  The gilded statue made after the ‘Second Coronation Portrait’ Wat Doi Chang temple, during the 1998 Chulalongkorn Celebrations

Figure 10  A selection of popular reproductions depicting the modern King Chulalongkorn
Figure 11a  The wreath presented by the Boon Rawd Brewery

Figure 11b  The wreath presented by the Sai Jai Thai Foundation

Figure 11c  The wreath presented by the Ratchasetthi Art School

Figure 11d  The wreath presented by the Worarat School
Figure 12  The wreath presented by '9944231-3'

Figure 13  ‘Somdet To teaching the young Prince Chulalongkorn’
In *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam* (1908) the picture is captioned ‘Buddhist Priest and Disciple’
Figure 14  The medium Mae Wan, possessed by the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, at the phone with a distant client. At the right a gilded statue of King Chulalongkorn.

Figure 15  ‘His Majesty the King is greeted by a hundred year old woman during his visit to the Northeast’. Decoration along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, 2007–2008 celebrations.
Figure 16  One of the most extensively reproduced portraits of King Bhumibol, showing the map, the pencil, the camera strap, and the bead of sweat. Top: billboard in Chiang Mai during the golden jubilee celebrations; below: murals on Dusit Zoo wall, the Chiang Mai Flower Parade (all in 1997)
Commemorating the King

Every year on 23 October, King Chulalongkorn is officially commemorated in a national ceremony celebrated in all district and provincial public administration centres of any significance. The anniversary of the king’s death, 23 October, or Chulalongkorn Day, is a national holiday, and several other national holidays also honour the monarchy: Chakri Day on 6 April, commemorating the establishment of the Chakri dynasty in 1782; Coronation Day on 5 May, commemorating the official coronation of King Bhumibol in 1950; Queen’s Day/Mother’s Day on 12 August, the occasion of the birthday of Queen Sirikit; and King’s Day/Father’s Day on 5 December, the occasion of the birthday of King Bhumibol. Other historical kings, including King Taksin and King Naesuan, also have commemoration days dedicated to their memories, but only Chulalongkorn Day is a national holiday. Whether or not this implies an official recognition of any superiority of King Chulalongkorn over other kings is a debatable issue that will be considered here by examining the place of ritual action in the King Chulalongkorn cult. Following Bell (1997), ritual is perceived as a cultural practice. Acknowledging both the roles of participants and spectators, and the variety of contexts in which they operate, ritual is understood as situational and performative. As Hughes-Freeland and Crain say, ritual “is most usefully and relevantly theorised as a contested space for social action and identity politics — an arena for resistance, negotiation and affirmation” (1998: 2). The ritualised actions organised in the setting of Chulalongkorn Day will indeed prove to be such contested social spaces. Without this perspective, the multi-layered and dynamic character of the cult would be difficult to access.

The ethnographic basis of this chapter stems mainly from research carried out in three different localities where Chulalongkorn Day is
celebrated annually. The first locality is the *Royal Plaza*, where the official commemoration ceremony of Chulalongkorn Day 1996 and the popular celebrations around the day were observed. The second locality is the residence of *Mae Wan*, a spirit medium in the vicinity of Chiang Mai, where research was conducted on Chulalongkorn Day celebrations in 1998. And the third locality is *Wat Doi Chang*, the Chiang Mai temple introduced in Chapter II, where the Chulalongkorn Day celebrations of both 1997 and 1998 were observed.

Based on the research conducted in the three locations, the chapter explores the two spheres of the official and the popular celebrations and their mutual interaction. The national wreath laying ceremony at the equestrian statue is the core of the Chulalongkorn Day celebrations. In the same way the equestrian statue surpasses all other portraits in import, the wreath laying ceremony transcends any other ritual. An analysis of the central ritual will make clear why this early morning event, on an empty square, is yet the pivotal element in the cult. The annual repetition of this particular ritual maintains the Thai collective memory of a crucial part of the nation’s history by renewing and formally confirming the link between the King Chulalongkorn myth and the equestrian statue. The popular rituals at the other localities or at the statue, however, reflect the ongoing process of reworking the myth in daily life. Finally, the chapter includes an analysis of the popular celebrations by delineating the interactions between the various groups and individuals participating in the events, explaining how, in the King Chulalongkorn cult, gender politics and identity formation are articulated in ritual action.

The Origin of Chulalongkorn Day

Just after midnight on 23 October 1910, King Chulalongkorn passed away. Although the king was suffering from diabetes and chronic kidney disease, his death was unexpected. His sickbed had lasted less than one week. During that period, very few people knew about his actual condition, which had been kept secret. It was taboo to inquire after the king’s health (Smith 1982 [1957]:94). “Less than forty-eight hours before he died the First Queen [Queen Saovabha Phongsri] had reported that: ‘His Majesty has improved in all respects.’” (Vella 1978:1).

There is no firsthand account of the reactions to the king’s death. Malcolm Smith, who became Queen Saovabha’s physician in 1914, reported being told that “[w]hen the Crown Prince came in and announced that
the King was dead, the entire company prostrated themselves and saluted three times in the customary manner. Everyone was deeply moved; many of them wept, for they had a real affection for the man who had ruled over them so long” (Smith 1982: 94).” Wales, expressing similar views, added a strong conclusion:

(...)

King Rama V created in the hearts of his subjects an entirely new outlook with regard to the ruler, a deep personal affection for the sovereign who had done so much to relieve the hardships of his people, as apart from the ingrained traditional respect for the kingship. Hence, after his death, there arose a spontaneous desire for an annual opportunity for the people to pay public homage to his memory (Wales 1992 [1931]: 171).

Three weeks after the king’s death, on 16 November, people gathered at the equestrian statue to express their grief. The date was significant as it had been celebrated as a second coronation day during the king’s lifetime. According to Vella (1978:141), “the tribute to Chulalongkorn was in large measure a popular and spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment”.

The accounts of Vella and Wales offer no way of judging what “popular” and “spontaneous” exactly mean, or which elements of the population participated; neither author mentions sources or provides further detail. But it can well be imagined that the king’s death was a shock for many, given both the length of the king’s reign and the importance attributed to Buddhist kings as protectors and sources of well-being. On the other hand, the question may be asked to what extent these descriptions of the veneration of King Chulalongkorn echo Prince Damrong.

In 1912, King Chulalongkorn’s son and successor, King Vajiravudh, decided to honour his father by declaring the anniversary of his death “Chulalongkorn Day”, or wan piya maharat — literally “the Day (wan) of the Great Beloved King”. King Vajiravudh, to a large extent, appears to have been inspired by Great Britain’s Victoria Day (Vella 1978: 141). Much of King Vajiravudh’s work and policies reflect his thoroughly British education, which he received when living in Britain between 1893 and 1903. Vella even speaks of him as a “Victorian Siamese Prince” (ibid.: 8–9). Like Chulalongkorn Day, Victoria Day (actually Empire Day, which later became Commonwealth Day) had been proposed by Queen Victoria’s son, King Edward VII.6 On 23 October 1913, the Bangkok Times wrote:
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(...) just as Victoria Day is largely an opportunity for bringing home to youth at school something of the meaning of the British Empire, so Chulalongkorn Day may well survive to a later generation as an aid to inspire youth with the spirit which the Rulers of Siam in our time have done their utmost to foster (quoted in Vella, 1987: 142).

Chulalongkorn Day thus sprang from the kind of modern nationalism promoted by Prince Damrong. This ideological background is, of course, important for a wider comprehension of the King Chulalongkorn cult, a dimension of the commemoration that will be discussed further below. To attribute, however, the institution of Chulalongkorn Day solely to contemporary nationalism and King Vajiravudh's British background does not acknowledge the context of Thai magic-religious thinking (cf. Vella 1978), which arguably played a role in the motivations of King Vajiravudh and the effects of the institution of Chulalongkorn Day. To a large extent, Chulalongkorn Day is also a continuation of the royal ancestor worship elaborated by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, in combination with the already existing practises of paying homage to deceased kings by the public. The importance of these elements becomes clearer when Chulalongkorn Day is compared with Chakri Day. The latter was also initiated by King Vajiravudh, but, more than Chulalongkorn Day, is considered to be Thailand’s “National Day”.

Chakri Day

Every year on Chakri Day, 6 April, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit pay respect to eight gilded life-size statues of the previous kings of the Chakri Dynasty. The statues are enshrined in the “Royal Pantheon” — one of the buildings that make up the Wat Phra Kaeo complex (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha). On 6 April, the Royal Pantheon, normally closed, is open to the general public. At the Memorial Bridge in Bangkok, the king, the queen and other members of the royal family perform a wreath-laying ceremony in front of a statue of King Rama I the Great (Somdet Phra Phuttha Yot Fa Chulalok Maharaj).

As explained in the previous chapter, the kings of Siam worshipped their ancestors as guardian spirits of the monarchy and the kingdom. For King Chulalongkorn, his father, King Mongkut, had become the phra sayam thewathirat, the divinity protecting Siam and its inhabitants, and King Chulalongkorn had a phra sayam thewathirat statuette cast bearing King Mongkut’s features (see Chapter II). Apart from the phra sayam
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The image, King Chulalongkorn also had statues cast of each of the four previous Chakri kings as objects of worship. In doing so he followed in his father’s footsteps, for King Mongkut started obeisance ceremonies for King Rama I, II and III (Vella 1978: 142). What makes the statues novel is that although they are made — in accordance with tradition — on the same scale as a crowned Buddha image, they are true portrait statues, reproducing the features and anatomy of each king (Apinan 1992bI: 342). The statues were kept in the Grand Palace until King Vajiravudh had them, along with a statue of King Chulalongkorn, transferred to the Wat Phra Kaew. A temple building was renovated to accommodate them and was renamed the Phrasat Phra Phetphob (literally, the Palace of the Divine Ancestors, usually rendered in English as the Royal Pantheon). The renovation was completed in 1918 and as the inauguration day King Vajiravudh chose 6 April, the day General Chakri was crowned king in 1782 and founded the Chakri Dynasty. Therefore, 6 April was “an auspicious day ‘both for the Chakri Dynasty, and also for Siam as a Nation’” (King Vajiravudh, as quoted in Vella, 1978: 142). The king himself compared Chakri Day with the French 14 July and the American 4 July (ibid.: 143). A significant difference is, however, that in contrast to these republican national days, Chakri Day resulted from a fruitful merging of traditional royal ancestor worship and modern nationalism.

While the institution of Chakri Day partly has to be understood as the continuation of a trend set by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, there is a significant difference in that it transferred royal ancestor worship from the private to the public sphere. The obeisance ceremonies organised during the Fourth and Fifth Reigns took place in the palace and the kings did not conduct any ritual in public. The phra sayam thewathirat/king Mongkut statuette, for instance, was kept in King Chulalongkorn’s bedchamber (Apinan 1992bI: 352).

Although still Thailand’s National Day, Chakri Day, unlike Chula-longkorn Day, does not seem to touch upon strong popular sentiments. The present king conducts the annual rituals and quite a number of people visit the Royal Pantheon to pay respect to the deceased Chakri kings, but there are no other signs of popular involvement. The rapid falling into abeyance of “Vajiravudh Day” (26 November), which was a later addition, suggests that a king does not automatically become the object of widespread veneration after his death, even when a special day is dedicated to him.
Like Chakri Day, Chulalongkorn Day should be partly understood as a modern continuation of royal ancestor worship and the public paying of respect to deceased kings. The material in this chapter will demonstrate that, in this case, King Vajiravudh’s combination of tradition and nationalism still flourishes and enjoys a great popular involvement. This involvement, however, is for the greater part expressed in separate celebrations, apart from the official state ceremony. Nevertheless, for good understanding, the chapter will place the popular celebrations in the context of the official ceremony. This approach also brings into focus the many-sided dynamism of the King Chulalongkorn cult, and permits an analysis of both the state-organised expressions of respect for King Chulalongkorn and the popular expressions of affection and veneration, which meet, influence, reinforce, but also contradict each other. The discussion will begin with activities around the equestrian statue, which encapsulate both the heart and the origin of Chulalongkorn Day.

The Nation Commemorates

Wales, writing about the period 1925–30, gives the following account of Chulalongkorn Day:

On this day the great equestrian statue of King Rama V, situated in the middle of the royal plaza, is surrounded by a rajavat fence, adorned with tiered umbrellas, and the base of the statue is massed with wreath and artistic floral decorations, the tribute of schools, government departments, and commercial bodies. The King [King Rama VII] and Queen arrive by motor-car, and, after inspecting the floral tributes, light candles and incense-sticks and offer flowers on the altar placed opposite the western entrance to the enclosure. Then they kneel and pay homage while aeroplanes circle overhead. The national anthem is played, and the King and Queen drive away. Throughout the day thousands of people take advantage of the opportunity to pay homage before the statue and, although music and refreshments are provided on both sides of the plaza, the occasion is celebrated with befitting dignity (Wales 1992 [1931]: 172).

Except for the royal inspection of the floral tributes and the aeroplanes circling overhead, Wales’ description could easily depict the scene of the Royal Plaza on Chulalongkorn Day 1996. Apparently, Chulalongkorn Day survived all transitions Thai society went through in the course of the twentieth century unaltered. It seems that Prince Damrong made an
astonishingly accurate prediction when he wrote about wan piya maharat 1912 in the letter mentioned in Chapter II: I see an overwhelming number of people coming to the equestrian statue from morning till midnight. I foresee that [the commemoration] as it is this year will remain a tradition forever (1976: 34).

Indeed, in 1996 thousands of people, “from morning till midnight”, came to the statue to pay homage to their king. However, a more detailed perspective on “who pays respect, when and in what manner” will show that at least the present Chulalongkorn Day (and worshipping King Chulalongkorn) is a more ambiguous phenomenon than the accounts of Prince Damrong and Wales would suggest. A comparison of the official celebrations and individual and other informal activities is revealing. Analysis of the different celebrations will begin with an overview of the official celebrations in Bangkok, which in 1996 comprised three activities: a two-day “Chulalongkorn Day exhibition”; the (national) wreath-laying ceremony (taking place in the early morning); and a short afternoon ceremony in which King Bhumibol and other members of the royal family paid respect to King Chulalongkorn. As Wales’ description of this latter small ceremony is still very accurate, there is no need to include a description of the 1996 ceremony below.

The Exhibition

On 22 and 23 October 1996, the space behind the statue and the large pedestrian area on the left were occupied by the exhibition, which was organised around the theme “Protecting the Environment” (Ngansairotkan Ruamchaiphak Rak Singwaetlom). The exhibition consisted of a large number of stands built by representatives of governmental and government-related institutions, including the Ministry of Defence, the railway authorities, the tourist authorities, the Red Cross, and several other charities. In brief, most stands gave some information on the history of the respective institutions, providing the visitors with information on their organisation’s tasks and objectives and often making a link in one way or another to King Chulalongkorn or his reign. Clearly, for most organisations it was not easy to present a triangular linkage between their own tasks and activities, “King Chulalongkorn”, and “Protecting the Environment”. In most cases, the focus on the environment was simply omitted. As a military officer from the Ministry of Defence’s stand explained, the theme of the environment had been selected due to its relevance and prominence in the golden jubilee celebrations of King Bhumibol’s acces-
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sion to the throne, which happened to fall the same year. Although quite a few people who came to the equestrian monument strolled along the exhibition, it was not obvious that anybody had come to the Royal Plaza for the sake of the exhibition alone.

The Wreath-laying Ceremony

The main element of the wreath-laying ceremony is the presentation of memorial wreaths (phuangmala) at the statue, a ritual also introduced by King Vajiravudh (Vella 1987: 141) and inspired by European custom. Despite this influence, the ceremony has evolved into a particular Thai form. Every year on 22 October, an extensive “forest” of stepladder-like constructions is erected around the monument, in order to hang the wreaths that will be presented early the next day.

The ceremony itself does not take long, especially when considering the large number of wreaths that are presented: on 23 October 1996, approximately 400 wreaths were presented between 6:30 and 9 AM. The largest number of wreaths certainly came from educational institutions. The ceremony consisted mainly of an almost continuous flow of well-organised groups of children and students, from kindergarten to the university level, who presented wreaths under the guidance of their teachers. From every class, one or two pupils were selected to represent their school. In addition to schools, banks, enterprises, the city authorities, the army, hospitals, public transport agencies, music bands, war veterans, charities and Scouting Thailand made appearances to present wreaths on behalf of their organisations. Except for the children and teachers from the International School of Bangkok, everybody — military, civil servants, bank employees, and school- and kindergarten children alike — dressed in the daily or formal uniform of their organisation. When presenting their wreath, members of each group knelt simultaneously to bow deeply (knap) and salute the king three times (thawai bangkhom).

This Chulalongkorn Day ceremony is duplicated all over the country at local seats of governmental power — the provincial and district administration centres — or at prestigious local schools. Similar to the ceremony at the equestrian statue, local representatives and employees of institutions, organisations, hospitals, schools and enterprises present wreaths. The equestrian statue is substituted by a smaller copy of the statue or by another image of the king. Statues of King Chulalongkorn have been erected in front of many provincial halls. At the district (amphoe) level there are usually no permanent King Chulalongkorn
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statues, though Chulalongkorn Day ceremonies may be held. Several people, who had spent their youth in smaller provincial towns, like Hua Hin or Kanchanaburi, told me that wood-carved or even paper copies of the king’s image may be placed outside in front of the Hall for the occasion. In 1998, I myself saw a less-permanent “Chulalongkorn Day image” in a small district town in Lamphun province. Seven wreaths were presented to a huge, enlarged photograph of the equestrian statue, mounted on cardboard and cut out.

Although essentially every institution and every individual is free to present a wreath on Chulalongkorn Day, in actual practice, mostly established institutions, major enterprises, and members of the higher echelons of society participate in the ceremonies, whether at the Royal Plaza or locally. Thus, with regard to schools, those that are either urban and/or secondary, college or higher level, or have students with a more or less well-to-do background, are more likely to participate. In contrast, the participation of elementary schools — particularly those further away from the local centre — is not self-evident at all. The children not selected for the wreath presentation will not be present. Most Thai therefore do not attend a ceremony on Chulalongkorn Day, meaning that, for many, Chulalongkorn Day is basically a day off.

The Chulalongkorn Day wreath-laying ceremonies reflect the hierarchical order of the Thai state and its administration. In Bangkok, the nation’s political centre of power, hundreds of wreaths are presented before the king’s most significant image, the equestrian statue. Many of these wreaths are presented by representatives from the highest levels of the organisations involved. The further from this centre, the lower the strata of the hierarchy represented, the more humble the execution of the king’s image, and the fewer people participate in the ceremony.

From this perspective, Chulalongkorn Day appears as the annual, nation-wide, ritualised affirmation of “the Goodness of King Chulalongkorn”, which at the same time is a legitimisation of the Thai state and its related organisations. The organisation of the ceremonies at all local seats of governmental power is significant: as the modernisation of Siam’s civil service was the king’s initiative, the centres of administrative power are “directly related” to the king. In the wreath-laying ceremonies, the presence of the king’s image serves as the focus of the attendants’ respect for the king, helping the participants establish and express their own linkage with him.

But, as seen in the previous chapters, the King Chulalongkorn myth touches upon more than national ideology alone. The wider reach of the
myth elevates the meaning of the national ritual above the legitimisation of the state. Indeed, a further study of the wreath-laying ceremony at the equestrian statue will show how the state ritual permeates the cult, and vice versa.

Filling the Centre

At the beginning of the wreath-laying ceremony of 1996, quite a large number of people were present. This did not imply, however, that the ceremony attracted wide public attention. In fact, those present consisted largely of the parents, relatives, colleagues and acquaintances of those involved in presenting the wreaths. Most groups left immediately upon completing their presentation, taking “their” public with them. Consequently, by the end of the ceremony, at around 9 AM, the Royal Plaza was almost empty. The emptiness of the square contrasted sharply with the fenced area around the equestrian statue, now full with wreaths, and the jam-packed scene of the previous night — a scene to be repeated on Chulalongkorn Day evening and on the evening of the 24th. What these contrasts reflect will be explored below, starting with a description of the equestrian statue’s precincts as a “full place”.

9:15 AM, 23 October 1996,

A woman, one of the few people who had participated, grasps my hand as soon as the ceremony ends. She invites me to join her. To my surprise, we approach the equestrian statue from the back, sneaking through a jumble of stands and wreaths. We are doing so, the woman explains, because officials would send us away if we proceed to the statue openly. Apparently, individuals are not allowed to pay their respect to the king at this moment. Upon reaching the statue, the officials on guard do not take any action against us, although our appearance “from behind” catches their attention. It must be rather unusual to see a farang (Westerner) approaching the statue like that and I realise this is a part of the woman’s strategy. We pay our respect at the base of the statue. The woman has brought everything required: incense, candles and a garland. When we leave, I see more people approaching the statue, even from the front. Clearly, the guards are not that strict.
This experience left the sensation that as soon as “the state” leaves, the square becomes “the place of the people” again. In this sense, the square can be understood as an arena where control over both “worshipping King Chulalongkorn” and “his image” is pulled back and forth between state authorities and groups of individuals. Coincidentally, 22 October, or “Chulalongkorn Day’s Eve”, fell on a Tuesday in 1996, the most significant day of the week for King Chulalongkorn worshippers. For many, this special evening was reason enough to come to the statue. Consequently, there were many more people than would be expected on any other Tuesday evening. They left piles of garlands and pyres of incense and candles, which in the end hid the base of the statue almost entirely from view. But by the early morning hours of 23 October, the place was clean and empty, as if there had never been a “Chulalongkorn Day’s Eve” celebration. Not a trace of the garlands, or any other material evidence of the event, was left. Apparently, the area around the equestrian statue was emptied literally, in preparation to be filled with meaning during the official commemoration ceremony again.

To fathom the meaning and implication of the official wreath-laying ceremony, a description of the actual annual ritual is not sufficient. The ritual may bring organisations to the statue, but with their wreaths the organisations bring in their own meaning. After the ritual, the wreaths remain around the statue, demonstrating that it is the latter meaning that lasts. The wreaths therefore deserve a closer look, which will provide a deeper insight into both the ritual itself and the role of the statue as the focus of the cult. In order to comprehend the “after-ceremony scene” at the equestrian statue, five Chulalongkorn memorial wreaths, and the organisations they represent, will be described in more detail. The selection is rather personal, but purposely includes an official institution, an established company, two types of schools and a small business.

Chulalongkorn memorial wreaths have developed into a category of their own, different from both Western memorial wreaths and regular Thai funeral wreaths. Most designs combine a selection of images referring to the king and his particularities (portraits, royal attributes, symbols of his deeds, roses), with symbols referring to the organisation or institution presenting the wreath. The basic construction material of virtually all wreaths is polystyrene foam, the material used for ephemeral decorations in Thailand, as can be seen in conferences or temple fairs. Most individuals and organisations order their wreaths from artists, usually florists specialising in occasional flower work. The first three wreaths
described below — judging from the general design, materials used and 
the form and typography of the banderoles — apparently came from 
the same workshop.

Reading Wreaths

The wreath of the Boon Rawd Brewery

(see Figure 11a)

Boon Rawd Brewery Co. Ltd. \( (borisat bun rot briwuri chamkat) \) is the 
brewer of the illustrious Singha Beer and various other beverages. The 
owners are among Thailand’s wealthiest.\(^\text{16}\) The brewery was set up in 1934 
by Mr. Boon Rawd, an entrepreneur of Chinese origin. Throughout its 
history, Boon Rawd Brewery has maintained close connections with the 
Thai Beer” \( (bia sing bia thai) \) reflects the company’s aim to present itself 
as a genuine Thai company producing a genuinely Thai product.\(^\text{17}\) Major 
government campaigns to promote Thai culture and Thai identity are 
sponsored by Singha Beer; these campaigns in turn influence the content 
of the brewery’s advertisements (Jory 1999: 471). In brief, Boon Rawd 
Brewery is important in the creation of Thai identity, involved in many 
events relating to Thai national or cultural identity.

In 1996, Boon Rawd Brewery presented a wreath in the shape of 
a hop, incorporating barley-heads and hops around a portrait of King 
Chulalongkorn. The portrait itself was special: a \textit{bencharong}\(^\text{18}\) plate with 
the portrait of the king. The whole was embellished with origami-style 
folded bank notes of 20 and 100 baht on a background of imitation 
gold brocade. Every 20 baht note was decorated with a lilac-pink imi-
tation gemstone. The 100 baht notes, folded to display the portrait of 
King Bhumibol printed on them in full, encircled the portrait of King 
Chulalongkorn.

The wreath combined many symbols, all quite obvious for the Thai 
beholder. Clear enough, the hop and barley-heads represent the company 
and its main product. The \textit{bencharong} porcelain is associated strongly with 
Royal arts and nineteenth-century Siam, and, in particular, with King 
Chulalongkorn. The king was an avid Chinaware and \textit{bencharong} collector, 
a pastime evident in the Viman Mek collection.\(^\text{19}\) The king — following 
European royal taste — had several dinner and tea services made and 
decorated with his portrait. \textit{Bencharong} bowls and plates, as well as other 
types of chinaware meant for decoration, were also made with the king’s
portrait or other royal symbols, such as King Chulalongkorn’s cipher. Today, contemporary “King Chulalongorn bencharong” is understandably hard to find, and very expensive. There is, however, ample production of new “King Chulalongkorn bencharong”, as there is “King Bhumibol bencharong”. For those who cannot afford porcelain, there is cheap melamine imitation King Chulalongkorn bencharong.

The gemstones in the wreath are lilac-pink as it is “King Chulalongkorn’s colour”. In Thailand, importance is attributed to the day of the week one was born – rather than to one’s date of birth. For the Thai, each day of the week has its own colour, considered auspicious for people born on that day. King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday, which is associated with the colour pink. This “implies” that the king’s favourite colour was pink. Finally, the display of King Bhumibol portraits around that of King Chulalongkorn visualises the familial and spiritual connection between the two kings.

**The wreath of the Sai Jai Thai Foundation**

(see Figure 11b)

The Sai Jai Thai Foundation (*munithi sai chai thai*) is a charity dedicated to the support of the families of military, policemen and civilians who died or became injured or disabled while defending their country. The Sai Jai Thai Foundation is closely connected with the current royal family. The foundation has been under royal patronage since 1975, with Princess Sirindhorn (the crown princess) serving as its president. Images of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit visiting wounded soldiers in field hospitals made up the framework of the foundation’s activities in the sixties and seventies, and are still part and parcel of current television programmes on King Bhumibol and the monarchy.

The foundation’s 1996 wreath was executed as a 16-pointed gold brocade star, again with lilac-pink imitation gemstones articulating its contours. The symbol of the organisation, a dark-red heart with the map of Thailand and thick drops of blood dripping from the heart, dominates the design. To the left side of the blood drops is a portrait of the king mounted in a golden frame above pink and white artificial flowers. The lower right corner is decorated with more lavishly coloured artificial flowers and little birds.

Through the articulation — three-dimensional and brownish red — of the already dramatic Sai Chai Thai symbol, this wreath exudes nationalistic sentiments. The positioning of the king’s portrait next to the drops
of blood adds to the dramatic effect. The message of the composition is difficult to miss: as did King Chulalongkorn, the Sai Jai Foundation, under royal patronage, strives for the maintenance of the Thai nation. The existence and activities of the Sai Jai Foundation, as well as its appeal to nationalist sentiments, should be understood against the background of the Cold War and the fight against communism or, more generally, the “fighting [of] all sorts of ‘enemies’ to protect the nation” (Thongchai 1994: 137).

**The wreath of the Ratchasetthi Art School**
(see Figure 11c)

The Ratchasetthi Art School was named after a member of the Ratchasetthi family, who was most likely the School's founder. The name, more precisely the prefix ratcha- (royal), indicates that the family is of Chinese background and only attained its Thai family name from King Chulalongkorn as a reward for some particular merit. The part setthi (rich person) suggests that this merit was of a financial nature.

The wreath of Ratchasetthi Art School (*rongrian ratchasetthi sinlapakam*) is designed in the shape of a peacock displaying its fan. Against a blue and gold brocade background, a large variety of small circular and oval portraits of King Chulalongkorn form the fan's eyes. Artificial gemstones in appropriate colours add to the fan's splendour. Under the protruding peacock's body, the wreath is decorated with yellow and white flowers and a small traditional garland of jasmine and pink roses.

With this wreath the Ratchasetthi Art School has really made an effort to live up to its name. The three-dimensional peacock, with its skilfully applied details, is an exceptional piece of work. There is not much symbolism in the wreath, apart from the fact that the peacock belongs to the category of mythical animals inhabiting the sphere of nirvana, and is associated with royalty and Buddhism (see Wales 1992 [1931]: 167). The wreath represents the art school because of its extraordinary design, and was obviously made at the school itself. The similarities between this wreath and the former two make clear that they all were made by the school. Together, the wreaths form one large advertisement for Ratchasetthi Art School. The fact that this school made the other two wreaths — or at least had its wreath made by the same artist — may indicate how these organisations, irrespective of their different fields of activity, are a part of the nationalist network, and are, in one way or another, involved in maintaining and shaping national identity. Generally,
art schools teach Thai traditional arts and are actively involved in the creation and propagation of Thai identity.

The wreath of the Worarat School
(see Figure 11d)

Not much background information on the Worarat School (*worarat suksa*, a private primary school) can be provided. But since it is a private elementary (*suksa*) school, its pupils probably come from the more well-to-do families.

The wreath of Worarat School is entirely made of polystyrene foam. The wreath has the shape of a pagoda. From top to bottom, the wreath is decorated with gold-painted symbols amidst gold-painted flowers, starting with the royal emblem (*phra maha chai mongkut*, the Great Crown of Victory). In front of the emblem floats, as it were, the Thai number five in pink. Immediately below the emblem a traditional royal war helmet and sword are depicted, the sword possibly representing the Venerable Sword of Victory (*phra saeng khan chai si*). The helmet leans on the middle tooth of a trident (*trisun*), which in its turn rests on a discus with knives (*chak*). On the left and right, two guardian angels each hold a spear with a banner. A hand-painted portrait of the king on polystyrene foam demarcates the transition from heaven (blue) to earth (red). The decorations to the left and right of the portrait represent temple doors. At the bottom is a lower arm with a broken chain below it.

The design is full of meaning. The pagoda shape places the wreath in a religious context. The royal emblem is one of the regalia, as is the Sword of Victory. The pink “5” refers to the fact that King Chulalongkorn was the fifth king of the Chakri dynasty (*ratchakan thi ha*). The helmet and sword refer to Thai kings as royal warriors and defenders of the independence of the kingdom. The trident and the discus are the traditional regalia of the Chakri dynasty, as they are believed to have been the weapons of General Chakri. The positioning of the portrait refers to the belief that King Chulalongkorn was a king who, during his reign, belonged both to the world of ordinary people (*lokiya*) and to the world of the enlightened (*lokutara*). Virtuous kings are considered to be *sommuttithep*, or “assumed divinities”. Finally, the lower arm and the broken chain refer to “the abolition of slavery”.

The wreath’s referential symbolism to the Chakri Dynasty and King Chulalongkorn demonstrates the school’s intent to create itself a place in the sphere of Thai identity, evoking the narratives of independence.
and the abolition of slavery with a few powerful symbols. By evoking the narratives, the school also stresses its natural linkage with King Chulalongkorn, the founder of modern Thai education.

**The wreath of “9944231-3”**

(see Figure 12)

The identity of the presenter of this wreath remains hidden behind the phone-number 9944231-3. The wreath, mainly embellished with pink roses (the king’s favourite flower in the King’s favourite colour), consists of a display of sepia-hued well-known photographs of King Chulalongkorn. The presenter wishes the beholder “miracles” (*phon pathihan*), hereby turning the wreath into a huge public Chulalongkorn Day greeting card. But the well-wisher does not leave it at miracles, and also wishes “gifts” (*khong khwan*) and “decorations” (*khong pradap*). Apparently, the presenter has a business in auspicious gifts, such as King Chulalongkorn portraits; his wreath, itself almost a greeting card, is an advertisement as well. The lower text reads: “It is auspicious (*pen mongkhon*) to give [such objects to matters concerning] life (*hai kap chiwit*)… home (*thi yu asai*)… [and] office (*samnak ngan*).”

The presenter of the 9944231-3 wreath can clearly not appeal to any specific linkage with King Chulalongkorn, the monarchy or Thai identity. The plainness of the wreath’s design shows, however, that the king’s effigy alone is sufficient to evoke the myth of the Great Beloved King. But, precisely because there are no symbols referring to any specific element of the narratives, the king appears on this wreath as merely the Great Beloved King of all Thai, to whom the presenter relates.

This small selection from the over 400 wreaths presented shows how the wreaths fill the area around the equestrian statue with numerous symbols referring to the myth of the Great Beloved King, of which the statue itself is the ultimate symbol. The myth, however, as seen in the previous chapters, is not fixed and is being reworked continuously. Consequently, the myth, as it exists in the minds of both the participants and the general public, consists of different versions and elaborations. With the wreaths, therefore, new meaning is carried to the statue in the annual ceremony. This remains largely hidden, however, as the symbols remain the same. The wreaths at the base of the equestrian statue connect new and old interpretations of the myth of the Great Beloved King to the statue. In this way, the annual repetition of the momentary ritual at the statue confirms and sanctions the collective memory of the king,
changing over time. Here, the official ceremony differs essentially from any popular ritual or celebration. The official ceremony primarily links the myth with the statue, while the act of worshipping primarily links the worshipper with the king — or more precisely, with the image of him arising from the myth. This gives the official ceremony primordiality over any popular ritual: it provides a legitimisation of the image of the king on which the popular worshipping is based.

This analysis differs from Connerton's interpretation of national commemorative ceremonies as a reminder to a community "of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative" (1989: 70). In the overall context of the King Chulalongkorn cult there is no need for such a reminder to keep the legend alive in the collective memory. The preservation of the annual ritual from 1912 onwards has certainly contributed to keeping the myth alive, however. Understanding the wreath laying ceremony as primordial, compared to other formal worshipping, helps explain why, contrary to intuition, there is no need to participate in the ceremony: the awareness that the ritual actually happens is, together with the presence of the statue, sufficient for the myth to be confirmed. But more importantly, such awareness contributes to a better understanding of the popularity of the King Chulalongkorn cult: it is the only Thai cult to see its conceptual universe, intentionally or not, formally affirmed by a state ritual that takes place at its central object of worship. For the individual beholder, the constant presence of the statue in the annual state ceremony maintains both the sense of the myth as a continuous whole, and of the image of the king as singular and unambiguous. This unification conceals any differences in interpretation between individual worshippers' renderings, as well as between the popular images of the king and that of the state. Every single interpretation is a "natural image" (cf. Barthes 2000 [1972]: 142) of the Great Beloved King, needing no further explication or justification. Whether in the capacity of a modern ruler, Buddhist king, or personal patron, "King Chulalongkorn" has an eternal, self-evident truth for every Thai. This natural quality of King Chulalongkorn corresponds with Barthes’ "very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature" (ibid.: 129). The myth of the Great Beloved King departs from historical reality (i.e., the very existence of King Chulalongkorn), but by "abolishing the complexity of human acts", it provides essences, purifications, clarity, and "a natural image of this reality" in return (ibid.: 143, 142). Together with the annual repetition of the commemorative ritual, the invariable presence of the statue confirms
this ahistorical timelessness: the statue is not so much a memorial of a past king and past events, but instead gives King Chulalongkorn presence in the present.

**Much Meaning, Many Meanings**

The overall impression of the celebrations at the equestrian statue is one of contrasting articulations. The popular Chulalongkorn Day celebrations are dominated by fullness and abundance. The official King Chulalongkorn commemoration consists of a single, almost austere, wreath-laying ceremony. The tidal alternation of fullness and emptiness around the equestrian statue expresses a notable contrast between popular and official celebrations. After the official ceremony the statue’s precincts are visibly most full with meaning, while near empty with people. During the popular celebrations the Royal Plaza is most full of people, but the meaning they carry to or from the statue remains hidden behind the ubiquitous portraits on the altar tables.

The different scenes at the Royal Plaza — the primary arena of competition for the control over the king’s image — illustrate the capacity of the king’s image to absorb new meaning. An ability to absorb, however, presupposes a certain degree of emptiness. The historical King Chulalongkorn was “emptied” to become the “Great Beloved King” in a Thai myth of modernity and Buddhist morality. The idea of the essential emptiness of a mythical image elucidates how the myth of the Great Beloved King could acquire both so much meaning and so many meanings: the greater the degree of emptiness, the greater the potential to receive almost any filling. The equestrian statue, testifying — as inscribed literally on its base — of the myth of the people’s love for their king rather than of the historical person of King Chulalongkorn, is the receptacle par excellence for such filling.

**Life’s Contingency**

In Chapter II, the presence of the king through his portrait was taken as a starting point to explain the appeal of the Tuesday evening gatherings at the square. The presence of the king in the equestrian statue enables people to experience the protective and the auspicious qualities of the king’s *barami*, the lasting, experienced effect of the king’s meritorious conduct. Another dimension that was touched upon was the opportunity
worshippers have to sacralise objects without any intermediary, such as a monk or spirit medium. By conducting the proper ritual at the statue, people may establish a direct link with the king’s spirit themselves.

When focusing on the ritualised aspects, the ways King Chulalongkorn and other spirits are approached have much in common; these approaches include the offering of favourite food and flowers, the burning of incense and the lighting of candles, the praying of the *khatha* and the pledge of making a votive offerings when a wish comes true. The worshipper establishes personal contact with the divine through an individual ritual. A major difference with other spirit cults, though, as Nithi rightfully observes, is that in the case of the “King Chulalongkorn ritual” one can have one’s objects sacralised in this divine contact. In this respect, the spontaneous, massive, public, and individually conducted sacralisation rites at the equestrian statue are assuredly a new phenomenon. The mass-produced booklets, tapes and leaflets specifying how to conduct the appropriate ritual contribute to the cult’s distinctly modern character and its appeal to the middle class.

However easy, convenient and positive approaching the king’s spirit may seem, dealing with divine powers is never entirely without danger, even where the power of a meritorious king is concerned. Apart from love and gratitude, King Chulalongkorn also inspires awe and anxiety. Feelings of awe easily evoke a physical response, like shivers or goose bumps. This may occur when the king’s name is mentioned unexpectedly during a conversation, or when people are suddenly confronted with his portrait. Feelings of anxiety, for example, are articulated in certain stories about the horse of the equestrian statue, or the idea that one cannot take anything home from the square without first asking the king’s permission.

The story on how King Chulalongkorn tamed the wild horse (Chapter I) already demonstrated that the horse of the statue may be identified as a ferocious, fearsome animal from France. It is “known” that the horse can be dangerous for those who do not show the appropriate respect and demeanour. A couple once told me — without referring to this particular story — that the horse punishes people who, intentionally or not, evoke its anger. Such people may disappear all of a sudden, having been eaten by the horse. The following story may serve as a warning to those who would immediately take anything from the square. A German had brought some soil from the flowerbed around the statue back to his home country. Once in Germany, the man became seriously ill. His Thai wife understood the cause of his illness and urged him to return the soil
to the statue. Being a true *farang*, the man refused to give in to “such nonsense” and consequently died.\(^{26}\)

Those worshippers who believe in the potential danger of such violations will not even carry away a King Chulalongkorn object bought to the square without asking the king’s permission. Contrary to Nithi’s observation, such people may resort to a ritual for which they lack the proper knowledge or abilities, and call upon the assistance of an intermediary. Since, as far as is known, only one person at the square renders such assistance, he will be referred to as The Intermediary.

The Intermediary addresses the statue by uttering a magic formula (*khatha*) in what is thought of as a divine language (*phasa thep*), that is, a language that ordinary humans cannot speak or understand.\(^{27}\) The Intermediary’s behaviour and appearance were remarkable, and in striking contrast to that of the people asking for his mediation. He was shabby, skinny, and aggressive; in all aspects of his appearance he reminded one more of a beggar than of a religious expert. The men and women in need of his help were generally, judging from their appearance, well-to-do middle class people. How could a man who clearly represents the seedy side of society become the “mediator” between the king and the Intermediary’s — more materially successful fellow countrymen? He represented everything people wanted to stay far away from: societal failure and a humble or poor background; in essence, the Intermediary reminded them of the fragile basis their wealth is built upon. Except when in need of his mediation, people stayed far away from him. Indeed, no one was found who could provide more detail on who he was and why he possessed these abilities or knowledge. Those who said that they did not believe in the Intermediary’s qualities understandably called him a swindler. The position of this man in the cult at the square reveals some of the ambiguity of the square’s atmosphere, which is not loaded with solely positive sentiments. It is probably that because the Intermediary was the personification of many of the uncanny feelings and fears that accompany middle-class life — which cannot be expressed openly — he may have become a mediator. Pacifying this repugnant figure may ward off the contingencies of life against which his clients seek refuge with the king. This “fearful side” looming behind the King Chulalongkorn cult is also circulated in the form of certain stories, or more accurately, rumours.

In 1997, stories circulated that a house in Bangkok had been totally destroyed by fire, except for a portrait of King Chulalongkorn that had miraculously survived undamaged. The story became front page news in
Thai Rath. Some time later the same story was heard again, but with the alteration that the house was in Chiang Mai instead of Bangkok. Then, again a few weeks later, a woman related the following story, which she in turn had heard from a German friend. This friend had just opened a bar in Bangkok. Among other things, he had decorated the bar with an enormous portrait of King Chulalongkorn. A Thai customer came in and looked at the portrait. He told the German that the portrait should not be kept. If he would keep it, a fire would destroy the whole bar, except the portrait. According to the woman, the man had said: “Look at the moustache. Can you see there is a small piece missing in the middle? And did you hear the news about the burned house and the King Chulalongkorn portrait that was not damaged at all? Also on that portrait exactly the same piece was missing from the moustache.”

The danger implied by the above story, as well as by the meditation sought with the odd figure of the Intermediary, arguably points to the fears and uncertainties of middle class life, helping to explain how the King Chulalongkorn cult and related phenomena arise. The fire in the story and the outward appearance of the Intermediary represent some of life’s most feared contingencies: losing a house or business by disaster and struggling in life. Both the story and the elicitation of the Intermediary’s mediation also indicate how to avert danger and allay fear. First, there is the way of ritual. The stories about the incomplete portrait and the necessity of mediation when taking something from the square show that ritual requires exactness, the forsaking of which may turn protective powers into the opposite. Next, as seen in Chapter II, ritual only works under the condition of moral conduct. The horse may even punish incorrect behaviour in general, showing that, apart from the direct context of ritual, moral conduct has supernatural implications. When moral conduct produces supernatural consequences, the distinction between ritual and morals fades. The following story illustrates this twilight: did Somphop fail to show the proper respect or did he fail to conduct a ritual properly?

Somphop, the owner of a small transport business, told of the following experience. Around New Year he cleaned his house — as most Thai do, and also wanted to dust off his King Chulalongkorn portrait. He took a small brush, apologized to the king that he was going to touch him and cleaned the portrait. That evening, many hours later, the portrait suddenly fell down. Although it was hanging at least two meters above the floor, the portrait’s glass was amazingly not broken. This incident,
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According to Somphop, truly demonstrates that King Chulalongkorn portraits possess magical power (sing saksit) and warns that one has to be careful. It was not due to any ordinary cause that the portrait had fallen. The house had been quiet and the nail was still in the wall. The portrait had fallen simply because he had made an important mistake: instead of using a clean piece of cloth to clean the portrait, he had used something as low (khong tam) and dirty as a brush.

Chulalongkorn Day at a Spirit Medium’s Residence

A pantheon of spirits

On 23 October 1998, Chulalongkorn Day was also celebrated at the residence (tamnak) of Mae Wan, a spirit medium in Saraphi, a district bordering Chiang Mai city. The residence, a white-painted modern building of approximately six-by-twelve metres with luxurious steps leading to a tinted glass façade, resembles the style often used for banks and other urban buildings. But the King Chulalongkorn statue in front reveals that this is no ordinary office. Inside, next to another statue of King Chulalongkorn, large statues of the holy historical monks Luang Pu Thuat (1582–?), Somdet To (somdet phra putthachan (to phrom rangsi)) (1788–1872), and Khru Ba Sri Wichai (1878–1939) are arranged against the rear wall.

Although judging from the outside, one would have expected the building to be air-conditioned, the interior is modest, with fans and little furniture. The tamnak contrasts sharply with the traditional teak house on poles a few metres further down the garden, where Mae Wan and her husband are living. The garden is decorated with a modest statue of the Chinese goddess Kuan Im (chao mae kuan im) and a shrine, as well as a (broken) fountain with the earth goddess Thorani.

Mae Wan — a woman in her fifties — has been a medium for King Chulalongkorn’s spirit since 1992. Her career as a spirit medium started when she was seventeen, not long after she had given birth to her first child. At that time she became seriously ill. Regular medical treatment could not cure her. Her mother then took her to see a spirit medium (mae khi ma, ma khi, chao song or rang song) who told her that she would only regain her health if she accepted the tutelary spirit(s) that wanted to possess her. Having done so, Mae Wan has now recovered from her illness and has been the medium for an increasing number of spirits.

The case of Mae Wan largely follows what has been written earlier about the attainment of female-centred spirit possession in Northern
In the “primary” phase, women become ill in contexts of domestic strife and their complaints are diagnosed as possession. The “secondary” phase is inaugurated when possession bouts become chronic, and the afflicted wife is inducted into what may become permanent membership of the possession cult group (Lewis 1986: 93).

Ultimately, a woman might become a shaman and thus be able to control and heal spirit afflictions in others — much like the medium who cured Mae Wan (ibid.). This close association of women with spirit possession has generally been analysed in the context of “the on-going debate about authority relationships between the sexes” (Irvine 1982: 240b). “(…) [W]e are dealing with a wide-spread strategy employed by women to achieve ends which they cannot readily obtain more directly” (Lewis: 1969: 85), found in all “those societies in which men hold a secure monopoly of the major power positions and deny their partners effective jural equality” (ibid.: 87). Lambek (1993) has extended this debate by providing a focus on, in his terms, the “know-how” of spirit possession. The identities of the possessing spirits (generally male) alter the identity of the medium, her social relations and the power configurations that are shaped in the process of possession. Lambek perceives possession as an alternative form of knowledge that operates in the context of the dominant body of knowledge (in Thailand, Theravada Buddhism), in spite of the “uneasy” relationship between the two. The people using Mae Wan’s services are faithful Buddhists, as is Mae Wan. Both spirit possession and Buddhism offer knowledge that, in Lambek’s line of thought, people can freely and variously draw from. Instead of a mere functional-pragmatic approach to spirit possession as a counter hegemonic strategy of the dominated, spirit possession should also be considered as a public context in which knowledge circulates, is constituted, understood, and in turn reworked into “personal and moral configurations of thought and action” (1993: 395).

There is much truth in both approaches. In terms of personal freedom, professional status and economic power, however, the position of women in Thai society differs strongly from that of women in male-dominated Muslim societies, which form the majority of cases on which Lewis’ study is based. Still, in the Thai public domain (see below), which includes official Buddhism, men are dominant. In this situation, mediumship
may provide opportunities for women to increase their influence. In the earlier analysis of Chulalongkorn Day at Mae Wan’s residence and the “King Chulalongkorn spirit possession sessions”, justice was given to both the economical and societal gains that spirit possession cults can bring for mediums and their entourage, as well as the idea of possession as a part of a discourse in which knowledge is constituted, interpreted and exchanged. Spirit possession sessions are complicated events, constituted by simultaneous processes of interaction between the medium, the spirit(s), and the audience. By implication, spirit possession sessions serve a wide variety needs, fulfil a wide variety of functions and allow for multiple interpretations. The following account of Mae Wan and her clientele will touch upon many of these aspects.

The first spirit ever to possess Mae Wan is the tutelary spirit Chao La (Lord La). The spirit possesses Mae Wan almost daily and he is the spirit that Mae Wan’s clients are most likely to consult. Chao La belongs to the category of deities (thevada) that Wijeyewardene has defined as “non-descriptive (...) whose names may come from legends now obscure” (1986: 207), “a miscellaneous grab-all” (ibid.: 220). Indeed, not much further information was found on Chao La, other than that the spirit was of a nine-year-old boy, coming from a distant and unknown past, but connected to the area. The characteristics of Chao La largely fit Irvine’s description of the stereotype of “the Small Lord” (chao noi), one of the three (traditional) spirit stereotypes mediums use “to construct identities for their possessing spirits” (1982: 253):

Chao Noi (...) is a shy, inexperienced, ignorant, unassertive child, a convenient role for spirit mediums to play in the initial stages of their careers.

The lord is also a spoilt, mischievous, irresponsible adolescent, a smart “spoilt brat”, whose “good sense of dress” is acted out by the medium when she uses expensive silk or scarves to improve on the standard uniform used by most chao: a long, bright coloured bathing cloth (...) tied at the waist, a head scarf worn tight to the skin and dark glasses (ibid.: 256).

Chao La never wore glasses, but always looked smart in his bright red appearance. People come to consult Chao La for healing and fortune telling, as well as to ask for remedies for a variety of problems. Since the spirit of King Chulalongkorn also comes to mount (khi ma) Mae Wan, Chao La serves as, as he calls it, the guide (kait) of King Chulalongkorn,
making all the preparations necessary to lead the spirit of the king to the tamnak at certain times.

Besides Chao La and King Chulalongkorn, many other spirits use Mae Wan as their medium. These spirits are deities, as opposed to ghosts (phi). The deities Chao Noi and Chao Phi belong to the same category as Chao La, but do not possess the medium very often apart from special occasions like the yearly “raising of the teacher” (yok khru) ceremony. A very different category of spirits that irregularly possess Mae Wan is those of the monks Somdet To, Luang Pu Thuat and Krhu Ba Siri Wichai. For Northern Thailand, the manifestation of these monks’ spirits is probably a rather recent phenomenon. In Wijeyewardene’s study, not a single reference is made to the spirits of these monks, while Irvine (around 1982) made the observation that some “modern” spirit mediums “claim to be possessed” by Somdet To. In the same paragraph Irvine notes that: “One spirit medium even says that her most senior caw [chao] are none other than King Chulalongkorn himself (…) and his son, King Wachirawut (…)” (Irvine 1984: 318).

As Chao La and some of the regular clients of Mae Wan related, the spirits of the monks and the spirit of King Chulalongkorn all came for the first time in 1992. Later, two more spirits appeared, Chao Dara Ratchami and Mae Bua Khiaw, two of the king’s wives. Chao Dara Ratchami was the king’s only wife from Chiang Mai, and the daughter of Phra Chao Inthanon (r. 1870–97), the city’s vassal ruler. The history of Mae Bua Khiaw is unclear, though it has been suggested she was the king’s wife from Wiang Kalong in Chiang Rai, another Northern Thai city.

Mae Wan, like most mediums, is never possessed by any spirit, not even Chao La on Buddhist holidays or Wednesdays (cf. Wijeyewardene 1986: 192). As Mae Wan explains: “Chao La knows that I need some rest too. He makes me tired and that’s why he does not come on Wednesdays. I also need some time to do shopping or to visit relatives.”

That a single spirit medium functions as the vehicle for such a variety of spirits in Thailand is a common phenomenon. There is a general tendency to incorporate mythological deities and historical figures from Bangkok urban culture and national history into Northern Thai spirit medium practices (Irvine 1984; Tanabe 2002). Tanabe gives a twofold interpretation of this process. First, he follows the general interpretation of female possession cults. The wide array of male tutelary spirits contributes to female appropriation of traditionally male domains of power: religion, monkhood, administration, politics, law enforcement, and many
forms of powerful magic. By staging spirits from these domains, female spirit mediums derive their supernatural power from the power of the domains involved. Second, the recent inclusion of spirits of figures from national history and Buddhist saints enables the medium to cater to a wide variety of tastes and preferences, therefore reaching the differentiated urban, or semi-urban, public that makes up the greater part of spirit mediums’ clientele today. Fragments of knowledge from different sources are freely and flexibly combined in the mediums’ performances (Tanabe 2002: 55–6).

The following section will demonstrate how the state, state rituals and the idiom of state-dominated history have blended into the amalgam of present-day Northern spirit medium practices. The celebration of Chulalongkorn Day described below illustrates how Buddhist ceremonies, traditional tutelary spirit cults, national heroes, and state ritual are incorporated into one large event, orchestrated by the spirit medium and attended by a diverse public. The Mae Wan Chulalongkorn Day celebration of 1998 combined four events: an initial, Buddhist ceremony; a wan piya maharat wreath laying ceremony; a possession session with the spirit of King Chulalongkorn; and finally, the ceremony of offering robes to monks at the conclusion of the Buddhist Lent (thot kathin), the rich’s traditional way of gaining merit. The latter ceremony took place in the afternoon at the temple of a small village one hour’s drive from the medium’s residence. It is not necessary to describe the kathin ceremony in detail, but the fact that Mae Wan had a kathin ceremony organised on Chulalongkorn Day should be kept in mind, as the inclusion of such rituals contributes to the general appeal of such celebrations.

The Initial Ceremony

As with every other important event in Mae Wan’s tamnak, Chulalongkorn Day started with a Buddhist ceremony. Five monks from neighbouring temples were invited to conduct the ceremony, which was scheduled to start at 9:30 AM. Before the ceremony began, Chao La was very busy directing instructions. Upon the arrival of the monks, the spirit of Chao La left and Mae Wan took her place among the audience, which was about twice as large as usual. Some one hundred people had come, among whom also quite a few people who had never, or rarely, been seen during ordinary possession sessions.

About three-quarters of the regular visitors were women. They came from a wide range of districts: Hang Dong, Lamphun, Mae Tang, San
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Patong, San Kamphaeng, Saraphi, and, of course, Chiang Mai City. In social status they ranked largely between lower urban middle class and villager (*chao ban*). The latter rather accurately reflects the socio-economic environment of the *tamnak* and that of the above districts, which are also neither urban nor rural. In all these areas, densely-built villages and some recent small estate developments alternate with paddy fields and orchards. Many families still partly depend on the income from their annual harvest of fruit or rice. But they also depend on the city for work (as a servant, policeman, or tailor, for instance) and higher education.

Furthermore, it is important to mention the group of five middle-aged ladies who, with their semi-traditional silk clothes, extensive make-up, hair-dos, golden jewellery and huge King Chulalongkorn medallions (*lokket*), fully met the ideal of Thai middle class women. Although relatively well-to-do, they were not rich: one was a teacher, one was the widow of a Westerner, and only two owned a car. These women knew each other and, as will be addressed in more detail below, belonged to the group of “more important” visitors. Other participants not to be counted among the average clientele of the medium were the men who performed various tasks in the ceremony. After the monks, the most senior present was the *makkhanayok*, the layman who led the ceremony. Other men were taking care of the microphones, adjusting fans and lights, and supplying the monks with drinking water. These men were distinguished from the majority of the audience by their gender, their active involvement, and their being unusually well-dressed.

The Buddhist ceremony conducted, the *sangkhathan*, lasted approximately half an hour. After the monks finished chanting, three women and two men, all from the middle class, presented offerings. Following this, the monks took their leave and the Chulalongkorn Day celebrations were continued outside. There, ten memorial wreaths were waiting to be presented at the King Chulalongkorn statue in front of the *tamnak*. During the presentation, the spirit medium was not possessed, but was part of the audience.

The Presentation of the Wreaths

The director of a high-school, Prajot Wongchai, presided over this part of the ceremony. He was dressed in his official *kharatchakan* (civil servant) uniform. After opening the ceremony by lighting the candle at the statue, he read the names of the persons and/or organisations presenting memorial wreaths:
The subdistrict headman and village headman (kamnan-phuyaiban)
the joined subdistrict policemen (tamruatchumchon tambon)
Free Magazine (fri maekasin), a recently established two-monthly advertiser
Om Sin Bank (thanakhan om sin)
Police Lt. Colonel (phan tamruat tho) Thanet Singsong
a group of followers/pupils (khana luksit)
the group from Rai Na Village, in Lamphun District (khana Ban Rai Na (Lamphun))
Daughter and Consort ( lukying lae phrasahai)
Mr Somkhit Saemphet
high-school director (phu amnuaiikan) Prajot Wongchai

What does the ceremony up to this point show? The chairman of the ceremony, as he related afterwards, visits the tamnak only occasionally, but he knows Mae Wan as a relative of her husband. He was asked to preside over this ceremony as he is a high civil servant (and conceivably the highest civil servant Mae Wan knows personally). The ceremony at the tamnak, thus, is arranged according to the same hierarchical structure as the official ceremonies. At Chiang Mai Provincial Hall, for instance, it is the governor, as the most senior civil servant at the provincial level, who presides over the ceremony. At the tamnak, this high-school director is the highest civil servant present.38

Before the director could come to the ceremony at the tamnak, he had to attend the official Chulalongkorn Day ceremony at Chiang Mai Provincial Hall. As that ceremony ended around 9 AM, the ceremony at the tamnak could start no earlier than 9:30 AM. The same applies for the representatives of the local administration (kamnan and phuyaiban), the policemen, and some other attendants of the tamnak ceremony: all of them first had to attend one of the official ceremonies. As a result, they all participated in Mae Wan’s ceremony in their official uniforms — contributing to the formal appearance of the event.

The subdistrict and village headmen, as well as the local police, present a wreath every year. Such wreaths, presented by officials, are kept in the tamnak until they have completely disintegrated or become very dirty. The other wreaths are kept too, but not as long. With this display of wreaths, the medium demonstrates her connections with the local authorities and their acknowledgement of her mediumship. The significance attributed to the display of these tokens of connection is demonstrated
most clearly by the preservation of one particular wreath: that presented by General Bunsak, a military official connected to one of the royal palaces in Bangkok. He had presented the wreath on Chulalongkorn Day 1996, a few months before I came to know about the tamnak. In the years before, the general had been a fervent supporter of the medium. He donated large sums of money for the construction of the tamnak (built in 1992), donated most of the statues, and travelled regularly from Bangkok to consult the medium. At that time he had the rank of Lt. General (phon tho). In 1996 he was made General (phon ek). According to Chao La, as well as several people who had known the general, it was due to the help of King Chulalongkorn that he attained his promotion. Although following his promotion, General Bunsak had apparently lost his interest in the medium, this loss of interest was not mutual. A few pictures taken of him and his wife at the palace still hold prominent places on the altar tables, among statuettes of the Buddha and holy monks, as well as pictures and statuettes of King Chulalongkorn. Chao La often mentioned his name and his support (although less frequently as time passed) while pointing to the memorial wreath or to the pictures, as even King Chulalongkorn sometimes did. At Chulalongkorn Day 1998, the memorial wreath was still there.

The presentation of the memorial wreath by Free Magazine was a novelty. Free Magazine had only come into existence in August 1998. The bi-monthly newspaper is freely distributed as it is fully financed by the advertisers. Consequently, Free Magazine contains little editorial text and many advertisements. The founder and owner had agreed with Chao La to use the tamnak as one of his distribution points.

The woman presenting the memorial wreath on behalf of Om Sin Bank was a regular visitor of the spirit medium. She often came to see Chao La for support, but she also attended the sessions with King Chulalongkorn. The woman, in her forties and unmarried, lived in the nearby district town, where she had a lower administrative position at a local office of the Om Sin Bank. Often she was very tired, and suffered from a painful back and legs. Chao La could comfort her by rubbing her legs with healing roots and giving short massages. This woman always made a rather depressed and overall unhealthy impression. Her contacts with the other women among the audience were very limited. It seemed as if she had hardly anything to say or share. Her presentation of the memorial wreath on behalf of the bank, however, was significant. On the one hand, it contributed to the prestige of the ceremony. It made the ceremony
arguably more complete, as banks also present memorial wreaths in the official Chulalongkorn Day ceremonies. At the same time, the presentation added to her own prestige at the tamnak. Dressed in her bank employee uniform, she was not the “washed out” woman she usually was, but a “somebody” contributing substantially to an important event.

Altogether, six wreaths were presented by individuals or groups not representative of official institutions. Although the Director and the police Lt. Colonel had their position and rank mentioned, they presented their wreaths in their personal capacities. The Group of Pupils (khana luksit) and the Group from Rai Na Village (khana Ban Rai Na (Lamphun)) were different groups of followers of the medium. It could be argued, the addition of the word khana gave their presentation a more formal appearance, similar to the official ceremony at the Provincial Hall where almost all wreaths are presented by centres, offices, institutions, schools, groups and so on. The representatives of those who called themselves khana luksit were the five middle class ladies mentioned earlier. They played a significant role in the events of the day, as they were closely involved with organising the later kathin ceremony.

The lukying lae phrasahai (Daughter and Consort) were a Thai woman, Wilai, and her farang (Western) husband David, who had first come to the tamnak approximately six months before and became intensively involved immediately. The woman told me she was the reincarnation of one of King Chulalongkorn’s children: the unborn child of Nang Rua Lom (“the lady of the capsized boat”). Nang Rua Lom is the popular name for Queen Sunanda Kumariratana, one of the most beloved queens of King Chulalongkorn. On 31 May 1880, the queen, her daughter, and her unborn child all died when their boat capsized on their way to Bang Pa-In Palace in Ayutthaya Province. Their death was all the more tragic as they might have been saved if it had not been forbidden for commoners to touch members of the royal family. After the accident, the king changed the law and lifted the prohibition. Furthermore, he erected a memorial for his beloved wife in the gardens of Bang Pa-In Palace. The memorial, containing the ashes of the queen, consists of a marble obelisk with an inscription.

The Nang Rua Lom memorial stands next to the Royal Memorial (Ratchanuson). The latter memorial was built in 1888 to commemorate a consort, a daughter and two sons of King Chulalongkorn who all had died the year before. In contrast to the austere Nang Rua Lom memorial, the Royal Memorial has no inscriptions. On each side of the base a
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Wilai spoke about her and her husband’s relationship with King Chulalongkorn. Some time ago she had been visiting Bang Pa-In Palace, something she had wanted to do for a long time. She also went to see the memorial of Nang Rua Lom. Looking at the memorial she was overwhelmed by a very strong sensation of sadness. There was, of course, no bust of the unborn child. The moment she realised this, she knew she was the reincarnation of this child. Not much later she learned about the tamnak of Mae Wan. Although she had never been there before, the king recognised her immediately as his daughter (lukying) at the first visit, reconfirming her feeling. For Wilai, this event made her feel as if she had “come home”.

Her husband, referred to as Consort on the wreath, had discovered that he had come to Thailand in a previous life during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. At the time he had been an Austrian general and had become an advisor and friend to the court. Wilai had recognised him on an old photograph taken in Russia with the king and other members of the court. Because both Wilai and David had shared a relationship with King Chulalongkorn in a previous life, they found each other again in this life. At the tamnak, the king had approved their relationship in person, in the knowledge that David, as an old confidante, would take good care of his daughter.

Except for the wreath presented by Wilai and David, none of the other Chulalongkorn memorial wreaths at the tamnak of Mae Wan carried symbols indicating a specific linkage of the presenters with the king, or their identity. All of the wreaths displayed a portrait of the king with flower decorations. Within this fashion, the design of the wreath of Wilai and David was exceptional; in all its plainness it expressed their link with the king “for those who know”. First, this wreath was bigger and more elaborate than the other wreaths. It was shaped in the form of a heart and heavily lined with beautiful, freshly-opened pink roses. The shape refers, of course, to the particular relations and emotions involved (father – daughter; father-in-law – son-in-law; employer – close advisor). The portrait on the wreath, a photograph that is generally believed to depict King Chulalongkorn as a young boy with Somdet Tö (see Figure 13), breathes a general atmosphere of confidence, intimacy and mutual respect. Wilai may have selected this particular photograph for the wreath because the atmosphere indirectly reflects her position as a daughter once more.
As observed, the ceremony at the *tamnak* follows the patterns of the ceremonies organised at the centres of administration. “Representatives” of the government, the educational system, and business, as well as individuals and groups, join the ceremony to pay respect to the king. The celebration illustrates how the dynamic nature of Thai popular religion is even able to adopt a secular state ceremony, allowing the modern state to enter its domain. This fits the underlying process, as described by Tanabe, in which a spirit-medium “(…) appropriates power by identifying herself with or, more precisely, copying or imitating the external other (…)” (2002: 57). Mae Wan’s appropriation of the *wan piya maharat* ceremony, however, stretches beyond the usual spirit-mediums’ identification with male, powerful mythical figures or national heroes, like King Chulalongkorn. The power imitated in this ceremony is actually the state itself. The fact that in the ceremony Mae Wan is present “in person” and, unlike most of the time, is not possessed is significant. When understanding spirit mediumship as the appropriation of power by mimesis, imitating the state by organising a state ritual no longer requires the imitation of any particular person.

Analysing this ceremony, the efforts of Mae Wan to organise Chulalongkorn Day as an integrated whole of Buddhist, state, and popular rituals can partly be understood from Tanabe’s sociological perspective of the appropriation of power. Such an event enhances the status of everybody involved in the organisation — in particular, that of the medium. At the same time, however, the organisers and participants together create a meaningful event in which knowledge is reproduced and circulated, helping people to establish a certain degree of coherence in daily life through a collective religious experience. Apart from this element of knowledge, the importance of the sensorial richness of the event should also be acknowledged: the aesthetic arrangement of the ceremonies contributes equally to the experience of the celebrations as a meaningful whole.

Interpretation of the ceremonial abundance of popular Chulalongkorn Day celebrations will occur later, following a description of the celebrations at Wat Doi Chang. In the next section will be a continuation of the description of the activities at the *tamnak*, focusing on King Chulalongkorn spirit possession sessions. King Chulalongkorn spirit possession sessions were organised at regular intervals, usually once every two weeks. The sessions largely followed an established pattern. On Chulalongkorn Day, after the wreath-laying ceremony had ended, the celebrations continued with a regular spirit medium session. The session
on Chulalongkorn Day differed from the usual sessions in one aspect only: before the king’s spirit left, the still-possessed medium posed for a photo session with the audience outside the tamnak, in front of the king’s statue and the wreaths presented in his honour.

The Appearance of King Chulalongkorn’s Spirit

Usually, King Chulalongkorn’s spirit arrives every two weeks on a Sunday, except for Buddhist Sundays (wan phra) or during a festival. In such a case the session was held on a Saturday or delayed for one week. The king himself co-ordinated the date and time of the next session with the audience using a calendar. By preferably organising the sessions on Sundays or, alternatively, Saturdays, the events were adapted to the urban life calendar, leaving little time on weekdays. The same can be said about the spirit of Chao La, who always possessed the medium by noon: lunch hour. Many regular visitors working not too far from the tamnak used their lunch break to consult Chao La.

While receiving King Chulalongkorn’s spirit, the medium is helped by an assistant (tang khaw) to get dressed in a white, rather official, jacket, wide blue trousers, white stockings and a brown, Western style men’s hat. During the Thai New Year (songkran) season in April, the king dresses in the Northern Thai (Lan Na) style — that is, in mo hom, the indigo blue farmer’s shirt and trousers with pha khao ma (a checkered loincloth).

All sessions started with the handing out of auspicious objects, including jasmine garlands and coins. Usually, as soon as the medium is fully possessed by the king’s spirit, at least one of the more well-to-do female visitors will first present twenty or thirty garlands. Subsequently, the king consecrates the garlands to distribute them among the audience. The coins “came with the king” in his sacred bowl. The custom requires that one pays a donation when receiving a coin. Until 1997 the price was 99 baht, but, as a result of the economic crisis the fee had dropped to 20 baht in 1998. For Chulalongkorn Day 1998, the king brought free lukprakham, rosaries with 108 (an auspicious number) wooden beads. As soon as the king had started to hand out the gifts, the audience eagerly gathered as close as possible around him; however, there generally were not enough gifts to suit everybody. Everybody also receives a royal mark — as if it were an anointment — on the forehead. While doing so, the
king asked newcomers where they came from, how they made their living, and whether they were married and had children, etc. Those people the king had met in earlier sessions were asked how they were doing and whether things were improving, etc. When everybody had received the royal mark, the king addressed the audience more generally. In contrast to Mae Wan or Chao La, who both spoke Northern Thai (kham mueang), King Chulalongkorn used Standard (Central) Thai (phasa khlang). But sometimes the king deliberately used kham mueang expressions, which were always received with great appreciation.

What were the most important elements of King Chulalongkorn’s image in these spirit medium sessions? First of all, the king’s image was fatherly. His speech and behaviour evoked the image of the wise and compassionate ruler who genuinely cared for each of his subjects. The king consistently referred to himself in terms of a (grand)father (pu or pho) speaking to his (grand)children (luk-lan). The children were to behave as good people and to support each other, and not to steal or envy each other. They should work hard and spend their money wisely. He gave advice such as: “If you have twenty baht, use only five baht for food and keep the rest. Then you always have something when need comes.” A word frequently used in the king’s monologues was “endurance” (otthon). “The children” should practise patience and endurance (luk tong mi otthon). When it became clear in the course of 1997 that the economic crisis would continue to make life hard for many, otthon became the king’s central statement.

The second feature of the king’s image in the sessions was the recounting, or actually the enactment, of a combination of the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn modernised Thai society” with “King Chulalongkorn used to visit the countryside”. In every session the king spoke about the progress (khwam charoen) he had brought to the country in the past, with a few examples, such as the introduction of electricity, railways and roads serving as illustrations. Sometimes air-conditioning was added to the list. But the subject subsequently changed to the positive influence of his current spiritual presence on the direct environment of the tamnak. The following quotation illustrates the fusion of both narratives: “Since pu [grandfather] sadet phrapat ton [made a royal excursion] to the tamnak of Mae Wan, there has been khwam charoen [progress].” Examples of this recent progress included the asphalting of roads in the entire neighbourhood, the connection of the area to the waterworks, and the presence of the telephone in the tamnak.
spirit strongly associated with modernity and accessibility, the king was easy to reach by phone. Indeed, during the King Chulalongkorn spirit possession sessions, the king periodically received calls (see Figure 14).

One final dimension of the king’s image needs to be mentioned: the idea of the king as an auspicious power, a power that works almost independently from his personal qualities. During the sessions the king’s spirit made continuous lottery predictions by “hiding’ numbers in his monologues. To give some examples: the king may begin the session with telling the audience that today (sometimes mentioning the numerical date), King Rama the Fifth (ro ha = 5) has come (khi ma) with King Rama the Sixth (ro hok = 6) to eat four (4) duck (pet = paet = 8) eggs (round shape = 0). Or sometimes, he would suddenly change the subject by asking the audience how many people there were and/or how many of them were women. Of course, everybody would then start counting. The king might occasionally repeat the outcome of these countings — sometimes in reverse order — before resuming to talk about the original subject. Similarly, he sometimes would ask someone among the audience about his or her age. The audience followed these lottery predictions eagerly and took notes, apparently without paying much attention to the recounting of the (already very well-known) narrated portraits.

Determining Distinction

We have now arrived at the question of what values and meanings or, in Lambek’s terms, what knowledge the King Chulalongkorn sessions carry for the people attending the spirit medium sessions. The answer to this question, of course, is very much dependent on the person concerned. The audience did not have a homogenous background and motivations for attending the sessions varied. To indicate this variety, the background and role of some of the individuals present will be highlighted.

For one category of people, it hardly seemed to matter whether the spirit medium was possessed by the spirit of King Chulalongkorn or by any other spirit. These people did not realise, or hardly realised, who King Chulalongkorn actually was. Their ignorance was clearly demonstrated, time and again, by the king himself. In most of the sessions the king would, at a certain moment, select an old woman from the audience to question her on her knowledge about King Chulalongkorn. The following is one such situation:
King: Old lady (*phu tao*) how old are you?

Woman: Seventy-eight

King: Do you know who I am?

Woman: [shakes her head to show that she does not know]

King: *Phra phuttha chao luang*. Do you know what *phra phuttha chao luang* means (*khue arai*)?

Woman: [remains silent]

King: *Phra phuttha chao luang* means *ro ha* (Rama V) *khue* (what means) *phra piya maharat*. Do you know which day is *wan piya maharat*?

Woman: [shakes her head again]

Audience: [mumbling] October the 23rd.

King: That is *wan piya maharat*. Did *luk lan* never tell you? Do you have a portrait of me?

Woman: [in the meantime becoming quite embarrassed] No, I don’t have one.

The king then asked somebody to bring him two of the King Chulalongkorn photographs from the altar tables. The first photograph depicts a visit of the king to Mount Suthep (Doi Suthep). The king speaks highly about Khru Ba Sri Wichai, as due to the efforts of this monk a road was constructed to the Doi Suthep temple (which is located on top of Suthep mountain). Subsequently, he asks the woman to identify him in the photo:

Woman: [hesitates and then points to the wrong person.]

King: That is wrong. I am the person at the left, wearing the top hat.

The next photograph, a picture of “the king cooking a meal”, is then shown to the audience.

King: I like cooking and I like [to be dressed and behave] ordinarily (*chop thammada*).

In this setting the spirit medium used the portrait of “the king cooking a meal” to symbolise the king’s commonality with the Thai people.
The king’s appearance on the picture — in a sarong (*phanueng*) and stripped to the waist (presently no longer considered a proper way of dressing in public) — is very different from that on the other picture shown, where King Chulalongkorn is dressed fashionably “with a top hat”. It remains of course a guess whether this really was an attempt by the spirit medium to evoke feelings of commonality, so as to counterbalance the questioning of the old woman.

For these old women, such questionings were no reason to stay away from the possession sessions with the spirit of King Chulalongkorn. They continued to attend the sessions in the hope they would hear — and indeed, were afraid to miss — the winning lottery numbers. Additionally, these women belonged to the group of regular visitors of Chao La. They only stayed while the spirit of King Chulalongkorn possessed Mae Wan.

For the medium, on the other hand, the presence of these elder “village” women was of help in moulding her relation with the middleclass among the audience. No greater contrast could be imagined between these elderly village women and, for instance, the five middle-class ladies mentioned earlier. Such ladies *know* about King Chulalongkorn. Their detailed knowledge of the king, especially on his preferences, was clearly demonstrated by the offerings they brought: pink or red roses, bottles of cognac or whisky of the correct brands, cigars, and the right kinds of fruits and Thai sweets. It was always one or several of these ladies who made the preparations required for the sessions: the appropriate clothes, the roses, the food, the drinks, etc. Everything had to be arranged properly. Most of the time, one of these women also assisted the medium in getting dressed. The huge King Chulalongkorn *lokket* (medallions) on their necklaces distinguished them, the insiders, from those “who do not know”. These women were never selected by the king for an “examination on knowledge of the king”. Furthermore, to the public, the embarrassing questioning of elderly women indirectly reconfirmed the middle-class women’s status as insiders, while at the same time serving as proof that the possessing spirit is really King Chulalongkorn. No other spirit would be able to display so much detailed knowledge of King Chulalongkorn.

Important for the argument here is the mere fact that these five middle-class women, as well as some other middle-class people, had come to the medium out of an ostensive interest in the king, as demonstrated by their medallions, offerings and involvement in the organisation of the sessions. With their involvement, the five women demonstrated how participation in the King Chulalongkorn cult allows them to perform
as successful, knowledgeable, and stylish people, representative of the middle-class as it should be. In contrast with others in the audience — whose interest in King Chulalongkorn was largely limited to his appearance in the medium sessions — such women always carried the king with them. They, and the world they sought to represent, shaped the form and contents of the King Chulalongkorn sessions at least as much as the medium itself. Without such a middle-class audience, King Chulalongkorn's spirit would probably never have appeared at the tamnak of Mae Wan at all. Conversely, the tamnak's semi-urban setting offered more urban participants an opportunity to perform as successful members of the middle-class. The latter argument will be underpinned with a short digression on the differing involvement of middle-class men and middle-class women with the medium. This section will also serve as an introduction for the argument on the importance of gender in the King Chulalongkorn cult as well.

The Disappearance of the Spirit of Somdet To

The year 1992 was a turning point in Mae Wan's career as a spirit medium. That year she became the medium for the spirit of King Chulalongkorn and for the spirits of the holy monks Luang Pu Thuat, Somdet To, and Khru Ba Sri Wichai. At the time, Mae Wan still lived elsewhere, although in the same neighbourhood. As related by Somrot, a follower of Mae Wan since 1992, the tamnak was built as an appropriate space to receive the spirit of King Chulalongkorn. In Somrot's words,

We selected a place for the tamnak [its present spot] and then first had to ask Somdet To, Luang Pu Thuat and Khru Ba Sri Wichai to give their approval for our choice. They did and Mae Wan moved to the house where she lives now. There was, however, no money to build a tamnak. Nevertheless the tamnak was built within two months, because two- to three hundred people were willing to donate money. The construction costs were approximately 1.000,000 baht. King Chulalongkorn (somdet phra phuttha chao luang) inaugurated the tamnak in June 1993.

Apparently at the time, Mae Wan was able to attract a rather large and steady group of followers who were able to donate the money needed. From these people, Somrot and the earlier mentioned General Bunsak will always be remembered. Their names are inscribed in golden letters on the bases of the statues they donated. General Bunsak donated the
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statues of Khru Ba Sri Wichai and Luang Pho Thuat. He also donated most of the money needed to buy the marble King Chulalongkorn statue. According to Somrot, the accumulated merit and the spiritual support of King Chulalongkorn helped Bunsak to become General. Somrot donated the King Chulalongkorn statue in front of the building and the Somdet To statue. Somrot relates:

The Somdet To statue is huge. It did not fit in my car and it had to be transported by train from Bangkok to Saraphi. The King Chulalongkorn statue also comes from Bangkok and I brought it personally. I took it with me in the plane. The strange thing was that I was able to carry the statue on my own. Once I reached the tamnak there were five people waiting to help me to put it in its place. The five of them were not strong enough to manage, but I could do it on my own. This is because I pray (suat mon).

Somrot’s background is different from most people’s at the tamnak. That is also how he perceives it himself:

Most people here are villagers (chao ban). These people do not know how to speak about King Chulalongkorn, so they say: somdet pho ro ha [venerated father R5], instead of phra phuttha chao luang [Royal Buddha]. Not me, I am a civil servant (khanatchakan), I know how to use royal language (ratchasap). Also because, long ago, somebody has taught me how to use it. I have always worked for the government, as a mining official, but I am not an engineer (…). When I came here for the first time I did not believe in this kind of spirituality (winyan), actually. A friend had told me about it, but I first wanted to see it with my own eyes. When I arrived, I met Chao La. Chao La knew everything. For example that I had asked three people how to get there.

Somrot was lucky to arrive that day. He not only met Chao La, but King Chulalongkorn and Somdet To. In Somrot’s opinion, Somdet To is higher then King Chulalongkorn, as Somdet To was King Chulalongkorn’s teacher.50 He has therefore a strong belief in the power of the amulets of this monk (phra somdet amulets) and in the power evoked through praying the phra khatha chinnapanchon, a khatha strongly associated with Somdet To (see Chapter IV for more on this khatha). With regard to the power of the phra somdet amulets, he related the following story:

When King Chulalongkorn went to Europe, he took with him a phra somdet amulet once given to the king by Somdet To himself. In Russia,
the Tsar asked the king about the light that seemed to shine through the king's clothes on his chest: it was the amulet. The strong power of the amulet greatly impressed everybody who saw it or heard of it. Clearly, nobody in Europe would dare to inflict any harm upon the king.

Somrot learned about the phra khatha chinnapanchon (hereafter PKC) from a monk more than twenty years ago while still living in Bangkok. It is a very long prayer, very difficult to recite by heart, and something that might take months to learn. It took Somrot, however, only seven days because he had asked Somdet To to help him.

Somrot visited the tamnak only rarely now that he has moved to Lampang, a city that lies at too large a distance to continue his once regular visits. This has been a real setback for the medium. Until sometime in 1996 the spirit of Somdet To used to come every Thursday evening, as the PKC is recited on Thursdays. The sessions started at 8 PM, a time scheme comparable to Chao La's preference for noon, and King Chulalongkorn's preference for weekends: not during office hours. Under the guidance of the monk's spirit the audience would practice meditation and recite the PKC. During my research I was occasionally told that I had again missed a session with the spirit of Khru Ba Sri Wichai, but I never heard of any recent possession session with the spirits of Somdet To or Luang Pu Thuat. In June of 1997, Chao La noted that the present Thursday sessions could not continue anymore, as there were no "men with knowledge" who could help with the sessions. In contrast with the King Chulalongkorn sessions, where women [with knowledge] could provide all the assistance required, Somdet To was a monk, therefore not able to be touched by women.51

Apparently, the Thursday sessions had greatly depended upon Somrot's initiative and participation. His departure — which coincided with the death of another man actively involved in these sessions — had de facto led to the disappearance of Somdet To's spirit from the tamnak of Mae Wan. Arguably, the disappearance of Luang Pu Thuat's spirit had a similar cause. As General Bunsak had donated the statue of Luang Pu Thuat, he was probably a dedicated worshipper of the monk. By becoming General Bunsak, Lt. General Bunsak had achieved one of his greatest ambitions, subsequently losing his interest in the spirit medium. His disappearance from the medium's clientele implied the disappearance of the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this material. First, the appearance of the spirits of these monks (both nation-wide venerated
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saints (arahan) at the tamnak specifically catered to the interest of urban middle-class men. The local involvement with these monks differs greatly from that with Khru Ba Sri Wichai, Northern Thailand’s most venerated saint (see Keyes 1982: 149–80). Hence, the spirit of this monk continued to possess the medium, something that happens particularly during thunderstorms. The spirit is connected with thunderstorms because Khru Ba Sri Wichai is said to have been born during a thunderstorm.52

Second, the explanation given by Chao La points to a strong gender division in the involvement of middle-class people at the tamnak. Following tradition, men involve themselves by and large with the spirits of holy monks. Without any underlying tradition, women seem to involve and engage with the spirit of King Chulalongkorn. This leads to the following argument: participation in the King Chulalongkorn cult gives women certain societal opportunities, which otherwise remain limited. Namely, to build networks involved in organizing religious activities next to the existing male-dominated institutions in these fields. This recent development should be partly understood as a response to changing gender relations in Thai society. This argument will be further elaborated below, using the material of Chulalongkorn Day at Wat Doi Chang as its basis.

**Chulalongkorn Day at Wat Doi Chang**

At Wat Doi Chang, unlike other Buddhist temples, the peak day of the year is Chulalongkorn Day. The Chulalongkorn Day celebration at the temple has nothing in common with the official state ceremony: it is mainly a religious festival. Chulalongkorn Day, as with many other days associated with kingship, is an auspicious day. For this reason, more temples plan a ceremony on this day and invite the laity to come to the temple to gain merit (tambun). The festivities organised at Wat Doi Chang, however, go much further than taking opportunity of the day’s auspiciousness. At Wat Doi Chang, Chulalongkorn Day is incorporated into the calendar of annual Buddhist festivals. During the festival the worshipping of King Chulalongkorn is combined with a variety of other auspicious ceremonies, all contributing to each other’s prestige and sacredness, as well as to that of the day in general. In addition, on the 24th of October, Wat Doi Chang celebrates thot kathin — the Buddhist ceremony marking the end of the Buddhist Lent — much like the spirit medium Mae Wan’s connection of this Buddhist ceremony with Chulalongkorn Day. Thot
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*kathin* has to be celebrated sometime between late September and early November, but certainly not specifically on 24 October. Attaching the *thot kathin* ceremony to Chulalongkorn Day pulls the latter even more into the religious sphere. The interpretation of Chulalongkorn Day as a religious event is strongly reinforced by the focus on the orphan centre — an initiative strongly related with King Chulalongkorn (see Chapter II) in the *kathin* ceremony. For many people who make donations to the temple during these two days, but in particular during *thot kathin* (when the largest donations are made), the idea that they also contribute to the maintenance of this charity project is important, making the donation extra meritorious.

On the early morning of 23 October 1997, the narrow lane leading to Wat Doi Chang was full with parked cars and vendors of food, toys, ice-cream, and drinks: the common scene of any temple fair. A busy day was ahead; the celebration of Chulalongkorn Day comprised an impressive religious programme, and already many people had come. The temple area was lavishly embellished with large bouquets of roses everywhere. Some two-and-a-half metres above ground-level a huge “cobweb” of white cotton thread covered the entire temple area, beautifully shimmering in the early morning sunlight. Around 7 AM the monks started chanting, marking the beginning of the celebrations. As there were far too many people to fit into the temple’s largest building, the *sala* — where the monks conducted their chanting, most people found themselves a place outside. In the middle of the temple area long tables were arranged in a wide square. An enormous quantity of baskets of food, drinks, and snacks brought by the laity was waiting there to be offered to the monks later that morning. While more and more people entered the temple area, the monks continued chanting, their voices loudly amplified by powerful sound equipment.

On the occasion of Chulalongkorn Day 1997, the temple had organised four ceremonies in addition to the traditional almsgiving ritual, which is part of any temple festival. The first ceremony was the mounting of top ornaments (*the cha* and the *cho-fa*) on the temple’s pagoda (*chedi*), starting at 7:59 AM exactly. For this occasion the pagoda had been entirely put in scaffolding. Tied to a long rope, the ornaments were hoisted to the top, where three men waited to place them on the pagoda. Apart from the rope, the ornaments were also tied to a *sai sin*, the white cotton thread also used in *phutthaphisek* ceremonies. During the hoisting as many people as possible tried to be in touch with either
the rope or the thread. This was obviously an auspicious moment. The abbot had invited the abbots of two other temples to lead the ceremony. During the hoisting the three abbots held the thread and rope, and chanted a prayer. The beneficial power generated by the prayer is said to be transferred through the rope and thread to all sacred objects and people “in touch”.

The ceremony was followed immediately by the official opening of the new building housing the school and orphanage. This ceremony was chaired by a woman, the chairwoman of the “housewives group of the Kawila Army Barracks” in Chiang Mai (klum mae ban thahan bok) — certainly not an ordinary housewife. She had a title (khunying, Lady) and, her husband was supposedly an army officer of high rank. The woman, Khunying Aphinya, lit a candle, and a chapter of monks conducted a short chanting.

The third ceremony took place at the wihan with the King Chulalongkorn statue, named Wihan Luang Chao Fa Chulalongkorn or Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan. Also on the wihan, a cho-fa was installed. Since the Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan statue was only some four metres high, this ornament-mounting ceremony was less spectacular than the pagoda ceremony. Again, Khunying Aphinya led the ceremony. She hoisted the cho-fa, together with two bouquets of roses, to the roof of the wihan. Indicative for the different nature of the two hoisting ceremonies was that no sai sin was connected with the ornament and no people were touching the rope during the hoisting. The atmosphere was also less sacred and more festive, the latter enhanced by the Kawila Army Barracks music band, which had been invited to add lustre to this part of the programme. After the cho-fa had reached the rooftop, Khunying Aphinya and the other members of the housewives group conducted a brief ritual to mark the official opening of the wihan to the public. This ritual consisted of the lighting of the candles in the wihan and paying respect to the three royal statues therein.

At around 9 AM all special morning ceremonies had been completed and the programme continued with the usual alms round of monks in the temple precincts. The most respected monk was one of the abbots that had been invited for the first hoisting ceremony. All those present made sure to put their first offerings in his alms bowl. The abbot of Wat Doi Chang himself was not among the monks making their alms-round. For the rest of the morning he was staying in the sala to receive large numbers of people, many of whom had made the trip from Bangkok especially to consult him and to make donations to the temple.
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The fourth and final ceremony of the day was a sacralisation ceremony (phitthi phutthaphisek), which took place in the evening. In the two days ahead of Chulalongkorn Day many people had brought amulets, portraits, and images of holy monks and of King Chulalongkorn to the temple to have them sacralised. This ceremony lasted from 7:50 PM to 1 AM the next morning. The event was attended by several hundreds of people.55

The ethnographic setting of the Wat Doi Chang celebrations demonstrates how the participation of women in the King Chulalongkorn cult contests traditionally male religious power. The ceremonies belonging to the traditional Theravada Buddhist repertoire, the temple ceremonies so to say, continue to be the domain of men. However, the ceremonies related to the King Chulalongkorn cult, as a recent phenomenon, seem to a large extent to be monopolised by women. Here it can be observed that the King Chulalongkorn cult offers women an opportunity to obtain influence and express status by fulfilling leadership functions in temple activities, a field hitherto largely restricted to men. A closer look at the preparations needed for the ceremony at the Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan will give a more sophisticated picture of the division of tasks within this general category of “women”, showing how the participation of women in female religious networks is a middle-class phenomenon, expressing and enhancing such women’s status vis-à-vis other women.

A Myriad of Roses

Most eye-catching at the temple were the abundant decorations of the Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan. A fan-shaped red-carpet of thousands of red roses covered the left side of the marble stairway leading to the entrance. The interior decorations were even more impressive: roses were literally everywhere. A three-layered elevation along the skirting-board of the walls was adorned with three broad bands of red, white and pink roses. The base of the King Taksin statue was decorated with bouquets of red and white roses, the King Naresuan statue with pink and white roses, and the gilded King Chulalongkorn statue with red, pink and white roses. Smaller bouquets were hanging in festoons along the ceiling and attached to the ledge. In 1998 — the year the decoration was exclusively made of pink roses — the wihan was as impressive as the previous year (see Figure 9).

The decoration of the wihan for Chulalongkorn Day turned out to be an annual attraction for the visitors of the temple. In order to gather
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enough roses, the laity is requested to donate white, red or pink roses (the king's favourite colours) on the 21st and 22nd of October. Indeed, every year an innumerable amount of roses is donated.56 The responsibility for the arrangement of the flower decorations lies with a wealthy female flower trader from a flower market in Chiang Mai. On “Chulalongkorn Day’s Eve” 1998, she rushed in accompanied by two male assistants ready to execute all her orders immediately. She was a tall and robust woman in her mid-thirties with an authoritarian personality. She had long black hair, and was dressed in black trousers with a long, dress-like shirt of vivid red silk printed with black camels. In essence she was in every aspect — both physically and mentally — the opposite of the humble, modestly-dressed local women awaiting her instructions for arranging the flowers. With her Chinese appearance it was almost as if the Chinese goddess Kuan Im (chao mae kuan im) had descended from heaven to take care of the wihan decorations in person. The woman was wearing eight golden bracelets — seven of which were identical — on her left arm, a golden watch on the right, large shining earrings, and, last but not least, an extravagant King Chulalongkorn lokket, at least ten centimetres in diameter and in a heavy golden setting, attached to a matching golden chain.

Earlier that afternoon a similar woman, though much older, had come to see the abbot. This woman was — according to one of the 15 relatives who had come with her from Bangkok — an important and long-standing benefactress of the temple. The woman, Mae Yai as she was called (meaning “Big Mother”), was in her sixties, and had the same authoritarian attitude as the flower trader. With her hair dyed pitch-black and her long white dress covered with a bright-coloured red, gold and green silk coat, she was an equally noticeable figure. Like the flower trader she was of Chinese descent, covered with jewellery, and wearing an extremely huge golden King Chulalongkorn lokket on a long golden chain. This woman’s attitude towards the abbot was remarkably different from what might be expected. Most notably, there was no trace of submission in her behaviour. While the abbot addressed her family, she even took the liberty of having a closer look at the amulets in the abbot’s bowls and some of his other attributes. Usually, women take utmost care not to touch anything belonging to the abbot or any monk. The abbot clearly considered her of so much importance that she could supersede the limitations usually set on women in institutional religious settings. Mae Yai and her family disappeared as quickly as they had come. They did not
participate in the ceremonies of the next day; nor did the flower trader. After giving her instructions she went back home. The local women of the housewives group, on the other hand, had to work through the whole night to finish the decorations in time. As others observed, only the flower trader returned very early in the morning to see whether everything had been executed in accordance with her instructions.

**Kingly Charms**

The ethnographic material from both Wat Doi Chang and the tamnak of Mae Wán shows that it is middle-class women who are taking a leading role in the activities connected with the King Chulalongkorn cult. In this final section, one particular expression of the differentiation of these women from the other: their King Chulalongkorn medallions (*lokket*) will be elaborated. It is argued that the King Chulalongkorn *lokket* served as the material manifestation and reconfirmation of the status of such active women in their networks.

A King Chulalongkorn *lokket* is a necklace with a pendant bearing the image of King Chulalongkorn. Depending on the financial situation of the owner, the chain may be made of heavy silver or gold. The image itself may be placed in a silver or golden setting, surrounded by precious stones. Cheap, mass-produced, King Chulalongkorn lockets, however, are for sale everywhere and are affordable for everybody. The difference in materiality between *lokket* not only indicates the wealth and status of the owners, but also their varying degrees of involvement in the cult. The elite members of the housewives group at Wat Doi Chang, for instance, such as the lady hoisting the roof ornament and the five ladies active at the tamnak, all wore clearly visible golden or silver King Chulalongkorn *lokket*, or occasionally, a “King Chulalongkorn brooch”. These *lokket* were not readily for sale, but designed and made according to the taste of the owners. Their owners were the women in charge of financing, organising and conducting the King Chulalongkorn ceremonies. In contrast, the lower-class women of the temple’s housewives group, as well as those at the tamnak, did not wear any King Chulalongkorn *lokket* apart from an occasional cheap medallion. At the tamnak such women had no special tasks in the King Chulalongkorn spirit possession sessions. At the temple these women arranged the flowers. Arranging flowers (normally not roses) for temple ceremonies is one of the usual tasks of local lay women. For these women, the King Chulalongkorn ceremonies — though social and meritorious events — added to the work to be done.
Clearly, within the groups of women described, the *lokket* (or its absence) and its material qualities were good indicators of the owner’s relative wealth and status. But what exactly does a King Chulalongkorn *lokket* add to its owner? To make this clear, it is important to return to the proposition made earlier, namely that the importance of women in the King Chulalongkorn cult should be understood as a response to changing gender relations in Thai society. It is argued the *lokket* is the female equivalent of the predominantly “male” Buddhist amulet.

In his book “The Buddhist Saints of the Forests and the Cults of Amulets”, Tambiah (1988) seeks to explain the increasing popularity of amulets and amulet collecting among urban Thai men, a phenomenon that evolved in the late sixties and early seventies. Tambiah even speaks about a “cult of amulets” and a “craze” (1988: 201, 228–9), attributing this development to the combination of Thai society becoming increasingly competitive and violent on the one hand, and the mere fact that it is men who daily engage in this competition for power, on the other. According to Tambiah, men are increasingly in need of protective and supportive amulets (ibid.: 228). But, more then that, since only the wealthy at the top can afford to buy the most powerful amulets, such as the extremely expensive hard to find genuine Somdet To amulets (*phra somdet*), an amulet collection is also a reflection of a man’s status within his networks (Stengs 1998: 73). The following case, taken from Tambiah (whose book is based on research done in 1978–79), illustrates the competitive and public character of amulet collecting:

(...) the *phra somdet* amulet of the first batch (*run*) (...) is deemed to be an envied collector’s piece. It is popular knowledge in Bangkok that a big businessman and millionaire by the name of Pomphan paid 700,000 baht (US$ 35,000) for a single tablet of the first batch. There are annual contests held in Bangkok for judging these Buddha-image amulets (...), and Pomphan’s piece is the uncontested winner in its class. It is rumored that another millionaire offered Pomphan 800,000 baht for the amulet but was, not unexpectedly, refused (1988: 220).

To Tambiah’s observation it should be added that the desire for potent objects — at least today — is not restricted to men, but common among all Thai, regardless of rank or gender. It will be hard to find somebody, man or woman, who does not wear an amulet or other potent object. As has been shown in the previous chapter, King Chulalongkorn objects are a fine example of such “other potent objects”. To judge from their
lokket, the active middle-class women described above were apparently as much in need of protection, good fortune, and public distinction as men. Sharing with men a need for potent objects, however, does not automatically imply a similar engagement of women with amulets and amulet collecting — here Tambiah is arguably correct. Knowledge about amulets — their spiritual and material qualities, when they were made and by whom and, most importantly, how to distinguish the real thing from the fake — is mainly a male affair (see also Stengs 1998). To cater to the enormous male interest in amulets, the market is flooded with dozens of weekly and monthly magazines, and every year many books are printed and reprinted, discussing detailed information on certain categories of amulets and images. In these amulet magazines one might run into an occasional article on King Chulalongkorn or on the power of King Chulalongkorn objects, but one won’t find this topic in connection with women. Women, to a large extent, are excluded from such magazines. Significantly, the subject “Women and King Chulalongkorn” has found a niche in feature magazines, between charity projects, recipes, fashion, environmental issues, holiday destinations, and other “glossy” subjects. Here one will find women recounting their magical experiences with the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, or see them depicted with their collection of King Chulalongkorn statues or genuine contemporary King Chulalongkorn portraits. The subject “Women and King Chulalongkorn” is as modern as these magazines and their readers.

Let me return to the active middle-class women at Wat Doi Chang and the tamnak. It can be interpreted that a custom-made expensive King Chulalongkorn lokket is an opportunity to wear an amulet and a jewel at the same time. As a jewel, the lokket has a “natural” element of show and display. It is meant to add to the appearance of the owner. Its material preciousness expresses the owner’s affluence and success. But, a King Chulalongkorn lokket is, as all objects bearing the image of the king, an auspicious object as well. As an auspicious object it makes — and shows — that the owner knows herself to be protected, at the same time explaining some of her visible prosperity. In addition, the auspicious image of the king is far more appropriate for depiction on an object worn by women than an object worn by a monk.

So far, the message of the lokket consists of elements of urbanism, fashion, success and power. When it comes to the need for protection, good fortune and expressing status, it can be concluded that women wear King Chulalongkorn lokket for similar reasons as men who wear
Amulets. But there is more to it than that, and that extra is precisely what differentiates the lokket from both amulet and jewel: the portrait of the king. What does the portrait of King Chulalongkorn add? Through the king’s portrait, the lokket places the owner’s wealth and status in the context of the narrated portraits of modernity and independence as parts of Thai identity, while placing this wealth and status in a moral perspective. Lokket tell that striving for affluence and societal status is essentially Thai, and also befitting of women. As a simultaneous expression of both wealth and adherence to the cult, the lokket also justifies wealth as a reward for moral conduct and spiritual dedication.

Furthermore, lokket are a means to demonstrate one’s engagement with religious and nationalist activities. Such activities are widely acknowledged as necessary and important. The societal networks that evolve inevitably around these activities can provide middle-class women the kind of acknowledgment and status that were traditionally only accessible for men. The material qualities of the different lokket express the position of the owners in the hierarchies of these networks. As the case of Wat Doi Chang shows, these networks operate alongside traditionally male religious domains and therefore do not compete directly with male-dominated networks.
Saints and Spirits

Why did so many Thai turn to King Chulalongkorn 80 years after his death? What did the King Chulalongkorn cult offer above the wide array of cults around spirits, monks, and deities that always have been part and parcel of Thai popular religiosity? Were there any societal circumstances particular to the last decade of the twentieth century that formed the seedbed of the King Chulalongkorn cult? In searching for an answer to these questions, it is tempting to look for novel elements in the cult itself that might suggest reasons for its success.

Thus far there has been no central concept, need, or belief in the cult that is entirely new or related solely to King Chulalongkorn. The beneficent effect of the merit of moral Buddhist kings on subject and society was a central concept in Theravada Buddhism of old. Modernity and independence have been vital elements of Thainess since the early twentieth century, when Thai nationalist ideology began to take shape. Thus, apparently, it is necessary to look beyond the actual cult when seeking an explanation of the cult’s recent popularity. This requires a wider socio-political perspective than the cases of individuals, organisations and groups worshipping King Chulalongkorn discussed so far. Although almost all of these cases can be understood against the background of the hegemonic Thai nationalist ideology, this perspective neglects actual political, social and/or economic circumstances.

In this chapter, therefore, I will widen my focus beyond the King Chulalongkorn cult, to examine how political and socio-economic developments of the second half of the twentieth century are reflected in changes in religiosity. One of the purposes of this chapter will be to situate the King Chulalongkorn cult amidst other expressions of Thai popular religiosity, in particular the cults around venerated monks and
millenarianism. The first part of the chapter discusses the veneration for holy monks as a way of exploring what the figure of King Chulalongkorn offers that cannot be found in other cults. The second part will discuss the Prayers Society, a nationalist religious movement, which has incorporated King Chulalongkorn as a focus of worship amidst the many saints already worshipped by its members. Apart from offering an example-in-a-nutshell of the hybrid constellation of popular Thai religiosity (cf. Pattana 2005), the Prayers Society’s relevance for my argument lies in its contribution to the shaping of the King Chulalongkorn cult by its public performances. Since the current Prayers Society is actually the continuation of the Huppha Sawan, a movement that has been studied in detail (see especially Jackson 1988), its history helps to illustrate the mutual interaction between political and religious discourse, including the influence of global politics on these discourses. In addition, the history of the Prayers Society’s teachings sheds light on the role of one particular elite network in shaping these interactions. I will seek to convince the reader that the modern spiritual discourse created by this small elite — a blend of spirituality, politics, and science — broadens the appeal of participating in cults, including the King Chulalongkorn cult, for modern-minded middle class Thai.

The Cult of Venerable Fathers

In virtually every place where King Chulalongkorn is one of the main objects of worship, other historical kings, monks or deities are worshipped too. Conversely, the image of the king is often found at temples and spirit medium residences where King Chulalongkorn is not the major object of worship. But there his image usually appears as one among a multitude of images of the (local) holy monks, gods, and kings that fill halls and altars. The King Chulalongkorn cult is clearly but one element in the amalgam of cults that constitutes Thai popular religiosity today.

The assemblages of cult objects in Wat Doi Chang and the tamnak of Mae Wan well illustrate which figures are the most important in the Thai popular pantheon. In both places, life-size statues of the holy monks Somdet To, Luang Pu Thuat and Khru Ba Sri Wichai loom large among the statuettes of divinities. At the temple and the tamnak, one will generally find copies of Somdet To’s famous phra khatha chinnapanchon offered for free distribution. The Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan at Wat
Don Chang houses, in addition to a golden King Chulalongkorn statue, huge King Naresuan and King Taksin statues. Outside, the temple area is dominated by a brightly coloured statue of Ganesha, the Elephant god, that is more than two metres tall. The temple’s sala is lined with statuettes of, above all, King Bhumiphol, the Chinese goddess Chao Mae Kuan Im, and King Taksin. Mae Wan’s garden has a special Chao Mae Kuan Im pavilion. The worship of these saints and divinities is nation-wide, and thus is not confined especially to these places or to the North. The worship of Khru Ba Sri Wichai, however, carries a special Northern significance (see Chapter III). All these divinities belong, so to say, to another plane of existence: they are believed to reside in one of the heavenly abodes. This excludes, however, King Bhumiphol, whose presence in this worship will be discussed in Chapter V.

The worship of living saints, and of extraordinarily venerated monks in particular, is a substantial a part of Thai popular religion. This is hard to observe when looking at the assemblages of images at Wan Don Chang and Mae Wan’s tamnak, however. For example, during the time of research, images of Luang Pho Khun, a nation-wide venerated monk from the Northeast, were virtually omnipresent in the public domain, making the absence of his image from the temple and tamnak (as well as at many other temples and spirit residences I visited)1 noteworthy.

The cult around Luang Pho Khun gained momentum in the early 1990s, eventually reaching the point where the king and other members of the royal family could be included among his following (see Jackson 1999a). Luang Pho Khun was featured almost daily on television as well as in printed media. Cult objects bearing the monk’s image, such as posters, amulets and “lucky banknotes” could be seen — in use or offered for sale — everywhere. The Luang Pho Khun lucky banknotes — meant to increase income — also frequently bore the images of King Chulalongkorn, Chao Mae Kuan Im and Nang Kwak, “the Thai deity of wealth” (cf. Jackson 1999a: 47). Like King Chulalongkorn amulets, Luang Pho Khun amulets were present in cars to protect against accidents (cf. ibid.: 22). Thus, when focussing on the needs of worshippers for seeking spiritual support, and the means to approach these powers, there is no great difference between King Chulalongkorn, Luang Pho Khun or any other divinity. All that counts is the conviction of the worshipper. From this perspective, the King Chulalongkorn cult does not appear as an isolated phenomenon but as part of an interrelated and versatile repertoire of practices, beliefs and symbols surrounding a wide variety
Saints and Spirits

of charismatic and magical figures — irrespective of whether these are present-day highly revered monks or spirits from a historical or mythical past. Differentiating between cults of living saints and those of historical or mythical figures may shed light, however, on the question of why cults of living saints may disintegrate easily after a monk's death, while cults of monks and heroes from a more distant past continue. In addition, and more importantly, a comparison will help to clarify King Chulalongkorn's specific appeal amidst so many other potential objects of worship.

Luang Phon Khun, Somdet To and Luang Pu Thuat all belong to a particular category of monks who are venerated for the magical powers they are believed to possess. Such monks are usually addressed with the epithet luang pho or luang pu (literally, venerable father/venerable grandfather). The connection between monks and magic is an ancient one, and is still part and parcel of present-day Thai religiosity (cf. Jackson 1999a; Kirsch 1977; Mulder 1973; Pattana 2005; Peltier 1977; Tambiah 1988 [1984]; Taylor 1993; Terwiel 1994 [1979]; Turton 1991). Although any monk might engage in healing practices, the application of magic tattoos, lottery predictions, or the production of amulets, doing so is not sufficient for becoming a luang pho. To follow Peltier's explanation, the epithet luang pho is a popular assignment that does not follow any established rules, but depends solely on the strength of the laity's belief in a monk's supernatural power (aphinihan). However, since the acclaimed supernatural power is supposed to result from superior knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, meditation, and moral discipline, most luang pho are praised for their excellence in these fields. This explains why many luang pho are phra thudong, or, forest monks. These monks keep to thirteen additional ascetic precepts (dhuthanga) and, as opposed to urban or village monks, dwell in reclusion in the forest. For the laity, these monks are wandering saints, renowned for their supernatural qualities (Taylor 1993). An increasing urban lay admiration and patronage of phra thudong — a phenomenon starting among the elite in the 1940s and popularised in the 1960s (ibid.) — eventually culminated in a “luang pho cult”. Luang Pho Khun's status is equally founded on a reputed spiritual superiority acquired after many years spent as a phra thudong (cf. Jackson 1999a: 6).

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, when modern media and means of transport in Siam had begun to develop, the fame of a luang pho remained a largely local phenomenon. But since the early 1950s, the magical powers of an ever-growing number of luang pho have
become a mass-media topic (Peltier 1977: 16–7). For this development, I will use the generic term “luang pho cult”, in analogy with Tambiah’s “cult of amulets” (1988 [1984]). Although only a variety of individual luang pho cults exist, these cults share so many characteristics that the perception of a single phenomenon is justified. The interest in luang pho pertains both to those deceased and living, since it is believed that even now miracles caused by the power of deceased luang pho occur. This power usually manifests itself through magical objects, places related to these monks, or through encounters with these monks’ spirits in dreams, visions, or spirit medium sessions, as discussed earlier.

The media attention paid to living luang pho can become so substantial that some even become national celebrities, visited regularly by members of the royal family or other elites, including top politicians or high brass military. In the 1990s, Luang Pho Khun (born in 1923) was by far the most popular media monk, with almost daily front-page coverage of the miracles attributed to him and his amulets by prominent people (cf. Jackson 1999a). It goes without saying that a visit from the king contributes enormously to a luang pho’s renown (see Taylor 1993: 207, 214–8). However, Jackson correctly perceives the royal patronage of luang pho as a two-way process, in which the monarchy gains as equally from appropriating of a monk’s charisma as vice versa. To again take the example of Luang Pho Khun, the king and queen came to visit the monk only when he had already been embraced by prominent politicians and military officials. The participation of the royal couple in the monk’s seventy-second birthday ceremony (1995) further increased the monk’s charisma. At the same time, the royal visit silenced criticism, and sanctioned, for example, the controversy that ensued when an image of the monk replaced that of the king on lucky banknotes. In 1996, after Luang Pho Khun had fallen ill, the king and queen took care of him by having the monk transferred to Bangkok, where he was treated as a private patient of the queen (Jackson 1999a: 38–40).

Nevertheless, support from the highest circles does not prevent a cult around an individual luang pho from collapsing soon after the revered’s death. For example, the cult of Luang Pu Waen (1888–1985), a monk who could count the king, Princess Sirindhorn, and, particularly, high military among his followers, disintegrated not long after his passing. Jackson, discussing the “deflation of charisma” of monks who have fallen ill or have passed away (1999a: 57), quotes Bangkok Post journalist Tunya Sulkpanich’s writing about the collapse of such cults:
A problem in Thai society is that the average Buddhist follows and respects particular monks rather than the Buddhist teachings themselves. Therefore, when highly respected monks pass away ... [their] temple loses its members, who in turn seek the guidance of other monks. Jackson considers it possible that the Luang Pho Khun cult will continue after the monk's death since, in his opinion, the monk's charisma has become relocated “into the multitude of [Luang Pho Khun's] reproduced images” (ibid.: 58). To follow Jackson in this exercise, I think it would be clarifying to note that Jackson's “relocated charisma” matches Tambiah's “sedimentation of power” (see Chapter II). No doubt, the belief in the power of Luang Pho Khun amulets and other images will continue after the monk's eventual demise. In that respect, the continuation of the Luang Pho Khun cult may become part of the general “cult of amulets”. Luang Pho Khun's charisma, however, could also continue to exist by mediation through “others” — i.e. monks and spirit mediums — who are believed to have developed a spiritual connection with the monk. If this were to happen, Luang Pho Khun's charisma would, in addition to being materially relocated, be spiritually appropriated as well.

This possible mediation of a luang pho’s spiritual power is significant for understanding the continuation, or rather “revival”, of cults, as observed in those built around Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To. Monks and spirit mediums are, for the wider public, the most important mediators of this spiritual power. The aspect of possible mediation essentially differentiates the cults of living saints from those of the distant past. The spiritual power of a living luang pho cannot be mediated by any other person, whereas the spiritual power of a deceased luang pho can be mediated by any person believed to have the capacity to do so. The case of the spirit medium Mae Wan is an illustrative example of the latter. In this chapter we will encounter several examples of mediation of spirits of luang pho, particularly those of Luang Pu Thuat, who died many centuries ago, and Somdet To, who died over a century ago.

The tendency of cults formed around living luang pho to dissolve shortly after the luang pho’s death may be partly understood from the impossibility of mediating their spiritual power, or, from another perspective, their personal charisma. Another important factor in the collapse of such cults may be found in the media's eagerness for news, sensation and images. In that respect, living luang pho have something to offer that spirits do not: the potential to appear daily in the media, preferably in
the presence of leading figures (including the royalty) whose charisma also depends also on media attention. Upon the demise of a venerated monk, the joint interest of the media and celebrities readily shifts to the activities of other famous monks, quickening the cult’s breakdown as much as it once boosted the monk’s charisma.

Transitions in the Thai Pantheon

Having so far elaborated on the distinction between the appeal of living saints and the spirits of the deceased, we are now left with the question of why King Chulalongkorn can be so easily worshipped together with the spirits of deceased monks. Apparently, the incorporation of King Chulalongkorn into the pantheon of popular religious figures did not replace any already venerated monk or deity. Does this imply that qualities difficult to attribute to monks or other saints are attributed to King Chulalongkorn? In my discussion of this topic I will limit myself mainly to the co-existence of the cults of Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To with that of King Chulalongkorn. The cult of Chao Mae Kuan Im would in fact deserve similar attention, but as the worship of this deity was not a prominent part of the daily routine at Wat Don Chang and Mae Wan’s residence, my attention was drawn mainly to the other cults.

The extensive mass-media coverage of luang pho and their magical qualities accelerates and broadens the dissemination of their fame, but should also be understood as an expression of the tremendous need for these qualities. That this need is not easily satisfied is apparent from the enormous quantities of amulets produced with the images of luang pho, the endless stream of biographies and other publications dedicated to the lives and miracles of the luang pho, and the increasing number of (sometimes huge) luang pho statues erected at temples and other places of worship (cf. Taylor 1993).

To understand how earlier individual regional luang pho cults evolved into a nation-wide phenomenon in the early 1950s, I will give a short overview of the development of the cult of Luang Pu Thuat. Apart from the fact that the Luang Pu Thuat cult presently co-exists so prominently with the King Chulalongkorn cult, there are two other arguments to first concentrate on Luang Pu Thuat. First, thanks to Peltier’s research, it is — to my knowledge — the only luang pho cult of which details about the initial stage of its development into a mass media phenomenon exist.
Second, as will be shown, the local *luang pho* veneration of Luang Pu Thuat was one of the first to develop into a true national *luang pho* mass media cult. This provides us with the rare opportunity to examine the initial underlying needs, emotions, and circumstances of the worshippers. Luang Pu Thuat amulets are certainly not seventeenth-century objects created by Luang Pu Thuat himself; nor are they even contemporary. According to Charoen, a teacher of photography at a vocational college in Chiang Mai who is both a fervent amulet collector and a worshipper of Luang Pu Thuat, the first Luang Pu Thuat amulets were made only in 1954. Another sources cites the date as 1952 (see Peltier 1977: 69, note 2). Charoen recounted how, in 1954, the abbot (Luang Pho Thim) of Wat Chang Hai had a vision in which the former abbot, Luang Pu Thuat, instructed him to make amulets with his image (see also Peltier 1977: 69–70; Maud 2008). In this respect, the Luang Pu Thuat amulets were radically different from traditional amulets. Traditional amulets have the shape or bear the image of a Buddha figure. Amulets with monks’ effigies have characterised the *luang pho* cult ever since.

We may wonder what the effigies of these venerated monks on this new type of amulets have to offer that the image of the Buddha on a traditional amulet fails to provide. To understand the specific qualities of this innovation, it may be important to note that *luang pho* are concrete actors in contemporary Thai history, whereas the Buddha is too abstract and too far away to enable the establishment of a direct personal relationship. Locally venerated monks have always provided advice and magical protection to lay followers. For their devotees, such monks are *thi phueng* (patrons, see Chapter II and Dr Phichai’s case, below). Arguably, the introduction of portrait amulets in the *luang pho* cult, and subsequently, in posters, photographs, and statuettes, offered a new possibility of detaching the establishment of a direct personal link with a *luang pho* from the requirement of his physical nearness, a process analogous to the role of portraits in the King Chulalongkorn cult (described in Chapter II). The *luang pho* cult therefore shares with the King Chulalongkorn cult the characteristic of being a “cult of portraits”, and in this respect may be regarded as a parallel.

A brief comparison between the different groups among which the cults of Luang Pu Thuat, Somdet To, and King Chulalongkorn began — respectively, in the 1950s, the 1960s and the early 1990s — and their specific concerns and interests, will clarify what the King Chulalongkorn cult offered beyond the already existing *luang pho* portrait cults.
Luang Pu Thuat: Protection for Military

As the story goes, not long after the manufacture of the first Luang Pu Thuat amulets a group of soldiers of the Thai border police miraculously survived an ambush set up by Malaysian rebels. It was later revealed that the soldiers had been wearing the new Luang Pu Thuat amulets, which explained their survival for many. The incident was widely covered in the national press, causing soldiers and officials of three army divisions to replace their old amulets with Luang Pu Thuat amulets. The resulting increase of the demand for Luang Pu Thuat amulets led other temples to produce their own. Not much later, Luang Pho Thim was invited to preside over several Luang Pu Thuat amulet consecration ceremonies in Bangkok (Peltier 1977: 70). Peltier gives a threefold argument to explain the explosive nation-wide development of the Luang Pu Thuat cult. First, a local cult was already in existence. Second, border incidents and attacks by rebel groups fostered the need for magical protection among the military. Third, the mass-media helped to quickly spread the news of the first miracles all over the country. Peltier illustrates the latter argument by observing that the fame of Luang Pu Thuat in the early 1970s even reached into Eastern Laos and Western Burma, where Thai is well understood and Thai media are widespread and easily received (ibid.: 69).

Presently, a similar observation can be made of the King Chulalongkorn cult. Portraits of the king are often arranged on Laotian altars amidst images of Laotian royalty (Evans 1998: xvii–xviii).

Supernatural protection against physical threats has always been a part of magical practices surrounding the military and warriorship, or, more accurately, manhood in general. There is a vast repertoire of tattoos, magical formulae and amulets to protect the skin against knives, swords, or bullets, to block enemy guns, or to make a man invisible to his enemies. Most of such protection was, and still is, provided by specialised monks, who pass the secrets of their knowledge to a select group of disciples (see Terwiel 1994; Turton 1991). In this light, it is quite understandable that, so shortly upon the conclusion of the Second World War, the actual physical threats imposed by both the Cold War and the wars in Southeast Asia boosted the need for magical protection among the Thai military (cf. Peltier: 1977: 50). Luang Pu Thuat has remained popular in military circles since the “ambush miracle”; in my view, this was initially more or less coincidental. The monk's amulets have remained strongly associated with “invulnerability” or, more generally, protection against
violent death (*tai hong*). Charoen gave a recent example of this power: in a newspaper article he had read on the 1997 Thai Airways crash in China, the only person to have survived unharmed was wearing a Luang Pu Thuat amulet.

The *luang pho* cult, however, did not remain limited to either Luang Pu Thuat or military circles, but expanded rapidly to a multitude of *luang pho* and other sections of society. Soon many other monks — all famous for more or less specific supernatural qualities and powerful amulets — became the objects of nation-wide veneration. *Tambiah* — whose research into this subject dates from the late 1970s — attributes the increasing popularity of amulets to the uncertainties and dangers that went with modern urban life of the time (1988: 228–9). In my view, we have to understand the particular popularity of Somdet To in this context.

### Somdet To: Assistance to Civil Servants

For many worshippers, Somdet To embodies compassion (*metta*), with the legend of the monk containing several anecdotes of his loving kindness. In the movie *Nang Nak* (Mrs. Nak, 1999), Somdet To saves a village community from the upset, mourning spirit of Mrs. Nak by directing his compassion (*phrae metta*) towards the latter. *It* is believed that a particular power of Somdet To is to support someone in his relationship with his superiors (see also Peltier 1977: 97). Somdet To amulets (*phra somdet*), or a recitation of the *phra khatha chinnapanchon*, evokes the compassion of those ranked higher in the hierarchy, increasing the chance of getting a raise in salary or a job promotion. *The* need for this particular power reflects the concerns and desires of the modern white-collar workforce, whose numbers have been increasing strongly since the 1950s. *In* the early 1970s the cult of Somdet To was already well developed. The value of an original *phra somdet* was generally expressed in comparison with the price of a car, indicating both the high price and the unobtainability of the object (ibid.). In 1971, anticipating the centenary of Somdet To’s demise, a large number of *phra somdet* were miraculously discovered in an old temple, an event that was widely covered by the press. The amulets were distributed among those who donated a considerable sum to the restoration of the Phrom Rangsi temple, a temple in Lopburi province connected with Somdet To. *Professor Chanchit Krasaesin*, the author of a 1962 two-volume biography on Somdet To, declared in *The Bangkok Times* that anyone who believed in Somdet To could testify to the
authenticity of the amulets (ibid.: 189–92).

This overview shows how changes in popular religious practices reflect changing societal circumstances. The differences in emphasis between the different *luang pho* reflect different anxieties. The Luang Pu Thuat cult reflects intensifying military tensions in the region and the military’s concern for their physical safety. The Somdet To cult reflects the career needs of the growing numbers of urban employees and civil servants. Differing emphases, however, do not imply, for example, that military officials will not worship Somdet To next to Luang Pu Thuat, nor that civil servants do not wear Luang Pu Thuat amulets. As time goes on, the distinctions tend to become more vague. Any Thai who believes in the power of amulets, irrespective of profession or class, is eager to own a genuine Somdet To or Luang Pu Thuat amulet. After all, the military are equally in need of their superiors’ *metta* for promotion as employees are in need for protection against *tai hong* in the form of plane or car accidents.

Apart from their special qualities, saints and their amulets have also become sources of beneficial power in general. The simultaneous worshipping of several saints is based both on the idea that doing so increases the number of risks covered by the saints’ different qualities and, inasmuch as it concerns beneficial power in general, the idea that “more is always better”. King Chulalongkorn could, therefore, be easily incorporated in the pantheon of Thai popular religious figures, as is exemplified by the common joint arrangement of the statues of the foremost *luang pho* and King Chulalongkorn. What matters for the individual worshipper is that the *luang pho* as well as King Chulalongkorn are Thai saints, and are equally part of Thai Buddhism. Illustrative in this respect is the incorporation of Somdet To into the King Chulalongkorn myth. The emphasis put on the intimate relationship between Somdet To and the young Prince Chulalongkorn (as visualised in Figure 13; see Chapter III), and the role the Huppha Sawan ascribes to Somdet To in the Pak Nam incident (see Chapter I), may serve as examples here.

**King Chulalongkorn: Support for the Self-employed**

Here we are back at the main issue of this chapter: the co-existence of the King Chulalongkorn cult with so many other cults. To address the question of which new qualities King Chulalongkorn contributed to the pantheon of venerated saints, I want to discuss the group among which
the King Chulalongkorn cult initially developed. This is because, as we have seen in the case of Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To, these qualities are best articulated by the concerns of the first worshippers of a cult. At the same time I will discuss which new developments in Thai society are reflected in the King Chulalongkorn cult.

The veneration of King Chulalongkorn evolved into a public cult in the late 1980s/early 1990s among urban people with an uncertain income. According to Nithi, mainly entrepreneurs and business people — ranging from street vendors, shop keepers, and restaurant owners to real estate agents and developers, stock traders and other self-employed people — came to worship King Chulalongkorn at the equestrian statue (1993: 12). For entrepreneurs, whose prospects cannot rely on the benevolence of a direct superior, the image of the king as a benevolent father, interested in the well-being of any Thai, offered an ideal figure to adopt as a patron.

The first public manifestations of the cult coincided with the Thai economic boom that began in the second half of the 1980s. Until 1980, agriculture accounted for more than 50 per cent of the country’s exports (mainly rice and cassava). Between 1985 and 1995 the export of manufactured products increased annually by 25 per cent, amounting to a seven-fold increase of total exports in 1995. In that period “thousands of local firms joined in the surge of export-oriented manufacture”, encompassing the production of a wide variety of goods such as textiles, electronics, jewellery, wood products, car parts, and processed goods (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 4). Moreover, in the 1980s the population of the Bangkok region further increased to 8.9 million (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 198, 207). The boom reached its zenith between 1987 and 1990. The growing confidence of multinationals in the Thai economy resulted in a strong inflow of foreign capital from 1987 onwards. This development, in combination with a continuous rise in export profits, led to a secondary boom in the Thai domestic urban market in 1988, particularly in Bangkok where 48 per cent of the country’s GDP was produced. Urban consumers increasingly spent money on cars, houses, and luxury goods, which in its turn accelerated the growth in real estate, construction, retail, finance, and telecommunications (ibid.: 162–4).

High hopes and great expectations were fed by success stories of overnight millionaires, but were balanced by the fear of falling behind or losing one’s gain. The-sky-is-the-limit fantasies for one part were reflected in a building boom that rapidly transformed the image of the city.
Pasuk and Baker mention, among other examples, a bank headquarters modelled after a robot toy (the Bank of Asia, “the Robot building”), modern condominiums designed as a Roman temple (the Jareemart Apartment, for example), Swiss cuckoo-clock houses, and a “rowhouse development disguised as a medieval castle complete with drawbridge” (1998: 163). Shopping malls grew in number and size, offering customers attractions such as amusement parks, swimming pools, zoos, or virtual-reality parlours. A new soap genre appeared on television, dramatising the excitements and difficulties of the extremely wealthy (ibid.: 160–4). In addition to the usual modes of speculation (gambling, stock market, real estate) that go with finance capital, this period was characterised by an increasing proliferation of, borrowing from the Comaroffs, the “spectral enchantments” of capitalism (2001: 19). The large number of people putting their faith in so called “direct-sale companies”, a form of pyramid schemes such as the American-based Amway, AIA (American Insurance Association) and the (Thai) Giffarine, formed another dimension of “the allure of accruing wealth from nothing” (cf. ibid.: 22).

The further development of the King Chulalongkorn cult should, at least partly, be understood against this background of intensifying preoccupation with wealth. Jackson, in this respect, considers the King Chulalongkorn cult a “prosperity religion” (1999a: 55–6, see Roberts 1995), “a religious movement that emphasises wealth acquisition more than salvation” (Jackson 1999a: 7). The cults around Chao Mae Kuan Im and Luang Pho Khun may also be regarded as “prosperity cults (...) to be linked with nationalist narratives of Thai development, growth and cultural pride” (Jackson 1999a: 56). Comaroff and Comaroff, discussing “the global proliferation of ‘occult economies’”, “a concept that parallels by and large that of ‘prosperity cults’”, distinguish two dimensions of these economies:

(...) a material aspect founded on the effort to conjure wealth — or to account for its accumulation — by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason; and an ethical aspect grounded in moral discourses and (re)actions sparked by the real or imagined production of value through such ‘magical’ means (2001: 19).

Indeed, in Thailand, religious movements, spirit cults, and meditation masters also receive extensive support from the urban middle class, who in their quest for financial gain, or legitimacy of acquired wealth, seek
backing in meritorious conduct. However, at least in the Thai case, it should be emphasised that the application of “magical techniques” aims not only at accumulating wealth, but also at countering misfortune. The moral conduct (prayer, charity, votive offering, and meditation) that largely constitutes the worshipping serves both objectives in an inextricable manner. Prosperity cults should therefore be considered as intrinsically ambiguous phenomena: they are about the opportunities and the perils that come with globalisation. The optimistic, nationalistic discourse of progress, emphasised more or less one-sidedly by Jackson (1999a: 56, 1999b: 308–9), is thus but one dimension of Thai prosperity cults. Its counterpart is equally significant: a discourse about failure, disillusion, and the fear of being left out.

This negative discourse is continuously present in the background and may, under the right circumstances, easily reach the surface. This discourse is also essentially nationalistic in nature, since its main topic of concern is the survival of the Thai nation. This concern will be one of the topics discussed in the remainder of this chapter, which will be dedicated to the Prayers Society (abbreviated from the Jinapanjara Suttam Prayers Society). The religious movement’s prophecies of doom may well be interpreted as an extreme expression of common Thai concerns with the consequences of globalisation.

The Prayers Society

Once again, I return to the 1996 Chulalongkorn Day celebrations, and specifically to the celebrations at the equestrian statue on Thursday, 24 October. These celebrations were organised by the Prayers Society, an organisation dedicated to praying daily at royal monuments for the sake of peace, the monarchy, and the nation. This part of the chapter deals largely with the history of the Prayers Society, highlighting the role of elite members of this group and their wider networks. I have chosen to pay ample attention to the Prayers Society for two reasons. First, the organisation is one of the many faces of the King Chulalongkorn cult, interweaving its own rituals and narratives into the cult. The Prayers Society influences the King Chulalongkorn cult significantly through the organised worshipping sessions held at the equestrian statue on Thursday evenings. Second, the winding path of the Prayers Society through four decades of Thai history offers a rare view of the interaction between politics and popular religiosity over an extended period of time. The
account of the genesis of the Prayers Society and their religious teachings will contribute not only to our understanding of the background and context of the King Chulalongkorn cult, but also helps to relate this cult to the veneration of King Bhumibol, the subject of Chapter V.

Chanting for the Monarchy

In the late afternoon of Tuesday, 22 October 1996, I met Mr. Prasert Sukhothanang at the equestrian monument of King Chulalongkorn. Mr. Prasert was there to invite worshippers to a ceremony in honour of King Chulalongkorn, organised for the following Thursday evening. He invited me as well, introducing himself as a member of the organising committee of the Jinapanjara Suttam Prayers Society (Chomrom Suatmon Phnakbatha Chinnapanchon/Society for Chanting the Venerable Chinnapanchon Formula). He told me that the Jinapanjara Suttam Prayers Society had organised its first evening prayer session at the equestrian statue on Chulalongkorn Day 1993, and that a session had been held at the monument every Thursday since.

On the 24th, around 8 PM, a large number of people, one thousand in my estimate, had come to join the ceremony. They were sitting on sheets of blue plastic and many of them were dressed in white. The organisation had invited five monks from the Marble Temple (Wat Benchamabophit) and four visiting monks from Sri Lanka to give their blessings and chant Pali-texts, in addition to the standard one-hour chanting and prayer programme described below. From a leaflet distributed by the organisation, I learned that apart from the Thursday sessions at the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn, weekly chanting was conducted at the equestrian monument of King Taksin on Saturdays, at the statue of King Vadjiravudh (Rama VI) on Wednesdays, and at the statue of King Phra Phutthaya Yodfa (Rama I) on Fridays. The same programme was conducted on Sunday afternoons at the Prayers Society’s Headquarters.

The whole event left me puzzled. What kind of organisation had I met? Was it governmental or Buddhist? Where did this idea of chanting at royal monuments come from? What were they actually praying? What did King Chulalongkorn have to do with it? And, last but not least, what kind of people participated? To find an answer to these questions, I joined the chanting at the monuments for several weeks, engaged in conversations with participants, volunteers, and leaders and visited the
Headquarters. Furthermore, the Prayers Society kindly provided me with many leaflets, newspapers, and books, all published by its own publishing house. Later I found several other books published by the organisation at major bookstores in Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Within a few weeks, Mr. Prasert gave me a partial — and unexpected — answer to the first two questions. As promised, he sent me some information on the Prayers Society, including a booklet compiled by himself, entitled *Fighter for Humanity, A Summary: Ariyawanso Bhikkhu (Prof. Dr Suchart Kosolkitiwong)*. The name Suchart Kosolkitiwong was familiar to me through an article by Peter Jackson (1989) on a religious movement — the *Samnak Pu Sawan/Huppha Sawan* — established by Suchart in 1966.\(^{20}\) According to Jackson, the movement had collapsed. Suchart had been prosecuted in 1981 on charges of occupying state land illegally (ibid.: 163), although he managed to escape arrest until 1987. In 1988 he was sentenced to one year in prison but released on bail (ibid.). Jackson describes the downfall of the Huppha Sawan that took place in 1981–82. Its related organisations were disincorporated, their assets frozen, and Suchart and the Huppha Sawan accused of illegal possession of arms, lese majesty, and, above all and in spite of their right-wing teachings, of communist sympathies. From Prasert’s booklet it became clear that a close connection existed between the Huppha Sawan and the Prayers Society. This knowledge gave the prayer gatherings at the royal statues a political dimension in addition to its religious one. Was there any specific political objective behind the prayer sessions?

During the period of research, all Thursday evenings at the monument were completely dominated by the Prayers Society. Only a small minority of worshippers set themselves apart from the crowd on the blue sheets. This had not always been the case. In 1993 and the subsequent one or two years, the number of people coming to the square independently from the Prayers Society by far exceeded the number of people that joined in the chanting.\(^{21}\) By now, the reverse was true. Apparently, the organisation has been able to attract a large number of people despite its negative history, particularly on Thursday evenings.\(^{22}\)

Every prayer evening the same sequence of activities is followed. Between 6:30 and 7:00 PM the small yellow van with Prayers Society volunteers arrives at the designated statue. Some volunteers unroll the long blue sheets of plastic to sit on. Others distribute leaflets among passers-by and people waiting curiously to see what is going to happen. Music from speakers on top of the van alternates with spoken text in
a bid to compete with noise from the surrounding traffic. Then more
speakers and microphones are installed. A portrait of King Bhumibol
is placed in front of the statue concerned, together with the national
tricolour flag and the yellow Buddhist flag.

During the preparations more and more people take a seat on the
sheets. Those arriving early generally know each other. They are the “hard
core” — a group of 30 to 40 people altogether — who will attend vir-
tually every Prayers Society evening session. Usually, they chat quietly or
meditate. At 8:30 PM the session leader (always a member of the board
of the Prayers Society) takes a microphone to start the programme. The
participants make three royal salutes (thawai bangkhom), after which the
chanting starts. Every evening the same texts are chanted in the same
order, except for special occasions like Chulalongkorn Day or King
Bhumibol's birthday. Special programmes will then be conducted. As
explained on both the chanting leaflet and the recorded voice from the
speakers, the sessions are organised with the purpose of generating a
maximum of positive power through chanting and praying. Although
this chanting and praying includes several texts, one particular formula
is considered to be very powerful, namely, the phra khatha chinnapanchon
(the khatha associated with Somdet To). The positive power that is
believed to be generated by the collective chanting of this long Pali-text
in particular is directed to the present king (thawai pen pharatchakuson
hai nailuang). Without exaggeration, we may state that the Prayers Society
has introduced a new element in Thai popular religiosity with these
sessions. By conducting public, collective chanting and “praying” pro-
grammes, the organisation has detached laity chanting from the traditional
temple liturgy.23

Understanding the Prayers Society, their teachings and practises,
their place in Thai popular religiosity, and their role in shaping the King
Chulalongkorn cult, is impossible without considering the organisation’s
links with the Samnak Pu Sawan. The following section, mainly based
on Prayers Society publications, shortly introduces its leader Suchart and
the early history of his various organisations.24

A Medium of Politics

Suchart was born in Bangkok in 1943 (2486 BE), the fifth of seven
children in a poor Chinese immigrant family. Since he did not like
school, he started to work at a very early age. He later finished four years
of primary education at a temple school. When he was 17 years old, a Chinese businessman gave Suchart a small amulet with the image of Luang Pu Thuat as a token of appreciation for his help. He first kept the amulet without paying much attention to it. But at a certain moment Suchart felt the urge to test its magical power. He therefore went to see a monk. The monk taught him a special Luang Pu Thuat katha, which he had to pray. As soon as he started to follow the monk’s instructions, a strong light hit him straight in the face and for a short while he lost consciousness. When he regained consciousness some friends who had accompanied him to the temple told Suchart that the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat had taken possession of him. But since Suchart had been unconscious during the possession he did not believe his friends, so he tested the amulet [i.e. prayed the katha] again and again, altogether more than a hundred times, in order to find out what had happened. At a certain moment, "(...) the Holy Spirit of Phra Bodhisattva Luang Poo Tuad [Luang Pu Thuat] really possessed Mr. Suchart's body and said, 'This man wants to test me so I will take him as my medium'" (Prasert 1995: 10, italics in original).

The news that the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat had taken possession of a human body quickly spread and many people came to consult the medium, especially those with diseases that no doctor could cure. Many of them recovered completely. But Suchart did not want to work for the spirit world, and thought that he might escape by going abroad. He went to Laos, but there the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat also possessed him, causing him to want to return to Thailand. It had become very difficult, however, to cross the border as a consequence of the increased political tensions between Thailand and Laos. Suchart took the vow that if the magical powers of Luang Pu Thuat could help him return to Thailand, he would accept his fate as the spirit’s medium. Thereupon Suchart could cross the border miraculously easy. Back in Thailand he had to join the army as a conscript soldier, a period that lasted from March 1964 until September 1965. It was in this period that the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat started to express his worries about the political developments of the time. According to the monk’s spirit, the political situation in the country was very bad (hetkan banmueang mai di), and the human world was in need of help from the spirit world. The spirit of Luang Pu Thuat then requested Suchart to found the Samnak Pu Sawan, or in the organisation’s own rendering in English, “the House of the Divine Sages on Earth” (ibid.: 13).
Cold War Millenarianism

Before elaborating on what spiritual help the human world could expect from the Samnak Pu Sawan, I first want to provide some political background in order to make understandable what the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat was referring to when he stated that the situation in the country was bad. First, since the early 1950s, Thai politics had gradually become dominated by a concern for the growing communist influence in Southeast Asia. Communism was considered to be a major destructive force, both for the Thai Nation and for Buddhism (Irvine 1982: 76–91; Jackson 1988: 141–3; Thak 1979). This concern particularly grew during the regime of Field Marshal Sarit (1957–63), when relations with Cambodia deteriorated and in Laos the Pathet Lao (the Laotian communist party) proved to be a major political power (see Thak 1979: 241–55). In Thailand, the communist party (CPT) had never been of significance, but in 1958 the CPT decided to take up armed struggle. In 1962, CPT headquarters were established in the Northeast and cadres were thereafter trained in Vietnam, Laos and China. In 1965 the first shot was fired (Bowie 1997: 62–3).

In the meantime the United States, in need of a stable anticommunist ally in the region, provided the Thai government with financial and military aid. Moreover, the United States made extensive efforts to convince the Thai government that outside threats were not the only important issues, but that internal security deserved major attention as well. The then Prime Minister, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who had come to power by means of a coup d’état, urgently needed to legitimise his regime. He therefore had set out a policy of development (patthana), which for him meant initially increasing the standard of living in rural areas (Thak 1979: 255). The emphasis was particularly on irrigation and welfare (ibid.: 258–9). As a consequence of the American involvement, the rather simple patthana concept was reformulated, and a policy was developed with a strong emphasis on community development and a tightening of administrative control through the extension of infrastructure and bureaucratic facilities. The Northeast region (bordering on both Laos and Cambodia) became the primary target for road construction and propaganda projects (ibid.: 256–68). After the death of Sarit (1963) these policies were intensified. Beginning in 1964, US military aid was directly used for counter-insurgency activities. Because of the increased involvement of the United States in Vietnam, a growing number of
American troops — 25,000 in 1966 — were stationed on Thai territory. In 1965 the U.S. started bombing Northern Vietnam and Laos from Thailand (ibid.: 271).

Although the message from the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat was not pointing to any concrete event, the first armed incident between communists and the Thai army occurred on 7 August 1965, in Na Bua village in the Nakorn Phanom province (Northeast Thailand). The confrontation, known as “The Day Gunfire Erupted” (wan ying arun) (Bowie 1997: 63), occurred while Suchart was serving his term as a conscript soldier. In the perception of Suchart, “The Day Gunfire Erupted” formed the signal to the spirit world (lok winyan) that assistance on earth was urgently needed. The threat of communism and the possibility of a Third World War that could lead to the complete destruction of the world remained at the core of the Samnak Pu Sawan’s, and later the Prayers Society’s, millenarian teachings (see also Jackson 1989). For the Samnak Pu Sawan, the “Day Gunfire Erupted” has always been of great significance. To mark the 12th anniversary, for example, on 6 August, 1977, the Huppha Sawan organised a ceremony in Na Bua village named “The Day when the Gunfire Ends” (wan siang pue dap) as a means “to promote peace and to give a halt to communism”.

The publications of the Samnak Pu Sawan and the Prayers Society on Suchart’s early years as a spirit medium do not provide us with sufficient details to place the development of his mediumship in a wider perspective. The politicised messages of the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat, and the subsequent founding of the Samnak Pu Sawan, suggest, however, a strong connection with intensifying military tensions in the region, a development of great relevance for the conscript soldier Suchart and his then immediate environment.

Mimicking the United Nations

The messages from the spirit of Luang Pu Thuat are indicative of the impact the anticommunist policy of the Thai government had on at least part of the populace. A similar appropriation of conservative, nationalist ideology by traditional religious experts, such as certain monks and spirit mediums, has also been observed by Irvine in Northern Thai in the late 1970s. These practitioners, the most famous of whom received wide support from the Chiang Mai and Bangkok elite, used supernatural means, such as amulets or “magic cylinders”, to foster mental health and
to resist communist subversion (ibid.: 73–5). The message of Luang Pu Thuat to Suchart indicates, however, that the popularisation of this anti-communist ideology should have begun at least as early as the mid-1960s. This popularisation was to some extent a consequence of two large “community development programmes” initiated in 1964 by the government to prevent communist activities. These programmes — the Phra Thammathut (Venerable Envoy of the Dharma) and the Phra Thammacharik (Venerable Wandering Dharma) — implied a large-scale involvement of the Sangha. Based on the idea that “being a Buddhist” was in contradiction with “being a communist”, it had become the monks’ task to strengthen Buddhism as a safeguard against communism, an unprecedented politicising of the monkhood (Irvine 1982: 68–9, note 3; Somboon 1993: 60–76).33

However, as in elsewhere in the world, the Cold War period in Thailand was not only characterised by the idea of dangerous and evil consequences of internationalism, but was counterbalanced by the good of the perspective of a “world-system of nation-states”.34 It was the period — to speak with Kelly — of the “United Nations world”; a world characterised by a “formal symmetry of nation-states” and “(...) [A] system in which “nations will not aspire to conquer, colonise or occupy each other any more (...)” (1998: 868). In the “United Nations world”, nations communicate and debate with each other and adopt resolutions according to “the number of votes”. This personalised perspective offered a particular possibility for both imagining “the nation” at a local level35 and channelling political anxieties. The establishment of the “spiritual organisation” of the Samnak Pu Sawan, and the organisation’s subsequent growth illustrate the incorporation of global United Nations discourse into Thai local popular religiosity.

The organisation’s publications explain how, in 1965, the spirit world adopted a resolution (matti) to help Thailand — and the world in general — with the power of three Bodhisattvas36 (Prasert 1995: 13; Natthawut 1996: 42, my italics). These three Bodhisattvas were Luang Pu Thuat, Somdet To and the Brahmin god Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara. Furthermore, Suchart was selected as the medium between the spiritual world and the human world (i.e. he became the spirit medium for the three Bodhisattvas). It was resolved that Luang Pu Thuat would act as the President of the House of the Divine Sages, Somdet To as its General Director, and Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara as the Advisor (SPSFS 1996, italics IS). After the ceremonial founding of the Samnak Pu Sawan
on 11 November 1966, the organisation quickly grew. Suchart, as will be elaborated below, was able to attract educated and influential individuals. The monk and social critic Phra Anan Jayananto (Pol. Maj. Anan Senakhan), a great opponent and critic of the Samnak Pu Sawan/Huppha Sawan, wrote in 1981 that “[Suchart] chose his disciples from among ‘scholars with masters’ degrees and doctorates from abroad, men of rank among police and military, colonels and generals. He even recruited entrepreneurs and successful businessmen with vast resources behind them” (Anan, quoted in Wijeyewardene 1986: 24, translation GW).37 As the remainder of this section will demonstrate, the growing elite support for the objectives of the Samnak Pu Sawan stimulated Suchart’s ambitions “to go global”.

In the 1970s Suchart successfully established a jumble of organisations—all closely related to the Samnak Pu Sawan, and all serving Suchart’s primary objective of giving his initiative a respectable and credible image, appealing to an increasingly wider international public. Not long after the establishment of the Samnak Pu Sawan, Suchart received instructions from the spirit world to build “the Religious Land of Huppha Sawan” (huppha sawan mueang sasana).38 For that purpose the organisation in 1972 rented a large tract of land, officially a national archaeological site in Rachaburi Province.39 The land would be used to establish an international meditation centre and, in line with the development ideology viable at the time, an agricultural demonstration station.

Thereupon, in 1975, the “International Federation of Religions” (IFR) (samakhom sasana samphan haeng lok) was established.40 This organisation, mirroring the United Nations on a spiritual level, was officially registered by the Office of the National Culture Commission. The purpose of the IFR was to seek international support for erecting symbols of all major religions in the world, a truly global project that would thus transform the area into a sacred land. In Suchart’s writings, and in the religious teachings of the Huppha Sawan, the building of the religious land was presented as an absolute necessity if the Thai Nation, and even the whole world, were to survive. Through the IFR, the Huppha Sawan had now become an internationally-oriented organisation.

For the construction of the religious land, the Huppha Sawan needed two things: funds, as the construction of the sacred land required an enormous investment, and official permission from the Department of Religious Affairs.41 Providing these necessities became the task of the next organisation: the “Jinnapooto Memorial Foundation” (munithi chinnaputo
worshipping the great moderniser

anuson), roughly meaning “the foundation for the remembrance of Jina Panjara [short for Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara], Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To”. In 1976 the Office of the National Culture Commission officially registered the organisation. Carrying the names of the three Bodhisattvas — among them the national saints Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To — the Jinnapooto Memorial Foundation advocated itself as a respectable religious foundation, working for a good cause.

In the meantime, another international course was plotted as well. In 1973 Suchart had founded the “Office of the World Peace Envoy” (samnakngan thut santiphap haeng lok). As already mentioned, the reason for the spirit world to interfere in the human world was the increasing threat posed by communism. In Suchart’s teachings, this danger was a symptom of the dark era (kali yuk). The world was in an era of moral degeneration that would end in a world-wide disaster, or more precisely, a nuclear Third World War. It was predicted by the Huppha Sawan that this war would break out sometime between 1974 and 1984. Following United Nations terminology, Suchart was selected by the spirit world to be their ambassador of peace, or “the Peace Envoy of the World of Divinity” (thut santiphap haeng lok winyan). The task of “the Peace Envoy” was to unite all world religions in the “brotherhood of religions” (phradonphap sasana). When the religions united, humanity would be able to generate sufficient religious power (phalang sasana) to avert World War III and establish eternal world peace. In 1978, the decision was made to organise a three-day International Religious Peace Conference in 1982, and to start with the construction of a conference hall on the Religious Land of Huppha Sawan. Esperanto was to be the official conference language.

World War III never happened. Nevertheless, Suchart’s predictions remained a vital element of the Prayers Society’s teachings. In the 1996 Office of the World Peace Envoy leaflet, one can read that between 1974 and 1984 the outbreak of World War III seemed inevitable. Therefore the World Peace Envoy had started a world-wide chanting, meditating and praying campaign to prevent this war. “The campaign was effective: the Third World War was postponed” (emphasis in original). In this way the organisation manages to circumvent the pitfall of millenarianism: the eventual failure of the prophecy (cf. Festinger e.a. 1956). Instead of being a failure of prophesy, the fact that no war occurred is presented as a major achievement of the organisation.

Between 1978 and 1981 several construction works at the Religious Land of Huppha Sawan were well in progress. Large statues (nine metres
high) of the Buddha and Jesus were built on two hilltops. Furthermore, statues of the Buddha Maitreya (phra si ariya maitri or phra si an), Ghanesha (phra phi khanet), the Chinese goddess Kuan Im (chao mae kuan im), Saturn riding a tiger, the holy virgin Mary, King Rama I, and a Peace Pagoda were erected all over the area. In addition, a vegetarian restaurant, Kin Phuea Yu (Just Eat to Live), was opened. Every 19th of the month at 8 PM a religious ceremony was held at the Peace Pagoda. The participants, dressed in white, gathered there to chant and pray for peace.

**Great Winds Blow Upon High Hills**

Suchart’s first term as the World Peace Envoy lasted from 1975 to 1981. Travelling abroad and inviting foreigners to his office, he tried to meet a maximum number of political and religious leaders and others who, to his opinion, believed that world peace could be achieved. The list of Suchart’s Thai and foreign positions, foreign visits, the meetings he attended, and the honorary titles and decorations he was awarded — most of them foreign — makes up a significant part of almost any publication of the Huppha Sawan and its associated organisations. Besides encounters with individuals who were not well-known and smaller organisations, he also managed to meet more influential people. His first real “international success” was the Conference Hall of Peace foundation stone laying ceremony on 19 October 1978. The ceremony was blessed by no one less than the Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha and led by the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Furthermore, altogether nineteen foreign ambassadors to Thailand attended, including those of the United States and the Soviet Union (Jackson 1989: 155). In 1980 the World Peace Envoy met then secretary-general of the United Nations Kurt Waldheim, who awarded the organisation the “United Nations Medal for Peace”. Suchart also had the opportunity to meet Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama. The photographs of Suchart’s milestone meetings with these foreign public figures are still used by the Prayers Society, particularly to illustrate their materials in English (see SPSS 1996; cf. Jackson 1989: 156).

Inevitably, these successes were not only a tremendous affirmation of the feasibility of Suchart’s undertaking, but also contributed to its megalomaniac escalation in the years that followed. For a detailed account of the developments that led to the downfall of the Huppha Sawan in
1982, I refer to Jackson, who has described the process in detail. Here I want only to mention briefly that Suchart became increasingly arrogant, provocative and paranoid from 1979 onwards, a change of attitude that at least partly explains why the wheel of fortune turned against him. He openly criticised Thai politicians on what he considered to be their meagre anticommunist policy, fearing their positions would eventually lead to the destruction of the Thai Nation. He became more and more outspoken in his aversion to some of the most respected political figures (Jackson 1989: 159). In 1981 he told his followers that there was only one person who could issue orders to him and that was the king, and not a “sparrow-like Prime Minister” (Anan, quoted in Jackson 1989: 160; see also Wijeyewardene 1986: 25). By referring to himself and to the king as phu mi bun (men with merit, see Chapter I), he presented himself as the king’s equal. Certainly, a most unwise move was the organisation’s 1981 request — on behalf of the spirit world — to the king to abdicate the throne and become Prime Minister (Jackson 1989: 160–1).

What was the secret of Suchart’s success? This question is not only relevant for understanding the case of the Huppha Sawan, but also for fathoming how Thai popular religiosity produces such phenomena as the King Chulalongkorn cult. In this part of my argument, I will focus on three factors that contributed to the success of the Huppha Sawan: elite support, the importance of the organisational structure around Suchart’s activities as a spirit medium, and the Huppha Sawan’s ability to formulate prevailing anxieties in a contemporary discourse.

According to Jackson, Suchart’s success was largely due to the support the movement had received from a certain group of rightwing military since the mid-1970s: “the most stridently anticommunist and authoritarian section of the political establishment” (ibid.: 147–8). This faction’s power was seriously contested from 1973 onwards when a coup d’ état brought an end to the dictatorial regime of the generals Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathian, and Lt. Col. Narong Kittikachorn (a son of Thanom married to Praphat’s daughter). In 1976 the trio managed to establish a short comeback, but from 1977 onwards — after another counter-coup — a generation of less politically extreme officers gradually replaced the old clique. The old rightwing military, now frustrated and under threat of losing their positions, were seeking an outlet for their anxieties, which they found in the millenarian teachings of the Huppha Sawan. This group was more susceptible to Suchart’s supernaturalism because of their limited exposure to Western thought and education.
Saints and Spirits

(ibid.: 153). Jackson emphasises the fact that the Samnak Pu Sawan and Huppha Sawan “did not begin as elite religious movements”. Unique was that, departing from a popular base, the group was “able to attract a large number of prominent and politically influential followers (...)” (ibid.: 147). Irvine demonstrates, however, that elite support for supernatural ideas was, and still is, not as exceptional as Jackson apparently assumes. Therefore, elite support as such cannot sufficiently explain Suchart’s extraordinary success. Moreover, Jackson’s analysis of the movement’s appeal to elite members in terms of a mere power struggle is too narrow.

First, we should acknowledge the appeal of the particular way Suchart had organised his spiritual practices. In terms of mimesis, the structure of the Huppha Sawan and its affiliated organisations can be understood as imitating the United Nations and its related organisations. The particularity of this approach is that Suchart — in a way comparable to what we have seen earlier in the case of Mae Wan, but on a larger scale and a continuous basis — was able to eliminate the necessity of being possessed by a spirit when acting on behalf of the spirit world. In his role as “The World Peace Envoy”, with his suit and tie, office, secretaries and printed letterheads, he mimicked the powerful, Western, white, male, international politician. Moreover, Suchart had created a space where his followers could join him in the “conscious play-acting mimicking of the European” (Taussig 1993: 241), together staging the assumed apex of global powers. Jackson’s frustrated politicians were ideal participants for such role-playing. If the Huppha Sawan is a “unique movement”, it is not so much because of its elite support, but rather because of the particular, formal structure in which Suchart had cast his mediumship.

Second, I would like to widen the contribution of the elite beyond the direct patronage of politicians and military by highlighting the role of certain academics in the construction of a modern discourse in Thai popular religiosity. My starting point will be Irvine’s argument on the contribution of a small group of psychiatrists to the nationalist and anticommunist discourse, and its appearance among traditional spiritual practitioners in the 1970s. In Irvine’s rather schematic interpretation, the cosmopolitan and the traditional world remain separated (1982: 79–91). My argument will be that the involvement of academics with traditional spiritual practices has created a discourse that blurs this distinction. Not all of the four literati introduced in the following section have played a direct role in the Huppha Sawan’s history, and none of them is directly involved with the King Chulalongkorn cult. Their relevance for my argument lies
in their contributions to the construction of a Thai scientific-spiritual-political discourse, a mixture of Cold War anticommunism, nationalism, royalism, local spiritualism and Western psychic research, partly in the period preceding the King Chulalongkorn cult. This spiritual discourse helps to explain the appeal of the Huppha Sawan. Its importance is much wider, however, since it helps to bridge the gap between the “Western rational world view” and the “Thai supernatural world view”, making public involvement with a spirit cult acceptable, or even appealing, for a wide public of upper middle class people.

**Literati and the Creation of a Thai Science of Spirits**

**Professor Khlum Wacharobon**

Professor Khlum Wacharobon (1907–87) has been one of the Samnak Pu Sawan’s most prominent members. From some of his publications on the Samnak Pu Sawan it can be concluded that the professor has been a regular visitor of Suchart since 1968. Until his death in 1987, the professor had been the public face of the organisation by fulfilling the position of “President (consulting)”.

Professor Khlum was widely respected in the higher echelons of Thai society and was a public figure of importance. He was not only a professor of biology at the prestigious Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, but he had even taught biology to the royal children. Professor Khlum died in 1987, but his name is still widely known in academic circles, where he is remembered as the “Thai Father of Biology”. Professor Khlum’s scientific career started in 1928 when he gained a scholarship to study biology at the University of London, where he eventually achieved his PhD in 1934. After an additional six-year period of post-doctorate research, he returned to Thailand and became professor of science at the Faculty of Science of Chulalongkorn University. He was later appointed dean of this faculty. He was the founder of the Science Association of Thailand, and its secretary from 1946 to 1954, president of the association of teachers of science from 1942 to 1959, and professor and chairman of the Biology Department at Chulalongkorn University from 1960 until 1965. He retired in 1966. Professor Khlum’s career was, to quote Irvine, “a model of successful Western education” (1982: 85, note 3).

The professor’s scientific background did not restrain him from conducting research on spirits and spirit possession. Wijeyewardene gives the
The significance of politics and the international world in Professor Khlum’s spiritual interest is apparent from one of the professor’s books, *The World of Soul* (1972, in English). In this book he describes a number of spirit medium sessions he attended at the Samnak Pu Sawan between 1968 and 1971. All accounts concern sessions during which Suchart was possessed by “foreign” spirits, namely Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed, Napoleon, Ghandi, and Nehru, the latter three expressing their views on war and peace, or giving an account of the consequences of their own behaviour in the afterlife.  

By highlighting the interest of the professor in the Samnak Pu Sawan and in spiritualism in general, I do not intend to present the involvement of the professor as the explanation for the success of the Samnak Pu Sawan/Huppha Sawan. Rather, his case should be read as the visible part of a process of fitting traditional supernaturalism into modern Thai society, a process that otherwise remains largely hidden, and to which subject I will return in detail after having presented the wider network in which Professor Khlum was active.

**Dr Charoen Watthanasuchart**

Professor Khlum’s interest in “psychic phenomena” was not only expressed in his membership of the Huppha Sawan. He was also one of the advisors of the Association of Psychic Research of Thailand (Irvine 1982: 85, note 2), which had been established around 1960. The members of this organisation — monks, academics, politicians, and high-ranking military officers — came from the most prominent circles of society. An important member of the Association was the psychiatrist Dr Charoen
Watthanasuchart, director of one of Thailand’s most important mental hospitals. Irvine takes his speeches as an outstanding example of how academic psychiatric language in the 1960s and 1970s became instrumental in the expression of certain influential psychiatrists’ nationalistic and anticommunist sentiments. In, for example, a 1979 scientific explanation of the emotional and mental stability of Thai soldiers, or “Thai fighters in general”, Dr Charoen equated “a good mental health” with “being a good Buddhist”, inferring that Thai fighters were fundamentally different from other soldiers:

We find the same unswerving mental and emotional quality among all Thai fighters, be they slaves or lords. All are deeply identified with the essence of Thainess [khwam pen thai] (Charoen 1979, quoted in Irvine 1982: 82, translation WI).

In a similar vein, he analysed the battle between King Naresuan and the Burmese King (see Chapter II, note 35), concluding that Naresuan won because of the higher quality of his mental health (ibid.: 83). To Dr Charoen, stability of mind was the single most important condition for national stability. Money, propaganda, and involvement in subversive activities could corrupt and destabilise the mind. In his opinion, political subversion should be approached as a form of group hypnosis. He substantiated his argument scientifically, elaborating on his twenty years of clinical experience and the working of the unconscious under hypnosis, which could reveal mental instability (Irvine 1982: 81–4).

Such an amalgamation of religion, politics, and science is not a phenomenon of the past. In certain circles the heritage of Professor Khlum and Dr Charoen is still alive. In 1986 the Society for the Study of Psychical Science (Chomrom Sueksa Withayasat Thang Chit) was established. Professor Khlum became an active member, although he soon died the following year. The organisation is connected with the Scientific Research Centre of Mahidol University, the Science Association, the Faculty of Science of Chulalongkorn University (Professor Khlum’s faculty), and the Association for Psychic Research. In 1997/98 the Society, popularly in English as “The Reincarnation Club” by its present president, was still active, organising a meeting every other month in co-operation with the Association for Psychic Research. The Reincarnation Club’s members study phenomena like spirit mediums, telepathy, meditation, and reincarnation.


**Professor Dhephanom Muanman**

I learned about The Reincarnation Club in August 1997 through Professor Dhephanom Muangman, the organisation’s President and, at the time, Chairman of the Bangkok Governor’s advisory team on public health. Professor Dhephanom is a politician and a well-known public figure. I approached the Professor after learning of his (spiritualist) interest in King Taksin.

The scientific career of Professor Dhephanom began in the United States, where he graduated from Jefferson Medical College. In Thailand he has been Dean of the Faculty of Public Health at Mahidol University for many years. Thereafter, he became Dean of the Faculty of Environmental and Resources Studies at the same university. In 1998 he was still a member of the University Council. His early political career is particularly associated with the Thai AIDS prevention campaigns of the late 1980s. Professor Dhephanom is, or has been, a member, advisor, or even founder of many prestigious international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, the World Bank, the Association of Medical Doctors of Asia, and the Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health. At the time of my research, his political interests were in environmental issues and public health, including air pollution, waste problems, and misuse of agricultural chemicals. He appeared regularly in the media and was often cited on issues such as the dangers of food colouring, germs in drinking water supplies, and the dumping waste in the Chao Phraya river. However, he was also frequently quoted on the subject of space aliens, with whom he had regular telepathic contact (through mind-waves, *thorachit*).

When we met, Professor Dhephanom told me about his interest in spirits and aliens. He does not only experience the existence of spirits and aliens regularly, but has also been able to register phenomena related to these invisible worlds with his Polaroid camera. As an example, the professor showed me a Polaroid photograph of a sword. The photograph had a coloured streak over the sword, which he explained as follows.\(^{53}\)

For years people from all over the country had come to him to present him with swords. All these people shared the same experience. In a dream a voice told them that the sword in their possession had originally belonged to King Taksin and that they therefore could not keep it, but should bring it to Professor Dhephanom. Thus Professor Dhephanom came to own a large collection of swords, something he appreciates very
much: it is thanks to swords that the Thai have been a free people for over 800 years, and swords should therefore be respected and cared for. Later, his interest in swords inspired him to found a sword fighting school, as Professor Dhephanom believed this Thai martial art should be preserved. The understandable problem with the swords presented to him was that he did not know which sword was the real sword of King Taksin, or whether he was actually in possession of this sword. Professor Dhephanom felt closely connected with King Taksin because, in a dream, King Taksin had told him that in one of his former lives, the professor had been King Taksin’s 29th and favourite son. When the original sword was finally brought to the professor its originality was proven by the Polaroid camera. The streak on the picture is purple-gold: King Taksin used to wear a sash of the same colours.

Spirits, according to the professor, can be contacted through spirit mediums, or — as he has experienced himself — spirits can contact people by approaching them in their dreams. Aliens (manut tang daw) become “visible” when you think of them; only then will they manifest themselves. The professor maintains regular contact with aliens through telepathy. In an article appearing in *The Nation* on 6 July 1997, the professor recalls an encounter of June 24 of that year when he was flying back to Thailand from Munich:

> The plane was at an altitude of about 21,000 feet. I sent out my telepathic message that if there were any UFOs around I would like them to come into sight. A few minutes later I saw three balls of light approaching the plane and they were later accompanied by five others.

He recorded the phenomenon with his video camera. The professor is convinced of the significance of the objective capacities of recording materials. During our conversation he showed me some items from his large collection of photographs. Each had strange light effects and impossible shadows, arguably proving the existence of UFO’s as well as spirits. The camera never lies, according to Professor Dhephanom, and may reveal things that would otherwise remain invisible to the human eye.

**Dr Naiphinich Kotchabhakdi**

Professor Dhephanom told me about The Reincarnation Club and I attended their meeting of 23 August 1997. About 50 members had come to listen to a presentation on “Young children who remember
their former lives”. The meeting started with an introduction given by the organisation’s secretary, Dr Naiphinich Kotchabkhadi, director of the Neuro-Behavioural Centre at the Institute of Science and Technology of Mahidol University. His speech revealed some of the frustrations he had to deal with as a scientist involved with research into the supernatural. He told the audience that farang (Westerners) regard the belief in spirits as superstition, and hence believe the people who are interested in this kind of phenomena are naive and credulous (ngom ngai). But, he continued, this is not the case with members of the society. The society is approaching the “problem of spirits and former lives” in a scientific manner. The important issue is to learn to distinguish the “real” from the “fake”. Dr Naiphinich concluded his speech by referring to the many years of collaboration between their organisation and the University of Virginia — particularly with Professor Ian Stevenson — demonstrating that academic farang may also take scientific interest in these matters seriously.

As Dr Naiphinich later told me, he strives for a “crossover between science and religion”, that is, a “spiritual science” (winyan sat). He foresees that in the twenty-first century “spiritual science” will be a major curriculum all over the world. The increasing importance of the Internet will facilitate the spread of “spiritual science”. Societal troubles will force humanity to reconsider the relationship between mind, body, and environment. Very much in line with Dr Charoen’s Cold War psychological insights, he draws a connection between mental health and morality. A good person is mentally healthy, which in its turn is reflected in physical health. An immoral, and thus mentally unhealthy person, however, has a larger chance of developing diseases as cancer. Dr Naiphinich:

The fact that so many people develop cancer these days is indicative of the state of decay of societies. The mind protects the body and can protect it against bad [immoral] influences. I call this potential of the mind “neuro-psycho-immunology”. The power of the mind (phalang chit), or psychic power, is therefore of utmost importance for humanity and deserves all research required to understand its working. This is not a matter of researching fairy tales (rueang magical) but a matter of researching the truth (rueang chin) (interview, 28 October 1998).

Dr Naiphinich told me that the majority of his colleagues take neither him nor his scientific interests seriously. At the same time, however, he is part of an elite network of which all members, from a scientific background
or otherwise, share Dr Naiphinich's political and religious outlook. In answer to my question regarding the professions and backgrounds of the members of the Society for the Study of Psychical Science, Dr Naiphinich mentions doctors — as they are confronted on a daily basis with spirits of deceased patients — biologists and chemists. Among other people, he mentions the name of Dr Phichai Tovivich, an associate professor of the Department of Chemistry at Chulalongkorn University. The person of Dr Phichai leads us back to the main case of this chapter. On Thursday, 24 October 1996 I met Dr Phichai, the present president of the Prayers Society, during the Chulalongkorn Day praying ceremony at the equestrian statue.

Dr Phichai Tovivich and the Reviving Spirit of the Huppha Sawan

Dr Phichai's involvement with the Huppha Sawan began in 1992. At that time the organisation was at a serious impasse. Promising attempts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to resume construction of the Religious Land had come to an abrupt halt in March 1991. The governor of Ratchaburi withdrew his earlier permission to continue the activities at the Religious Land after a group of military staged a coup d'état on 23 February 1991 and proclaimed martial law. The exact political considerations of the governor cannot be traced, but his order to the Huppha Sawan to leave the Religious Land refers to the state of martial law (see Choompol 1992: 98). Suchart, who had resumed his task as the World Peace Envoy after 1987, had to withdraw from public activities again. He decided to enter the monkhood and stepped down as the daily leader of the Huppha Sawan.

Left without a leader and having lost the Religious Land, the Huppha Sawan considered liquidation in 1992. But then — just in time — a new leader was found in associate professor Dr Phichai Tovivich. Here the fact that Suchart had established his movement as a more or less self-sustaining, formal structure proves vital for understanding its survival through this difficult period. Because the organisation did not depend solely on Suchart’s charisma as a spirit medium, a new leader could be appointed, and the old teachings could take a fresh course.

Dr Phichai has a background in chemistry. He earned his PhD from Boston University, and was connected to the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Chemistry of Chulalongkorn University as an associate professor at the
time of my research. In addition, he runs a business in laboratory equipment. As Dr Phichai told me in February 1997, he did not know anything about the Huppha Sawan until 1992, when one of his customers told him the fate of the Religious Land. This customer invited Dr Phichai to the Huppha Sawan’s headquarters, and since then Dr Phichai has dropped by every now and then. At one of his visits he met “Achan” Suchart — now bearing the monk’s name Phra Ariyawanso — who still pays an occasional visit to the Huppha Sawan.62 Achan Suchart invited Dr Phichai to become the new daily leader of the organisation,63 and to become the successor of the late Professor Khum Wacharobon. Dr Phichai used to know Professor Khum, as he had been one of his students at Chulalongkorn University. Although Dr Phichai felt honoured by the request, and although he respected Professor Khum very much, he refused the offer because he did not feel competent to fulfil the position.

But, as Dr Phichai says, nothing happens by mere chance. What he was not aware of at that time — but what he now knows — was that the spirit of Somdet To was working hard to find a new leader for the Huppha Sawan.64 Therefore Somdet To had consulted the spirit of Professor Khum as to whether he knew someone who would be suitable for this task. Professor Khum’s spirit had suggested Dr Phichai. On one of his next visits to the Huppha Sawan, the spirit of Somdet To (in a possession session with Suchart/Phra Ariyawanso as the monk’s spirit medium) told Dr Phichai that the spirit of Professor Khum had recommended Dr Phichai to be the new leader.65 Dr Phichai was very impressed and felt that he had to offer his support. After all, there were no reasons to refuse. The Huppha Sawan was only striving for good things: peace, religion, the king, and the monarchy in general.

Subsequently, Dr Phichai was installed as the President of the Samnak Pu Sawan Fellows’ Society, an organisation founded in 1992 “in order to carry out the ten objectives of Samnak Pu Sawan” (SPSFS 1996). Dr Phichai took over responsibility for all major activities in the Fellow’s Society. At present he is also the President of the Jinapanjara Suttam Prayers Society (the Prayers Society), the President of the Inter-Religious Foundation for Peace, and Secretary General of the Office of the World Peace Envoy.

Under the energetic guidance of Dr Phichai, the situation has improved tremendously. The headquarters are located in a side lane of Petchkasem Road (Bangkok), in a brand-new four-storey building named Ariya Sat Si (The Four Noble Truths). The old “residence” (samnak), built
not long after the establishment of the Samnak Pu Sawan, is an ordinary house opposite the Ariya Sat Si building. The samnak is still used, but is no longer as significant as before. The first floor of the Ariya Sat Si building houses a vegetarian restaurant (Jay Jay) and a book- and amulet shop (Dharma Maitree Shop). The second floor contains a permanent exhibition on “The Twelve World Religions”. On the third floor one can find the offices of, among others, the Samnak Pu Sawan Fellows’ Society, the Prayers Society, the Praying Society for Paying Respect to the Bodhisattva Avoliketsavara (the Chinese goddess Chao Mae Kuan Im), and The Vegetarian Centre of Thailand. The Office of the World Peace Envoy is accommodated on this floor as well. Most important, however, is the fourth floor with the Meditation Hall, or Hall of Samnak Pu Sawan’s Great Teachers (Borom Kru Hall). Here not only the statues of the Buddha (phra phuttha rattana), Luang Pu Thuat, Somdet To, Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara, Chao Mae Kuan Im, and the Buddha Maitreya are exhibited, but even relics of these Great Teachers. With its marble floor and its teak panelling, this clean, luxurious, air-conditioned place breathes an atmosphere in between of that of a modern temple and the entrance hall of a bank. The people present are usually lost in meditation, or praying on deep red mats in front of the holy images. On Saturdays, Sundays, important religious holidays, royal birthdays and other royal celebrations, as well as on every 1st and 19th day of the month, meditation, chanting and prayer sessions are organised in this Hall. Once again, the Huppha Sawan is prospering and in smooth waters.

To introduce the reader to the renewed millenarianism and spiritualism of the Huppha Sawan/Prayers Society, I will discuss the role of spirits in Dr Phichai’s personal life on the basis of an August 1997 interview I conducted, as well as his 1997 booklet about the imminent end of the world. By the end of 1998, at least 600,000 copies of this booklet had been distributed for free and a new edition planned.

**Spiritualism and Materialism**

According to Dr Phichai, the spirits of Luang Pu Thuat and Somdet To, and Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara are co-operating in heaven. Luang Pu Thuat is in control of the spirits and Somdet To is his assistant. The special powers of Somdet To are more in the field of compassion (metta), which for Dr Phichai mainly means protection against illness and health problems. Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara averts evil.
Together they oversee everything: they are a comprehensive entity. For Dr Phichai personally, Luang Pu Thuat is the most important Bodhisattva. Whenever he has to do something of importance he first directs himself to Luang Pu Thuat. Asked in what respects the three Bodhisattvas are so important to him, he told example after example, revealing the practical and material nature of the support the spirit world (lok winyan) provides to him. Apart from this, the case of Dr Phichai is a fine example of support from the spirit world taking the shape of an almost personal relationship. Irrespective of the centrality of Somdet To in the Prayers Society’s teachings, and of the equestrian statue as its main place of worship, for his day-to-day business concerns, Dr Phichai relies solely on the protection and support of Luang Pu Thuat. The latter may be therefore regarded as his personal patron (thi phueng, see Chapter II). I have chosen to present a substantial part of Dr Phichai’s enumeration to demonstrate how his spiritualism reveals his material preoccupations.

Dr Phichai began with the story of his secretary’s stolen car. Dr Phichai directed a prayer to Luang Pu Thuat; a week later they received a telephone call from the police stating that the car was found. In 1996, when Dr Phichai was attending the World Transcendental Meditation Congress in the Netherlands, he met a professor who told him that his car had been stolen that week in Amsterdam. He told the professor how the car of his secretary had been returned and promised that he would do his best to get the professor’s car back. In order to do so, Dr Phichai needed a description of the car, as well as the place and time of the crime. After the congress, Dr Phichai went to Amsterdam. He went to the street where the car had been stolen and directed a prayer to Luang Pu Thuat. A few months later, very unexpectedly, the son of the professor — on his way to Burma — came to see Dr Phichai to tell him how grateful his father was. The car had been found! It was completely burned out, but that was no problem. Because it had been found, the insurance compensated for the lost car.

Upon my question of how this could happen, Dr Phichai explained how the spirit world operates. Since he has made a study of the spirit world, Dr Phichai knows that Luang Pu Thuat is in charge of all spirits residing in the human world. These spirits include not only the spirits of the dead, but also the spirits of places. Every place on earth has its own spirit. We are not able to see those spirits, but they can see us. Therefore, in the case of the stolen cars, Dr Phichai asked Luang Pu Thuat to get in touch with the spirit of the place where the car was stolen to ask
what he had seen, what the thief looked like, which direction the car went, etc. Then Luang Pu Thuat passes this information on to all other spirits. As soon as one spirit sees the car or recognises the thief, he will contact Luang Pu Thuat. Luang Pu Thuat, subsequently, will ensure that the information reaches the human world. “Actually”, Dr Phichai said, “the principle is very similar to contacting the police in this world, only this is more effective.”

Luang Pu Thuat helps to not only return stolen objects, but also to support Dr Phichai in many other respects. When Dr Phichai visits a potential customer to persuade him to place an order with him, for example, he asks Luang Pu Thuat to approach the spirit of the place to assist Dr Phichai in convincing that person. “This works amazingly well; actually, it works always. So many times things have happened that could not be explained otherwise than from the protection of Luang Pu Thuat and the other Bodhisattvas.”

Take for example the time when he had to send a new price list to a company in Khorat. Whether his firm would receive an order would depend on the prices. Many times his secretary attempted to fax the list, but she did not succeed. At a certain moment, another employee rushed into the secretary’s office: the list she had wanted to fax contained the wrong prices, which were too high. Thereupon she tried to fax the correct list, which offered no problem at all. It turned out that while attempting to send the wrong fax, she had consistently dialled the phone instead of the fax number.

Dr Phichai also related another very similar experience. The company where he used to buy equipment had become very expensive, so Dr Phichai decided to contact a cheaper Japanese firm. The prices of this firm were good, so the decision was made to place an order with them. For reasons unclear, it was impossible to send the fax with the order. At a certain moment they received a phone call from the Japanese firm. They told Dr Phichai to wait a little longer with the order, since a special discount would be arranged. When the definitive prices were clear, there were no problems with sending the fax.

The most recent example of the continuous support from the spirit world occurred just a few months earlier. The firm of Dr Phichai had wanted to place an order of two million baht with a German company. Normally, when an order exceeds one million baht it is possible to arrange special conditions for payment. This generally includes a tax exemption and the possibility to pay in instalments over a longer period. There is
a disadvantage, though: one has to pay interest. This time Dr Phichai could not succeed in getting such an extended payment arrangement. Though a complaint was sent to the mother company in Germany, that did not help either. But now, however, Dr Phichai realises that the spirit world was protecting him at the time. The recent devaluation of the baht would have cost him an extra 600,000 baht had he negotiated the arrangement.

The protection of the spirit world works in other important situations as well. Once, Dr Phichai wanted to send a complaint to the government about the way they had treated the Huppha Sawan. While he was writing, the electricity broke down and he was unable to finish his letter. Dr Phichai told Achan Suchart that he had not yet finished writing. Achan Suchart then said that there was a reason for the electricity breakdown: the letter was too provocative. Thus, Dr Phichai reformulated the letter in milder expressions. As a result, the letter was very well received and printed in many newspapers without any problems.

Another strange phenomenon Dr Phichai noticed is that everybody who is honest to him is doing very well, and vice versa. All his business partners are experiencing economic progress. But as soon as somebody tries to cheat him (which fortunately rarely happens), the swindler suffers an economic setback or worse.

A company, for example, had asked the firm of Dr Phichai to draw the plan for a new laboratory. This (very reasonably priced) 100,000 baht order was part of a larger project, costing over 23 million baht. After they had sent in the designs, Dr Phichai did not hear anything and no payment was made. Dr Phichai started to send reminders, but the company did not react. At a certain moment Dr Phichai sent a final notice, with the warning that if the firm did not pay before a certain date, a lawsuit would be filed. Dr Phichai did not receive anything on either Saturday or Sunday. On Monday, Dr Phichai received the news that that morning around 1:00 AM, just after the deadline had expired, a big fire had destroyed the company’s entire building. Dr Phichai’s concluded: “Now their costs were far and far higher than those 100,000 baht.” Dr Phichai has a similar example of punishment through interference of the spirit world: at another company that had refused to pay a bill, a burglar had taken away all its valuables.

Another example: Dr Phichai had a long-standing business relationship — for some twenty years — with a Japanese firm. At a certain moment the owner learned that Dr Phichai was also working as a
university lecturer. Thereupon this man suddenly regarded Dr Phichai as no longer a real manager and subsequently arranged all things with Dr Phichai’s partner. This partner wanted to move their firm to another part of Bangkok. This resulted in a break between the two men, as Dr Phichai and the majority of his employees had a different opinion on the matter. Consequently, the partner and Dr Phichai continued their businesses independently. The Japanese firm remained with the partner, and Dr Phichai found another firm to co-operate with. The end of the story was that both his ex-partner and the Japanese firm went bankrupt. Dr Phichai’s new business, on the contrary, expanded and became an internationally operating firm.

Environmental Millenarianism

The cornerstone of Suchart’s general policy was to present the Huppha Sawan as part of an international network working for an internationally accepted cause, namely, peace. Although the threat of a Third World War is still part and parcel of the Huppha Sawan’s teachings, the Cold War and the threat of communism have faded into the background at present. Today the organisation’s doomsday expectations are articulated in terms of another global anxiety: the destruction of the environment and its disastrous consequences for the world, and the Thai nation in particular. In this new perspective, the presentation of the Huppha Sawan as an organisation with international contacts and concerns has remained important.

In 1997 Dr. Pichai published a booklet, in Thai and English editions, in which he warned the Thai people and the world of the imminent disasters from all four elements that will hit the world from 1999 onwards. His predictions, leaning on a prophecy of the Buddha and the prognostications of Nostradamus, are embedded in the environmental perspective of global warming. The Buddha is believed to have predicted that his teachings would start to decay gradually half-way through a cycle of 5000 years, from 2500 BE (1957 AC) onwards. The moral decay would eventually cause suffering and disasters. Where Suchart linked the dark era with communism and World War III, Dr Phichai emphasises devastation by natural disasters. Earthquakes, irregular droughts and floods, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and toxic air will torment humanity, destroying 90 per cent of the earth’s surface, except for Thailand, which will suffer only 70 per cent damage. Only good people (that is, those who
meditate, follow the five precepts, pray the phra khatha chinnapanchon, and worship holy objects) will be spared. After the disasters:

[r]he number of the survivors in Thailand will be higher than those of other countries. The Thai language may become the major language of the world at last because foreign people, though alive, will lose their mental consciousness. The moral Thai survivors will be the chroniclers of the events for the next generation (Phichai 1997: 28–9, emphasis in original).

Dr Phichai’s predictions on Thai survivors echo Dr Charoen’s theories on mental health and Buddhist morality. In his introduction, Dr Phichai places his ominous predictions in the context of King Bhumibol’s concern with the environment and the preservation of forests. As 1999 would also be the year of the king’s sixth cycle birthday (72nd) anniversary, the prayer sessions from August 1997 onwards were called the “Chanting for National Security Project” and dedicated to this auspicious occasion. From the spirit world, Somdet To is working to delay the disasters for 30 years. Whether he will succeed depends on the joint efforts of all good people. Again proclaiming a possible postponement of the apocalypse, the Prayers Society’s teachings continue Suchart’s line of millenarianism.

In a nutshell, the booklet of Dr Phichai is another example of the mixed discourse that incorporates science, contemporary political issues, and nationalism into Thai middle-class spirituality. We may note, for example, how scientifically formulated warnings (global warming, melting polar icecaps, and ozone depletion) are brought into line with predictions made by the Buddha and Nostradamus. At the same time the booklet provides a moral context for the nation-wide concern with the consequences of the destruction of the local environment (including landslides in the South, annual floods in Bangkok, droughts in the Northeast, nation-wide deforestation, and air- and water pollution).

Dr Phichai’s concerns are actually more with the Buddhist moral order than with the environment, which becomes clear from the fact that the changes of conduct he advises are merely moral in nature. The theme of the superiority of Thai morality, leading to the Thai language becoming the world’s major language, demonstrates the ardent nationalism involved, and at the same time shows how the hegemony of the United States has become a model of ultimate global power. Finally, by asking his readers to dedicate to the king the merit generated through chanting and meditation, Dr Phichai confirms the king’s position at the apex
of the moral order and, without saying so explicitly, as the only one who can avert the imminent disasters. Here Dr Phichai connects his millenarianism with the widely held conviction that the destination of the Thai nation depends largely on the virtue and merit of the king. In Chapter V, I will elaborate on the importance of this belief for both the King Chulalongkorn cult and the cult that simultaneously takes shape around King Bhumibol. Here, I will further pursue my argument on the importance of individuals with an education in Western sciences — Weber’s \textit{literati} of the present — for current developments in Thai popular religiosity.

Prominent scientists such as Dr Charoen, Professor Khlum, Professor Dhephanom and Dr Phichai at least blur the distinction between “scientific” and “supernatural” discourses. Their convictions are widely disseminated through their regular exposure in the mass media, as well as through the high output of seminars, lectures, books, and tapes produced by the network they are a part of. In July 1997, 4000 people attended the “first-ever” seminar in Thailand on UFOs, telepathic contact with aliens, and a possible outbreak of star wars.\textsuperscript{71} In February 1998, “the country’s leading astrologers, mediators, yogis, academics, and scientists” attended a two-day seminar entitled “1999–2000: The World According to the Doomsday Prediction and How to Survive”, a seminar very much in line with Dr Phichai’s predictions of environmental disasters.\textsuperscript{72}

The use of scientific vocabulary, categories, and methodologies for approaching supernatural phenomena is appealing to large groups of people — including members of the establishment — who have no academic background but who regard themselves as “modern”. The powerful blend of this thinking with nationalism and morality enables people to believe in the supernatural while simultaneously being a truly modern person and a Thai Buddhist. To be clear, this new blended discourse is more than a scientific endorsement of supernatural phenomena: for the people involved, it makes the supernatural even more of a reality than it already was. The modern spiritualist discourse is therefore a vital element in explaining the continuing appeal of the Reincarnation Club, the Huppha Sawan/Prayers Society, and related phenomena among which the King Chulalongkorn cult exists.

**The Prayers Society and the King Chulalongkorn Cult**

The Huppha Sawan/Prayers Society’s ability to incorporate the latest trends in popular religiosity into its teachings provides a further explanation of
the movement’s success. The development of the Prayers Society’s interest in King Chulalongkorn parallels the king’s overall increasing popularity among the Thai populace. It is no coincidence that the prayer and chanting sessions at the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn started in 1993, the same period that Wat Doi Chang and Mae Wan incorporated worshipping King Chulalongkorn into their religious practices. The linkage of their activities with the King Chulalongkorn cult gave the Huppha Sawan an excellent opportunity to recover from its impasse, just as linking with the King Chulalongkorn cult allowed the abbot and the spirit medium to recruit a large group of followers from various parts of the country and from various sections of society. I will conclude this chapter with a closer look at the dynamics of the King Chulalongkorn cult, specifically focussing on the mutual influence between the King Chulalongkorn cult and the Prayers Society. For this purpose, I will return once more to the Thursday evening sessions at the equestrian statue.

Before the chanting begins, a tape with a song in praise of King Chulalongkorn is played at full volume.73 At the first note, all participants rise from the sheets they are sitting on to stand. The scene is very much as if the National Anthem is being played. As I noticed, for most “independent” worshippers, sitting by and large between the statue and the Prayers Society, this standing up is rather compelling. Not joining in the rising could easily be understood as rude and disrespectful. In addition, the Prayers Society’s volunteers take care that leaflets with the chanting programme are distributed to everyone present, inviting them to join in the chanting. Again, many people comply. As people answered when I asked why they joined in, “why not?” One cannot possibly have any moral or religious objections against chanting these texts. Furthermore, the overwhelming effect of hundreds of people chanting celebrated Pali-texts should not be underestimated. In such an atmosphere it becomes almost impossible to conduct some form of individual worship.

Over the two years that I have been a regular visitor to the square, the “absorption process” has clearly been cumulative. And since all participants time and again conduct the same procedures collectively, the sessions offer an extremely homogeneous — and impressive — image, evoking the impression that all participants share a single aim and a common belief. The increase of the number of people joining the Prayers Society’s Thursday evening sessions does not imply, however, that all of them develop a more intensive engagement with the organisation or its teachings. The number of participants at the equestrian statue sessions
always exceeded the number of participants at other royal monuments by far, demonstrating that, for the majority of the Thursday participants, veneration of King Chulalongkorn is the main motive to engage in the sessions.

There is no evidence that the Huppha Sawan had ever shown any specific interest in King Chulalongkorn before the Prayers Society started its chanting sessions at the equestrian monument. Suchart — like many other Sino-Thai — worshipped King Taksin. As early as 1973, the Huppha Sawan erected a statue of King Taksin next to the samnak as a sign of respect. Among the statues in the Religious Land of Huppha Sawan, there existed only one kingly statue, that of Rama I — the founder of Bangkok and the present Chakri Dynasty. The erection of this statue in 1978/1979, however, should be understood against the background of the approach of 1982, when Thailand was to celebrate the bicentenary of Bangkok as the national capital, as well as of the Chakri dynasty. These auspicious jubilees made 1982 an ideal year to organise auspicious events, such as the three-day International Peace Conference planned in 1978.

This perspective implies that in the Prayers Society’s teachings, neither King Chulalongkorn nor other deceased kings of the Chakri dynasty play any specific role in protecting the religion, the nation, and the monarchy. Their statues function merely as auspicious places suitable for nationalistic praying sessions, just like certain dates or occasions are considered auspicious for organising a session. In the organisation’s beliefs, the spiritual and magical power of Somdet To and his phra khatha chinnapanchon are of much more significance. In fact, the King Chulalongkorn cult hardly affects the Prayers Society’s teachings. Conversely, however, the presence and practices of the Prayers Society on the Royal Plaza do affect other people’s rites of worship. In the course of time between my first visits in 1996 and my last in 1998, the Thursday sessions organised by the Prayers Society eventually attracted more of the public than the “conventional” Tuesday sessions.

The Prayers Society itself offers a different explanation for its initiative to organise prayer sessions at the equestrian statue. According to Dr Phichai, they started their prayer sessions to counterbalance the failing health of King Bhumibol with the positive power generated by the praying. When King Bhumibol was in the hospital in March 1995 due to heart problems, the Prayers Society intensified the praying programme by organising additional prayer and chanting sessions at other royal statues. The intensified programme, according to Dr Phichai, proved very effective.
His Majesty’s health began to improve almost immediately, and it was not long before he could leave the hospital in good health. The concern for the king’s health, however, is not only the Prayers Society’s, but is a lasting and increasing worry, shared by the majority of the populace. This worry will be one of the main topics of Chapter V, in which we will see how the concerns articulated in the King Chulalongkorn cult dominate the veneration of King Bhumibol as well, and how, as a consequence, the images of both kings increasingly merge.
Modern Buddhist Kingship

In the preceding chapters we have seen how King Chulalongkorn as the Great Moderniser has become an icon around which concerns related to Thailand’s position in a globalising world can be articulated. This image of the king as the Great Moderniser is, as I have shown, inextricably bound up with his image as an ideal Buddhist king. The final step in my analysis of the King Chulalongkorn cult will therefore be an investigation of the present-day interpretations of the ideal of Buddhist kingship in Thailand. To understand these interpretations and how they have arisen, I will include an analysis of the iconography of Thailand's present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great. For it is my proposition that the increasing atmosphere of adoration around King Bhumibol and his achievements has given an important impetus to the imaginary around King Chulalongkorn. Furthermore, this focus also evokes questions regarding the developments around the present-day image of other Thai/Siamese kings, a subject that will only be addressed as far as it adds to our understanding of the main subject of study: the cult of King Chulalongkorn.

The prominence of King Bhumibol in Thai society, and the importance attributed to his words and deeds may seem self-evident. For, as explained in earlier chapters, Buddhist kings are considered to be a source of bun barami. Moreover, the mere fact of being a king would already provide King Bhumibol with the kind of authority that comes with what Weber calls ‘charisma of office’ (Amtscharisma), i.e. the kind of charisma that stems from the belief that certain families or institutions possess extraordinary powers (Weber 1976: 144, 675). The potential of charisma of office to continue independently from either the person or the physical presence of the king may partly explain the almost immediate
popularity of King Bhumibol when he took residence in Thailand in 1951, after the virtual absence of a ruling king during the first two decades of the Thai constitutional monarchy.4

When we look at the steady repertoire of royal images displayed on altars or at the walls of houses, restaurants, and offices, we find the images of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol often in the company of images of King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605), King Taksin (r. 1767–81), and, to a lesser extent, King Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I, r. 1782–1809). Other kings of Thai history are virtually absent from such collections, including the three twentieth-century kings that were on the throne between the fifth and the ninth reign — King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–25), King Prajadipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–35) and King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, r. 1935–46). This proves once again that neither kingship nor recency are sufficient conditions for worship (see also Chapter III). It has already been observed that Vajiravudh Day was a short-lived initiative. The differences in popularity, in my view, point to an analogy between the worshipping of luang pho and the veneration of kings. Parallel to the observation that the assignment of the epithet luang pho is not the outcome of a formal procedure, but depends on the strength of the laity’s belief in a monk’s supernatural powers, the degree to which a king becomes an object of worship largely depends on the strength of the belief in his merit and grace (bun barami). Where luang pho are supposed to derive their power from knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, meditation skills, and moral discipline, Thai kings are believed to derive auspicious power from both adherence to the “Ten Kingly Virtues” and their virtuous deeds. A king’s virtuousness is to be judged from the overall welfare of the kingdom, which is perceived as the result of his merit and grace. In the preceding chapters, King Chulalongkorn appeared as a continuing source of bun barami, with his own specific qualities and contributions to the kingdom’s well-being. Apparently King Naresuan and King Taksin, who both maintained Siam as an independent kingdom in crucial stages of the nation’s history, are also widely acknowledged as continuing sources of bun barami.5 All these great kings of the past are venerated for their individual contributions during specific junctures in the nation’s history. It is therefore important to explore both how general perceptions of the present monarch’s specific qualities relate to new interpretations of Buddhist kingship and their effects on the well-being of both individual people and the nation. Finally, contrasting the veneration of King Bhumibol with the King Chulalongkorn
cult will allow me to highlight the specific characteristics that have given the image of King Chulalongkorn its unique appeal. My investigation of the signs of meritorious kingship attributed to King Bhumibol will begin with an analysis of his visual image. This image appears in television and radio broadcasts, magazines, books and web sites, and, most importantly perhaps, also permeates the verbal accounts of almost any Thai speaking about the king.

The Royal Saint: A Secular Hagiography

Every evening on every channel — government, military and independent alike — news broadcasts will open with the subject “royal news and activities”. In hierarchical order, the events of the day related to members of the royal family will be screened. Provided there is actual news to cover, we would first see King Bhumibol, to be followed by Queen Sirikit, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, Princess Sirindhorn, and Princess Chulabhorn, respectively. Additionally, the activities of other members of the royal family, such as the crown prince’s former wife and their daughter, may be included in the news. The general public activities of the royal family encompass attending or presiding over such occasions as important Buddhist ceremonies; cremations of members of the elite; openings of companies, factories, or schools; receiving government dignitaries and representatives of foreign countries; conferring distinctions on officials; and the presentation of hundreds of diplomas to students of certain higher or elite educational institutes. This latter activity is a phenomenon by itself. Because of the large number of students involved, such presentations are orchestrated down to the smallest detail. Particularly important are the manner in which the king, prince or princess has to be approached and the movements of the hand when receiving the diploma. A picture is taken every time a diploma is presented. As a result, hundreds of thousands of graduation photographs are proudly displayed on sideboards and desks throughout the kingdom.

In addition to the royal news items, other — almost daily — broadcasts elaborate extensively upon the personal history and achievements of the more prominent members of the royal family. Not surprisingly, broadcasts about the king far outnumber the others. These royal programmes are generally shaped as a documentary about a certain topic or a historical account of a certain event. However, one form is virtually reserved for King Bhumibol. These productions of approximately two minutes, entitled
“Follow in His Majesty’s Footsteps” (tam roi phrayukhon bat), have no specific topic, nor do they address any specific event. They are about the king; we see His Majesty “doing the things he does”. Through the camera we literally follow in His Majesty’s footsteps. This means we see him visiting peasants on foot, wading through paddy fields, discussing agricultural or technical problems with engineers and officials in the field, and driving through rough all-weather roads. The king always has his camera (a Canon reflex) with him, although he is rarely seen taking pictures. Furthermore, in almost all scenes he carries a large map, a pencil, and a walkie-talkie. The map is extensively used: we see the king giving explanations to the attending officials while pointing to it. He also takes notes on his map with the pencil, and sometimes the map is clearly used for orientation.

The film regularly shows the king’s face in close-up, often when he wipes the sweat off his brow. Wherever he goes, members of the (typically rural) local communities, whether ethnic Thai, hill tribes, or other minorities, await him in large numbers with paper Thai tricolours in their hands. They are seated on their knees and bow (wai or krap) deeply when the king passes by. Sometimes he stops for a personal conversation with one of the peasants. It is impossible to hear anything of what the king says or of what is discussed: everything is shown in slow motion. Although the intro is a fragment of music taken from one of the king’s own jazz compositions, the rest of the film is accompanied by a woman’s voice singing in praise of the king. This is done in the style of a khap sepha, a classical style of singing long narratives. The text of the panegyric appears simultaneously as a subtitle, not unlike in karaoke. The film is shown as a “moving portrait”, an antique-styled wooden frame mounted around the images. A sufficient amount of empty space is left around the whole “portrait” to suggest its “hanging” on the screen. The makers have even enhanced the effect by providing the frame with its virtual shadow.

The moving portraits of “Follow in His Majesty’s Footsteps” can be regarded as a visual hagiography. This hagiography is composed of recurring iconographic elements, which I call “the king’s attributes”. I have chosen this term because of the analogy with the iconography of Catholic saints, where the function of attributes is twofold. Apart from allowing us to identify individual saints, the attributes are important pictorial shorthands of a saint’s deeds and sufferings. The iconography of King Bhumibol comprises five attributes: the camera, the walkie-talkie, the map, the pencil, and the “bead of sweat”. If we look at portraits of
the king (apart from formal portraits), whether in books, on billboards, as “free style” paintings, postcards, or special stamps, it is safe to state that each of them depicts one or more of the attributes mentioned (see Figure 16). Which signs of meritorious kingship or other distinguished qualities do they convey? My interpretation of the five attributes is meant as an introduction to the overall image of King Bhumibol, and leans on textual sources which I will discuss in the section thereafter.

The Camera

The king is known to be an enthusiastic photographer. Exhibitions of his photographs are regularly organised and many of his pictures have been published, either in photo books or as illustrations in other books. Pictures and portraits of his family (in particular from the childhood of the royal children), photographs of “his royal subjects” during his visits to rural areas, and pictures of the Royal Development Projects form the major subjects of his work. There is a general consensus that the photographs made by the king are of a professional, original quality and thus deserve to be made public. The meaning of the king as a photographer, though, goes further than this observation. The camera, its presence in some portraits only indicated by the strap, has become a symbol of the king’s interest in his country and his subjects. Moreover, the professional nature of the camera refers to his interest and abilities in modern technology.

The Walkie-talkie

Like the camera, the walkie-talkie links the king with modern technology and hence with progress. The attribute also signifies the king’s interest in his subjects, but in a slightly different way. Although a camera can be used almost everywhere, the use of a walkie-talkie refers more specifically to field trips. The walkie-talkie evokes the image of being far away and in difficult to reach, maybe even dangerous, areas. That the king is literally willing to go that far is again proof of his compassion for all his subjects, regardless of the circumstances in which they live. The fact that present-day mobile communication systems are more sophisticated than walkie-talkies is not problematic. In the case of natural disasters — when the king almost always comes in person to inform himself of the situation — communication depends on walkie-talkies and the like.
The king’s walkie-talkie not only demonstrates His Majesty’s open-mindedness and capacities to make use of the right technology at the right time, but it also depicts him as a leader, taking the lead in times of emergency. In 1997, Thai Telecommunications, on the occasion of its first centennial, awarded the king the predicate “The Telecom Man of the Nation”. A series of four stamps was issued portraying the king with a range of modern communication systems, from a walkie-talkie and other field telephones to computers and GIS.

**The Map**

Like the walkie-talkie, the map symbolises being “far away and difficult to reach”, and in a similar way denotes the king’s love for all his subjects. His detailed inspection of the map, and the notes he subsequently takes, show His Majesty’s concern with development and progress, even in the most remote parts of the kingdom. The use of the map does not only signify the importance of road construction and the integration of remote areas with the rest of the country, but equally the king’s concern with water management and soil condition. The map also symbolises the king’s detailed knowledge of every part of the kingdom. However, the strongest symbolic meaning of this attribute is probably that the king has the nation and its fate in his hands.

**The Pencil**

The pencil, like the camera, symbolises the king’s sincere interest in his country and subjects. With the pencil the king literally takes notice of the problems and constraints of a particular village or area. The pencil assures that, once the king has returned to his palace, he will not forget about his royal obligations towards his subjects. By taking these notes on the map, the villagers and their needs become, so to speak, located within the kingdom: the king puts them on the map, literally as well as metaphorically. In addition, the pencil counterbalances the high-tech image of the camera and walkie-talkie and demonstrates His Majesty’s preference for “cheap and simple” whenever possible.

**The Bead of Sweat**

The bead of sweat is the attribute with the strongest emotional charge. In the films, the regular close-ups of King Bhumibol with sweat on his
brow show that he is tired and feels hot. In portraits, the essence of this physical condition is usually visualised by the depiction of a single bead of sweat at the tip of the king’s nose. The bead of sweat recounts that — in contrast to most politicians and officials — the king does not remain in his air-conditioned office. The king does what the majority of the common Thai villagers have to do every day: he goes out to work and bears the climate. The bead symbolises the king’s continuous efforts and hard work to increase the well-being of his subjects. It symbolises his self-denying disposition: although he is hot and tired he never rests, not only dedicating all his time, but even sacrificing his health. More than for anything else, the people owe their king respect and gratitude for his self-sacrifice.

Together, the attributes depict the king as a source of development and progress, as well as someone who sacrifices himself for the well-being of his subjects and to whom the well-being of the nation is safely entrusted. The attitude of fatherly care and concern that emanates from the overall picture does not solidly relate to the specific qualities of King Bhumibol, but is considered a key quality of Thai kingship. An accurate illustration of the general perception of the origin and significance of this quality is offered by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun in King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Thailand’s Guiding Light, a book published by The Bangkok Post in commemoration of the king’s 50th year on the throne in 1997:

To understand the present-day Thai monarchy, one needs to go back to the founding of the first central Thai state, Sukhothai, in the thirteenth century. The pioneers of independence chose to elevate the wisest and most capable among them to be king. The king having been entrusted with the task not out of any divine right but by the consent of his peers, had an inherent obligation to rule the country “with righteousness”, not for the glory of himself or his family but “for the benefits and happiness” of the people in his trust. The king, being a Buddhist, was in effect a dharma raja — that is, a monarch upholding the rule of Buddhist righteousness, ruling in a style of kingship some have summarised “patriarchal” (Anand 1997:169–70).

Anand explains the ideal paternalistic ruler as “sensitive to the needs of his people and aware of his duty to guide them” (ibid.:170). Subsequently, he quotes the well-known part of the inscription of the illustrious “Stone of Ramkhamhaeng” (phrathaen manangkhasila):
(The King) has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance … which he wants to make known to his lord and ruler, 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 (ibid.).

In this perception, King Ramkhamhaeng the Great (1276–1317) (phokhun ramkhamhaeng maharat) appears as the first genuinely Thai king and the embodiment of fatherly and accessible leadership. This image of King Ramkhamhaeng as a “patriarchal” (phokhun) ruler was first articulated in the early twentieth century during the reign of King Vajiravudh, a great admirer of his thirteenth-century predecessor. In the eyes of the king, the inscription represented “a perfect society subject to a perfect king”,¹¹ a view that was reflected in the plays, poems, and musical dramas in which King Vajiravudh glorified the patriotism, compassion, and intelligence of the Sukhothai ruler (Vella 1978: 209–11).¹² For his coronation ceremony King Vajiravudh had the old Chakri throne (installed by Rama I) replaced by the “Manangkhasila throne”. This throne was constructed around the stone reputedly used as a throne by King Ramkhamhaeng (ibid.: 277, note 16).¹³

The image of King Ramkhamhaeng was further promoted by Luang Wichit during the first decades of the constitutional monarchy (see Chapter I). As no other Thai, he possessed the qualities to popularise history for political and nationalistic purposes (see also Barmé 1993; Thongchai 1994: 156–8). In 1954 his play Anuphap Phokhun Ramkhamhaeng (The Prowess of Father Ramkhamhaeng) had its premiere. In the play, King Ramkhamhaeng repeatedly expresses himself in sentences like: “I am the father of all who reside in Muang Thai [Thailand]” or “I have no personal secrets. A father has nothing to hide from his children.” Luang Wichit had also composed a song and dance entitled: “Sound of the Bell Song”, inspired by the inscription above (see Thak 1978: 744–94). Public ideas on the importance of phokhun qualities in leaders have been influenced a great deal by this play and other writings of Luang Wichit (ibid.; Thak 1979:179–86). In these days, however, the phokhun concept of leadership was not used to promote the king, but rather to promote the then leader Field Marshall Sarit (1957–63) in an attempt to give his authoritarian leadership a touch of kingly quality.

The next step in my analysis of the image of King Bhumibol as a king of great merit will focus on the narratives that give expression to this
image. The below “secular hagiography” of King Bhumibol is primarily based on a number of books on the life and deeds of the king, as well as on programmes and documentaries that were published or broadcast in 1996 and 1997. In those years, in the course of the celebrations for the king’s 50th year on the throne, more publications on the life of the king appeared than ever before.

**The Bucolic King**

I will start my analysis by returning once more to the programme “Follow in His Majesty’s Footsteps”, to give a more detailed account of what is shown to the audience. In most scenes we see the king visiting peasants, an important topic in almost any book or documentary devoted to King Bhumibol.\(^\text{14}\) It is no exaggeration to state that the personal encounters of the king with his rural subjects have become one of the hallmarks of the king’s reign. The picture which most strongly symbolises this caring and interested attitude is a photograph of the then young king bowing to a very old, clearly rural, woman (see Figure 15). The pleasant expression on the king’s face and the expression of joy on the face of the old lady have made this photograph a best-seller for almost as long as the king has been in reign.\(^\text{15}\) It has been reprinted numerous times in books. It is for sale as a New Year’s greeting card. It is also shown in every movie theatre as part of the obligatory opening programme of pictures of the king and his activities.\(^\text{16}\) The picture demonstrates His Majesty’s empathy with the rural and underprivileged.

Often, the king’s remarkable compassion with even the most humble of his subjects is explained from his birth: though his father was a son of King Chulalongkorn, his mother had a very modest background. H.R.H. Princess Sri Nagarindra (1900–95), usually referred to as Somdet Ya (Venerated Royal Grandmother), was born the third child in an ordinary goldsmith family. In remembrance of her humble background, she raised her children to be aware of other people’s plight. The modesty of the princess mother, whose biography has become a hagiography in itself, is a vital element of the king’s hagiography.

No written account fails to mention that the king has visited all of the kingdom’s 66 provinces, even in the most distant and remote areas, in order to get to know the local communities and their ways of life. The king made the development (kan phatthana) of rural Thailand a major priority. Road constructions, irrigation schemes, soil improvement,
reforestation, and agricultural innovations are of the king’s utmost concern. More than 2,000 Royal Development Projects have been initiated. In the gardens of Chitralada Palace (Bangkok), the king even experiments with agricultural innovations in, for example, dairy farming and aquaculture. This has led to popular descriptions of the king as the Farmer King or Development King.

The regular television broadcasts on the king or the “Royal Development Projects” highlight the use of new and innovative technology. A good example is the reporting on the Royal Rain Project, showing how years of chemical and meteorological research have led to a technology of fattening the clouds above areas suffering from a lack of water, subsequently inducing them to produce rain. Besides emphasising the king’s concern with water management, water supply and water quality, a great deal of attention is paid to the innovative thinking involved. A case often mentioned is the RX2, a water aerator for treatment of polluted water, which was invented by the king. The invention serves as another example of the king’s acknowledgement of appropriate technology as a key prerequisite for rural development. At the same time, the aerator serves to demonstrate the king’s genius. “It was a source of pride to the Thai people that the Chaipattana Aerator Model RX2 was considered for and issued a patent in His Majesty’s name on 2 July 1993 (…), it was also the first patent ever, in Thailand and in the world, to be registered and granted to a Monarch” (RDBP 1997: 156, emphasis in original). In the same year the Office of the National Research Council awarded the invention the first prize in the category “discovery or invention of benefit to the nation”.17

Another element of the king’s image expressed in “Follow in his Majesty’s Footsteps” is the king as the nation’s leader. The agricultural experts and officials following the king into the field are always portrayed as listening to him, as the king knows what policy or technology should be applied in whatever circumstances he encounters. “Development” — a discourse by itself — forms the core of the king’s activities; consequently, the king has thought out a detailed set of theories about development in relation to the needs of the country.18 Closely related to development, and of equal national importance, are environmental issues and natural disasters. In these fields the king has also manifested himself as a leader, initiating reforestation policies, organising relief actions, and promoting a more balanced relationship between man and nature.

The same can be said of major urban problems, such as traffic congestion and the regular flooding of the Bangkok area: as the “Guardian
of the City”, the king provides the governing authorities with well-thought out, well-balanced, and detailed suggestions on such issues as flyovers, elevated roads, bridges, toll-ways, canal extensions, and water reservoir construction, solving the city’s two most urgent problems as quickly and smoothly as possible. However, in comparison to the king’s involvement with development and the rural poor, urban topics are less prominent in the hagiography, visually as well as in text. Although most texts mention that, besides the rurally-oriented initiatives, the king has also established and supports numerous projects for the benefit of victims of natural disasters, the urban poor, the disabled, orphans, and others in need of support, no iconographic image capturing the king’s compassion with the urban poor exists, to my knowledge.

In general, His Majesty’s abilities, or even genius, are illustrated by referring to the king’s hobbies. No extensive textual portrait of the king is complete without paying attention to his excellence as a musician and composer, a sportsman (as a sailor he even built his own boat), an artist (in oil painting), and, as already mentioned, as a photographer. All these qualities are extensively illustrated in word and image. The king’s qualities as a musician, for example, are captured by the photographs of the king playing the saxophone with Benny Goodman in 1960, at the occasion of the royal couple’s state visit to the US. In addition the king has composed a vast oeuvre of jazz “with a Thai touch”, widely distributed on tape and CD. The general image that emerges from the king’s excellence in his hobbies is that of a person with outstanding technical capacities and skills who is poetic and artistic at the same time. A series of stamps, issued on the occasion of the king’s golden jubilee in 1996–97, well depicts this extraordinary combination of qualities. The first stamp depicts the king playing the saxophone, set against the background of the king’s most famous jazz composition Sai Fon (“Falling Rain”). The second stamp depicts the king painting a portrait of the young queen, the background being one of the king’s modernist works: proof of his multifaceted appreciation of art, as well as of his talents. The third stamp is a composition depicting the king as a technician: the main image depicts the king as a carpenter, working on his sailing boat. A tiny sailboat in the background refers once more to this achievement. The tiny aircraft refers to the high-tech “Royal Rain Project”, and the woman’s bust to the king’s skills in sculpture, moulding, and casting. The upper-right corner depicts the Phra Phim Chitrada, an amulet created by the king in August 1965, another demonstration of his skills in moulding, but
also an indication of his knowledge of making powerful amulets. For the Phra Phim Chitralada, the king used both ingredients related to him very personally and ingredients collected from religious sites of all provinces. The fourth stamp depicts the king’s qualities as a sailor. The king and his oldest daughter, Princess Ubolratana, won a golden medal in the yachting competition of the 1967 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games. Stamp number five depicts the king with two of his technical attributes: the camera and the map, while the last two, finally, depict the king with the latest symbol of technological innovation: the computer. The backgrounds of the two stamps show us the various fields in which the king uses the computer. On stamp number six we see a picture of his latest book, a retelling of “The Story of the Mahajanaka” (Ruang Phra Mabachana), referring to the usage of the computer as a word processor. The last stamp depicts a more technical usage, showing a piece of paper full of 0’s and 1’s, and indicates the internet. The use of the internet is visualised through the depiction of one of the computer-drawn mythical “weather maps” illustrating “The Story of the Mahajanaka”, which can only be understood if one is familiar with the following episode.

Early November 1995 the Meteorological Department warned that the typhoon Angela might hit Thailand, causing damage and flooding. The king, closely monitoring the developments via satellite pictures available on the internet, judged differently: the cyclone would diminish to a small depression before it would reach Thailand. The king proved to be correct. Thanks to the information technology, the king was better informed and knew “earlier than anybody else in the country” how the storm would develop.

An important element in King Bhumibol’s hagiography is his image as a “Pillar of Stability”. The aspect is often illustrated by the fact that his reign has continued through 16 constitutions and 18 coups d’état. The most telling moments are the rare occasions that his leadership reached directly into the field of national politics, in particular during the uprisings of 14 October 1973 and 17–20 May 1992, when progressive, democratic groups demanded a right-wing, dictatorial regime to leave office. On both occasions, the military leaders tried to end the protests violently, and many demonstrators were killed in the confrontations. The hagiography ascribes the king a decisive role in both events, saving Thailand from civil war twice. In 1973, the king opened the gates of Chitralada Palace for fleeing demonstrators seeking refuge for the bullets fired by the military. He summoned the three key military figures of the time to
leave the country, after which the crisis ended. In 1992, three days after
the violent confrontation between protestors and military troops, the
king summoned the leaders of the military government and the opposi-
tion to his office and publicly, in a live television broadcast, reprimanded
them for their actions. Thereupon, the confrontation immediately came
to an end. In general, the king’s role in 1973 and 1992, unlike his activi-
ties as a development king, sailor, musician, painter, and photographer,
are not covered or visualised in television documentaries. However, the
more elaborate books on the king’s reign also include photographs of
the students at the palace grounds with the royal family (1973) and a
photograph of the king’s audience with the two leading actors in the
1992 drama.

A Pillar of Stability: Hagiography at Work

As an illustration of how the hagiography works upon the general imagi-
nation, this section will elaborate on the iconography of the king as the
We will not only see how the image of the king saving Thailand from
civil war was deliberately used as an instrument in actual politics, but
also how the king cannot be and do anything but good. Paradoxically, the
image of the king, in principle an a-political icon, has become a powerful
political device.

The May 1992 events sprang from an increasing resentment against
the group of military officers who had come to power by a coup d’état
on 23 February 1991. In a bid to capitalize on the general political senti-
ment, the officers legitimated their intervention by referring to the severe
corruption of the toppled Chatichai Choonhavan government. Initially,
they met relatively little opposition in the general atmosphere of relief
surrounding the government’s fall. After the coup, a National Peace
Keeping Council (NPKC, khana raksa khwam sangop riaproi haeng chat)
was installed, a military council that would govern Thailand until March
1992. On 7 April 1992, coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon was
appointed prime minister, despite his earlier promise not to enter the
government. Public protests against this appointment increased when
pro-democracy leader Major General Chamlong Srimuang started a “fast
to death” to enforce Suchinda’s resignation on 6 May 1992. On 17
May, a mass non-violent sit-in was organised at the Royal Field in front
of the Grand Palace, putting pressure on parliament to revise the new,
dictatorial constitution issued by the NPKC in December 1991. Despite the massive protests against the NPKC constitution — which allowed, for example, an unelected prime minister — the charter was passed. Significantly, the king encouraged the acceptance of the constitution at the time (cf. Callahan 1995:104). On 18 May, the government tried to end the protests with military violence, the effort of which left a large number of people killed. Chamlong was arrested, together with thousands of others. But, different from 1976, and against all expectations, the protests continued until 20 May. On that day the military stopped shooting and decided to negotiate.

Two days of tense waiting followed. On 23 May, in an extraordinary television broadcast, the crisis was brought to an end. Suchinda and Chamlong — the leaders of the respective anti-democracy and pro-democracy camps — were received in an audience granted by the king, approaching him on their knees in order to be “reminded” of their obligations towards the nation, and to be told that their stubbornness had endangered the nation. The whole scene, humiliating for both the military and the protestors, was the outcome of extensive negotiations. It was agreed that Suchinda should resign, and that the king should announce “amnesty for all involved” in return. The democratic groups found the amnesty hard to accept for two reasons. First, it precluded prosecution of the military officers responsible for the shooting and the subsequent casualties. Second, the amnesty essentially implied that there is no distinction between the military attempting to safeguard their own power at any price, and those devoted to the common good of democracy. The ambiguity of the king’s role — his initial support for the new constitution, his late intervention, and the amnesty granted — is only acknowledged and remembered within a rather limited circle of intellectuals, activists, and families of the victims who died in the crackdown. For the majority, the king’s role is determined by the image of the king calling both opponents to order. At the time of my research, “Black May” and its well-orchestrated ending were still recent memories and were often spoken of. The general perception of “the king solving the crisis” was well expressed by Son, owner of a mid-size Chiang Mai bookstore (earlier quoted in Chapter I). The first thing she said when our conversation came to King Bhumibol was:

He is the best king we have ever had. Think for example of May 1992. Fighting broke out. Soldiers even began to shoot. The king closed his palace. For a while nothing happened, but then the king appeared on
television with Suchinda and Chamlong. He reprimanded them as a father. Even now, when I think of it again, this episode makes me shiver [of awe].

The image of the 1992 audience with Suchinda and Chamlong, when the king actually solved the then crisis, resonates with the image of October 1973, when the king supported democracy amongst the students in the palace grounds. Both images, as visual, historical evidence, support and strengthen the narrative truth of the king’s hagiography.

Suphab, owner of a stationery shop in Chiang Mai, told me: “Without the monarchy, we [the Thai] cannot exist (yu mai dai). Take for example the violence of October 1973 and of 1992. In both cases it was thanks to the king that the violence ended.”

Phanya, owner of a small porcelain factory in Chiang Mai: “We were saved from civil war twice only because the king managed to stop Thai people fighting against each other in October [sic!] and in 1992.”

Like the king’s role in ending the crises of October 1973 and May 1992, the crises themselves have also become icons. They have become loosened from their actual political contents and tend to merge into one single image, symbolising either the struggle for democracy or the worst political scenario imaginable: civil war, Thai shooting Thai. This merging can be found visualised in King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Thailand’s Guiding Light, the book issued by the Bangkok Post in commemoration of the king’s Golden Jubilee in 1996. Anuraj Manibhandu, the author of “Pillar of Stability”, according to the editorial of the book’s main chapter, writes: “HM’s best-known acts are the interventions of 14 October 1973, and 20 May 1992, which saved the country from disaster” (1996: 28). Here the author names 20 May (the end of the shooting) as the date of the royal intervention, instead of 23 May, the date of the televised audience. We see how myth “takes over” history: the ending of the shooting tends to be presented as the outcome of the intervention. The accompanying pictorial section first amply covers the 1973 protests and the royal family’s concern with the student protestors, followed by the 1992 protests and ending with the audience with Chamlong and Suchinda. The captions of two photographs depicting the chaotic and tense atmosphere during the 1992 protests around the Democracy Monument at Ratchadamnoen Avenue read: “May 1992, and democracy fights again” and “In the aftermath a monument of democracy holds.” As the next case will illustrate,
such merging of the images of 1973 and 1992 also happens beyond the
domain of officially sanctioned ideology, to which domain such books
as the *Bangkok Post*’s belong:

21 October 1998. Around 6:30 PM Pom, a woman in her twenties,
assembles her small open-air café at one of the several second
hand evening markets that have emerged in Chiang Mai in the
aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis. Such markets are known
as “formerly rich markets” (*talat khoei ruai*), because they had
arisen when the once well-to-do started to sell (a part of) their
belongings to obtain cash. She has to assemble and dismantle her
café every evening: during daytime the market place is a tourist
bus parking lot. Situated against the outer wall of a large building
bordering on the market, Pom’s café is furnished with three tables,
chairs, and a small bar with stools. At the building’s wall, Pom
has hung two kinds of decoration: three water buffalo skulls and
four large posters of the Black May protests. Two of the posters,
originally photographs published by *The Nation*, show Chamlong
surrounded by protestors. The other two show large groups of
arrested and wounded protestors. On my question of why she
decorates her café with these posters, Pom answers shortly: this
is “October 14.” Apparently, she considers this answer sufficient.
Everybody knows “October 14.” In the weeks before my visit to
the café, the media had paid ample attention to the 1973 crisis
because of its 25th anniversary, and the discussion around the
erection of an October 14 memorial. “But,” I say, “this is May
1992, look, there is Chamlong.” In disbelief, Pom takes a close
look at the posters. “Yes,” is her answer, “those in colour are
from May 1992, but the black and white definitely are from
October 14.” As these sepia-tinted posters depict protesting
students, indeed, there is great similarity to the photographs of
October 1973, also depicting protesting students. And what about
the skulls? Pom: “They have the same meaning; the skulls refer
to [the rock group] Carabao.” People who come to my place
know [the meaning of the skulls and photographs]. They know
about politics and they want democracy.”
with “long ago”, helps to dissociate the images from the actual historical events. In this way, the images become floating elements in an a-historical, indefinite past, as do the crises to which they refer.\(^{33}\)

The significance attributed to these two episodes illustrates that here the hagiography touches upon the core of Buddhist kingship: safeguarding the cosmological, moral and social order within the kingdom. When interpreting a hagiography, however, we should not limit ourselves to highlighting the core elements, but also look for telling deficits. Indeed, such “absence” may point to a “twilight-zone” (Thoden van Velzen 2000) where fantasy scenarios reflect unarticulated fears. In this perspective, the most notable absence is that of the greatest threat to the kingdom’s order during this king’s reign: the coup of 6 October 1976 (\textit{hok tula}) and its violent prelude and aftermath. In terms of “civil war”, 6 October 1976 may have been more threatening than either October 14, 1973 or May 17-20, 1992. More than a hundred students were killed by paramilitary groups (e.g. the Village Scouts Movement, and the Border Patrol Police) on that fatal day, while thousands were detained and many fled to take refuge in the jungle. Before discussing the meaning of the fantasy scenarios that surround kingship, however, and entering into the realm of what I would like to call “the fearful side of kingship”, a digression to address the political situation during the October 1976 crisis, the darkest period in recent Thai history, and the image of the royal family as it emerged from this period is necessary.

\textbf{End of Democracy — The October 1976 Massacre}

The period 1973–76, often referred to as the “democratic period”, was actually a period of increasing polarisation between reformers and reactionaries. This complex episode has been described and analysed thoroughly by other authors, in particular Morell and Chai-anan 1981, but also Anderson 1977; Bowie 1997; Chai-anan 1982; Girling 1981; and Thongchai 2002. For my argument it is important that, in the course of the polarisation process, the student/labour movement increasingly became associated with societal division and communism, the conservatives with national unity and stability, and the royal family with the conservatives. In the eyes of the conservative elite and of the urban middle classes, striving for reform became ever more synonymous with a policy of violence and conflict, leading Thailand into becoming “another Vietnam” (Bowie 1997: 109). In this atmosphere, the king’s choice
was for stability, a choice possibly strengthened by the abolition of the Laotian and Cambodian monarchies by communists in December 1975 and April 1976, respectively (Anderson 1977: 23–4; Bowie 1997:107–8; Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 272). After 1974, the king’s initial overt sympathy with the democratic movement gradually diminished and the royal family was instead increasingly in favour of the reactionary politics propagated by the military and business elite. In addition, a deliberate choice was made to give the throne a more militaristic image.

Why was the king only perceived as being sympathetic with reactionary forces in the end? In the course of 1975, the royal family regularly attended and presided over the cremations of soldiers, volunteers and Border Patrol Police servicemen who had died in counterinsurgency actions. On 2 April 1975, Princess Sirindhorn was appointed President of the patriotic Sai Jai Thai Foundation under Royal Patronage (see Chapter III). Even more outspoken was the king’s 1976 visit to a training camp of the Red Gours (Krathing Daeng), a paramilitary vocational students organisation established by the Internal Security Operations Command (Marks 1977: 59). The Red Gours, primarily active in Bangkok, were infamous for their violent actions (i.e. attacks on progressive students, assassinations of labour leaders and leftist politicians, the throwing of grenades into crowds). The Red Gours, as well as Thailand’s other important rightwing organisations made extensive use of portraits of the king and queen in their anti-leftist rallies. As Marks notes: “That nothing was done to either criticize such practices or to forbid them was for leftists tantamount to evidence of royal tacit support for the forces of the right” (ibid.: 58). It can be added that the right reached the same conclusion. ‘Under royal patronage’ the Village Scouts grew tremendously due to the large amounts of money poured into the organisation by conservatives, evolving from 1975 onward into an “urban middle class phenomenon under the control of right wing politicians” (Bowie 1997: 110).

Eventually, the violent ending of the democratic period revolved mainly around the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, one of the three military leaders sent into exile as a novice in 1973. Immediately upon his arrival on 19 September 1976, Thanom was rushed to Wat Boworniwet — the foremost royal temple — to be ordained as a monk as a means to obtain social immunity. Reputedly, the king had approved Thanom’s return. It is at least certain that the royal couple had flown from their Southern palace to Bangkok on September 21 to visit Thanom at the temple (Bowie 1997: 126; Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 271;
Worshipping the Great Moderniser

Thongchai 2002: 247–8). While there the queen “urged the people to protect the religion and the [Boworniwet] temple in particular” (Thongchai 2002: 248). In the same interview she said that “there were some people trying to destroy Buddhism in Thailand” (ibid.).

October 5, the day before the eventual coup, the rightwing press and the military radio claimed that Thammasat University students had insulted the monarchy by staging an execution of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn in effigy, and were about to attack Wat Boworniwet. “All patriots” were summoned to gather and fight. Dao Sayam’s front-page accusation of 5 October “that the radicals were eager to destroy the monarchy” transmuted, in Thongchai’s words, the controversy: “it was no longer about the return of dictatorship but had turned into a communist attempt to destroy the monarchy and the nation” (2002: 249).

That evening, 4000 Village Scouts and other paramilitary groups assembled around the Thammasat campus, which had previously been locked by the Border Patrol Police. The next day,

[w]ith the police in the lead, the mob stormed the campus. The carnage was almost unbelievable. Some students were burned alive or lynched from nearby trees; others were simply shot at point-blank range, some on the university grounds, others as they attempted to flee the campus on foot or to swim to safety (...). Official government reports later mentioned forty-six dead, but other observers believe the toll was much higher.35 Hundreds were wounded (...). None of the rightists or police were ever arrested for their actions (Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 275).

In the evening, the military announced that the National Administrative Reform Council, a military junta, had been put in charge “in order to restore stability and law and order to the kingdom” (ibid.).36 After the coup, the king approved the appointment of the extremely conservative Thanin Kraivichien, a former Supreme Court judge, as Prime Minister. Thanin had “a reputation for integrity, an ardent anticommunist whose writings had become standard fare at military academies, an adviser to the Internal Security Operations Command, and a person closely associated with the palace” (Girling 1981: 217).

In the period that followed, the royal family continued their policy of promoting a “military royal image”. They frequently and increasingly attended public occasions in military uniforms. In contrast to the sympathy the royal couple had shown with the victims of 14 October 1973 (with hospital visits and by presiding over the cremations in a state ceremony),
the royal family was now depicted visiting hospitalised soldiers and policemen, wounded in combat with communists. Newspapers published almost daily photographs of the crown prince in the company of army and police officers. The crown prince and the king were also regularly depicted amidst Village Scouts or attending scout initiations. Formal portraits of members of the royal family in Village Scout uniforms were made for nationwide distribution.

It was felt not only among liberals but also among prominent royalists that the monarchy’s militarisation and explicit support for the right damaged the institution’s reputation (Bowie 1997: 140). In this period, significantly, speculations about a political division within the royal family surfaced in the public arena for the first time. In leaflets distributed in Bangkok after the massacre, it was argued that the queen and her relatives were attempting “to force the king to abdicate in favour of the crown prince, who was said to be under his mother’s influence” (Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 272). “Reliable sources” (ibid.) suggested that it was the queen, and not the king, who had actively supported the return of Thanom “and finally implicated the king in the situation” (ibid.). “It is she (it is said) who determined the choice of the obsequious Thanin” (Kershaw, quoted in Bowie 1997: 140, see also Keyes 1987: 100). The speculations about attempts of the queen to manipulate the succession to the throne may have been spurred by the unexpected return of the crown prince from his studies in Australia on 2 October. The fact that the conflict around Thanom’s return escalated three days later because of a supposed mock hanging of the crown prince’s effigy indicates that negative ideas about the crown prince had been circulating for a longer period, and that the “pro crown prince” camp was apparently aware of the existence of such ideas in student circles. According to Marks: “Though a taboo subject in most Thai circles, discreet comments on the composition of the royal family had gone on for years” (1977: 56). In activist student circles such comments apparently had been less discreet: “[l]eftist students frequently mocked [the crown prince’s] dress, carriage and alleged clumsiness and lack of intelligence, though only among themselves” (ibid.). The unexpected announcement that the crown prince would marry his first cousin Soamsavali Kitiyakara, a niece of Queen Sirikit, in January 1977 further added to his image as “an incompetent successor to the throne”. In Bowie’s dry wording: “[p]ublic confidence in the suitability of the bride was undermined by her failure to complete high school” (1997:141).
Thus, at the end of the 1970s, in certain urban, intellectual, and court circles, the future of the monarchy had become subject of speculations in the form of rumour and gossip about the lack of intelligence of the crown prince, and of manipulations by the queen. The king and the princess, neither of them any less involved in the militarization of the image of the monarchy, largely stayed out of range, although, as a whole, the image of the monarchy had been tarnished (cf. Bowie 1997: 127–31).39 It is irrelevant to engage in speculations about the exact origins of the fissure in the image of the royal family. For my analysis, which aims to uncover any existing paths of imaginary rather than of factual intrigue, it is significant that this split in the image of the Thai monarchy not only continued to exist after twenty-five years, but has also become detached from its democratic, intellectual and liberal elite origin.

The “fearful side of kingship” is an important determinant of urban middle class imaginary about the destiny of the monarchy and the nation. One elaboration of the fears is the frequently told story of an old prophecy predicting the end of the dynasty after the ninth king. In line with this prophecy, it is feared that the present king’s death will imply the end of the monarchy, and by implication will herald the end of the country’s stability and prosperity. As time goes on, the end of King Bhumibol’s long reign will inevitably come closer, making the eventual succession a topic of increasing interest and concern. A significant aspect of the prophecy is that it necessarily belongs to the category of stories and rumours that cannot be the subject of any open, public form of discussion or speculation (see also Hamilton 1993: 359).40 Thai law makes lese majesty a very serious criminal offence and forbids any publication or behaviour that might lead to negative interpretations of the monarchy, the king, or any other member of the royal family.41 Obviously, any discussion of an end to the dynasty would be considered a negative comment. That such discussions nevertheless exist demonstrates that the Thai interest in their monarchy is less one-dimensional than what appears from the hagiography. The interest in the prophecy is another example of discontinuities between the official discourse mainly propagated by state institutions through the official media, and the content of private conversations.

The direct link between the prophecy and other speculations about the eventual succession is the king’s mortality. Of course, the strict lese majesty legislation — a tool in the hands of the official image-makers — never allows any rumour or speculation, let alone any public debate,
on the role of any member of the royal family to surface in the public domain. But these politics of silence in controlling the mass media do not mean that the state is able to suppress the popular imagination. As Hamilton writes about rumour and gossip: “In Thailand what is not said, the resounding silences, can open up fissures through which an unofficial discourse is constructed and rapidly circulated” (Hamilton 1993: 345). One resounding silence can, for example, be found in products of popular culture, such as New Year’s greeting cards. The virtual absence of Crown Prince Vajiravudh from this particular genre, as opposed to the large number and wide variation of Princess Sirindhorn cards, speaks volumes.42

In the public imagination, the members of the royal family are no longer discussed in terms of their actual roles in political or economic developments: they have become icons, captured in images. The king has become the “royal saint” described above. The image of Princess Sirindhorn evolves in a similar fashion: the princess literally and metaphorically follows in her father’s footsteps by sharing the endless hardships of going to the people wherever they live, taking note of their needs and circumstances. This image is widely cultivated in a variety of popular portraits of the princess, alone or together with her father. She is considered to share many of her father’s interests and qualities, including intelligence, modesty and musical and writing skills. The roles of the crown prince and the queen in fantasy scenarios, on the other side, reflect the fear of the perils implied with the good of the kingdom being dependent on human beings, who are fallible by nature.

In addition, to contextualise the imagination around the role of the present king, it is important to note that the hagiography mirrors wider processes of merging, remembering and forgetting that shape the Thai social memory of traumatic events. Thongchai, analysing how Thai society deals with its violent past, argues that in the dominant, nationalist narrative of Thailand as a peaceful, prosperous and steadily progressing kingdom, the very idea of Thai fighting Thai has no place: Thai enemies have always been foreign (i.e. Burmese, potential colonisers or communists) (cf. Thongchai 2002: 263). In this respect, the violent episodes of 1973, 1976 and 1992 are at odds with the prevailing Thai historical discourse (ibid.: 264). But, as Thongchai rightly claims, the linkage between 1992 and 1973 makes it possible to incorporate these events into a positive discourse on “the history of the development of Thai democracy, for which no full realisation is as yet in sight” (2002: 271). October 1976,
from this perspective, represents failure, an incomprehensible event full of ambivalence. It is therefore "likely to remain in the shadows of Thai history for years to come" (ibid.: 279). The absence of the October 1976 massacre from King Bhumibol’s hagiography arguably reflects the general impossibility of any public discourse on this violent incident, and the silencing of an infamous episode in Thai history. The imaginary surrounding the future of the monarchy and the relations between King Bhumibol and other members of the royal family shows that the image of King Bhumibol relates explicitly to current political issues and power struggles. In this respect, the body of narratives around King Bhumibol differs significantly from the imaginary surrounding King Chulalongkorn.

Having explored the image and hagiography of King Bhumibol, I will continue my argument with the construction of King Bhumibol’s image during the 1980s, when the king’s image fully developed into its present hagiographic form. This phase of my argument will return to the main subject of this study: the cult of King Chulalongkorn. The joined promotion of the two kings during this period provided the basis on which the King Chulalongkorn cult could eventually evolve.43

**Two Great Kings**

In the 1980s three important royal jubilees were celebrated. The first jubilee, in 1982, marked two events: the bicentennial of Bangkok as the Thai capital and two hundred years of rule by the Chakri dynasty. A second important festivity took place in 1987, when King Bhumibol celebrated his 60th birthday or, to say it differently, the auspicious completion of his fifth cycle of 12 years. The third celebration, in 1988, marked the king’s breaking the record of the longest reign ever by a Thai/Siamese monarch. The previous record had been set by King Chulalongkorn, who had been on the throne for 42 years and 23 days. The broadcasts, publications, and festivities that accompanied the bicentennial celebrations brought the achievements of the Chakri kings extensively to the attention of the public. King Rama I, the founder of Bangkok, was honoured posthumously with the title maharat (the Great). The Grand Palace was richly restored. The celebrations also served as a preamble to the 1987 and 1988 festivities. It was during the bicentennial, for example, that the idea was born to present a park to the king on the occasion of his 60th birthday (The King Rama IX Royal Park). Funds for constructing the park would be raised through donations from
people “from all walks of life” (Usnisa 1988: 32–3). Another idea for a gift from the people to their king to mark his auspicious birthday was also presented in 1987: to honour the king with the title “the Great”.

A special committee was appointed for the organisation of the 1987 and 1988 celebrations: the National Commission on the Great Celebrations to Honour His Majesty the King. Between 1985 and 1987, the Ministry of Interior had conducted a nation-wide survey in which forty million people completed a form asking which title they preferred: “Bhumibol Maharaj” (phumiphon maharat) or “Phatha Maharaj” (phattha maharat). There was also room to enter another suggestion on the form. About 34 million people voted for Bhumibol Maharaj. Thus, as of 5 December 1987, the official title of the king is “King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great” (somdet phra phumiphon adunlayadaet maharat). Coincidentally or not, he is the ninth monarch in Thai/Siamese history (thus not of the Chakri dynasty) to bear the title.

Seven months after the King’s sixtieth birthday, in June 1988, the celebrations for “The Longest Reign” (mahamongkhon phraratchaphithi mangkhalaphisek) took place. Since the record to be broken was set by King Chulalongkorn, comparisons between the two kings were self-evident. The fact that King Chulalongkorn had also been a maharat made this task easier: both kings were, so to speak, on the same level. It was no impediment that King Chulalongkorn had probably been Siam’s most absolute and powerful monarch, in contrast to the present king who is restricted by the constitution. One of the first books exclusively focussing on a comparison between the two Kings was published by the Office of the National Cultural Commission. The book Two Great Development Kings (song maharat nak phatthana, 1988) addresses most achievements of the two kings. The portrait on the cover of the book is of both kings. The same composition was also part of one of the triumphal arches erected for the celebrations on Ratchadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok. Through the stream of television broadcasts, magazines, and newspapers covering the celebrations, the picture must have reached almost every household in the kingdom multiple times. King Bhumibol is placed in the front, in colour. He is dressed in a white uniform with golden decorations. In the back, slightly higher, and thus evoking the effect of watching over the present king’s shoulder, we see King Chulalongkorn, depicted in sepia. The composition suggests that the spirit of King Chulalongkorn is literally behind his grandson, approving and supporting him. It could also be interpreted as showing that, although King Chulalongkorn died
Worshipping the Great Moderniser

a long time ago, his spirit is still watching over his country and subjects, reflecting the idea of a convergence of the king’s spirit and the *phra sayam thewatirat*. The composition has inspired a wide range of variations, found anywhere in the form of coins, medallions, greeting cards, stickers, or posters. Other portraits may be used, and sometimes prayers or royal symbols are added, but generally the colours-sepia distinction is maintained. A telling composition, which I found as a New Year’s greeting card, depicts a large portrait of King Chulalongkorn (head and shoulder, in sepia) in the background, filling almost the whole picture. In the front we see a rather tiny King Bhumibol (head to foot, in colour) standing in a rice field, a sickle in the hand: the farmer/development king working hard to harvest what his grandfather has sown.

It would be hard, if not impossible, to distinguish where popular imagination begins and officially promoted images end. The question to what extent the official images are influenced by the imagination of the public is not too far-fetched either. However impressive and abundant the official celebrations may have been, numerous people will have been hardly affected. The celebrations alone do not sufficiently explain the nature and scale of the present-day devotion to the kings. The King Chulalongkorn cult in particular goes widely astray from the officially promoted trail, a matter that will be further addressed below.

It seems safe to state, however, that the social imaginary has been influenced by the jubilees. In brief, I want to distinguish three aspects of the celebrations’ impact. First, leaning on the personal charisma King Bhumibol had established in the 1950s and 1960s, the celebrations further strengthened the glory of the Thai monarchy as a whole. Second, the celebrations channelled the already existing feelings of veneration for King Bhumibol and King Chulalongkorn into a summation of the dynasty’s inherent charisma of office and the personal charisma of the two kings. The ample attention to King Chulalongkorn in ‘The Record of the Longest Reign’ celebrations in 1988 may have even given the veneration for this king a decisive impetus for its development into a cult. Third, the widely campaigned comparisons between King Bhumibol and his grandfather during the celebrations of “The Record of the Longest Reign” have greatly added to what I see as a merging of the two royal images. Almost every single personal quality, interest or attitude that is part of the image of King Chulalongkorn has its complement in the image of King Bhumibol. To mention the most important: open-mindedness and eagerness towards technological innovation; taking care that only
innovations fit for the kingdom are implemented, guiding the country towards a specifically Thai way of being modern (*khwam thansamai*); an explicit compassion towards ordinary, rural people; the ability to protect the kingdom in times of danger; and a never failing willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of the people and the nation. Furthermore, the kings share qualities or deeds not directly related to a particular achievement but underlining the extent of their similarity. They share talents in writing, translating, and photography, for example. The two are also the only kings of the Chakri dynasty who entered monkhood after having ascended the throne, a demonstration of their strong adherence to the Buddha Dharma. Finally, they are the only two kings to have received the title *maharat* during their lifetimes.

Apparently, the qualities, interests and propensities that make up King Chulalongkorn’s image, as well as King Bhumibol’s, are perceived as the pivotal elements of both kings’ virtuous and beneficent reigns. In my opinion, this “merged image” of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol expresses the image of the ideal modern Buddhist king. Here we may note an essential difference in function between the “old” Great Kings of Thai history and these two modern kings. The old great kings who are venerated today, particularly King Naresuan and King Taksin, are remembered as “fighters for independence”. As warriors, they maintained the kingdom’s independence by defeating Siam’s arch-enemy, the Burmese. In today’s globalising world, threats of a different and less concrete nature are experienced, such as economic dependency, environmental degradation, and moral decline. As such threats at the same time represent the reverse of development, prosperity, and modernity (*khwam phatthana, khwam charoen, and khwam thansamai*), they illustrate the ambiguous nature of the latter. The wise eclecticism of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol could therefore be understood as a Thai strategy of overcoming both this ambiguity and the threat modernity poses to Thainess. One might say that in the veneration of the great warrior kings, “the Burmese” have become a sign for “alien threats to the kingdom” rather than for “physical, foreign enemy”. But, even then, the old warriors could from heaven only help to ensure Thailand’s independence, while a fruitful dealing with modernity and global processes requires the specific personal qualities of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol. In my view, this is such a central aspect of their image that we may speak of a new interpretation of Buddhist kingship, which I would like to capture “modern Buddhist kingship”.

Two Modern Buddhist Kings

The “Record of the Longest Reign” comparisons still resounded in the late 1990s. When speaking about King Chulalongkorn’s meaning in their personal lives, many worshippers included King Bhumibol in their account. In their view, the present king equals his grandfather in many respects. Following myth and hagiography, people compared the kings in their genius, compassion, and leadership. These qualities may be regarded as popular renderings of the notions of Buddhist kingship and the “Ten Kingly Virtues”. These three qualities culminate together in the “higher” quality of “source of progress and prosperity” (of khwam charoen). As we have seen in Chapter I, this is not just a quality in the general sense. It is, far more, the outcome of other qualities: being hardworking, humane, gifted, and virtuous. The idea of the kings as sources of khwam charoen, of course, comes very close to the image of the two kings as “Great Developers” promoted in the 1988 celebrations, but it is not entirely the same. The meaning of khwam charoen is wider and more general than phatthana, and the concept refers more directly to the quality of concrete daily life. As proven sources of the nation’s prosperity, the kings also appear as guarantors of well-being to all citizens.

As actual objects of worship, King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol seem to grow towards each other. At places where one finds images of King Chulalongkorn (e.g. at home altars, in temples, with vendors at the equestrian statue, or at amulet markets), one increasingly finds medallions, statuettes, and portraits of King Bhumibol as well — not to mention the numerous images depicting the kings together on one single object. Still though, we should not conclude that the King Chulalongkorn cult and the veneration of King Bhumibol tend to become one single phenomenon. Although in terms of qualities both kings embody the ideal of modern Buddhist kingship, their individual images relate to different circumstances and expectations. The basis of this difference lies with the obvious fact that in the case of King Chulalongkorn, people worship a deity, while in the case of King Bhumibol, people venerate a living monarch. As a consequence, King Chulalongkorn may be approached by anyone, at any time, and anywhere, while King Bhumibol, on the other hand, remains virtually inaccessible for any direct request. A second implication is that appeals to and expectations regarding King Bhumibol’s auspicious powers tend to be more or less explicitly related to actual political and economic problems, whereas the worshipping of King Chulalongkorn, as
we have seen in the foregoing chapters, is mainly restricted to the sphere of the individual life and its immediate needs and problems.

The veneration of King Bhumibol is imbued with anxieties about the destiny of the nation as a whole, of which uncertainty about the monarchy, as we have seen, is intrinsic. Worries about the monarchy cannot be openly expressed, except occasionally in the form of concern with the king’s failing health and his heart condition in particular. When King Bhumibol on 15 March 1995 was hospitalised for cardio-vascular treatment, the concern with his health not only reached a high point but also, for the first time, could be fully expressed in public. On the day of the operation, March 19, thousands of people gathered at the Sanam Luang (the Royal Field in front of the Grand Palace) to participate in a ceremony dedicated to the king; additionally, monks conducted twenty-four hour chanting sessions in temples throughout the country. After his recovery, the king explained in a television broadcast all details of the operation. To my feeling, this broadcast not only showed that the king was again in good health and full control of the situation, but also that nobody except the king should publicly discuss the king’s health. The broadcast was intended, so to speak, to allay the concern over the king’s health, and to put an end to the topic as a matter of public speculation. Although the subject of “the king’s failing health” may be below the surface again, it is only just below, offering a possibility to articulate political and economic anxieties in guarded, but positive terms. Once arisen, such a “fissure” is apparently hard to close. At the end of this section, I will return to this subject when summarising the major difference between the King Chulalongkorn cult and the veneration of King Bhumibol.

Prestige through Participation

The image of King Bhumibol as a personal friend of the peasants complies with the ideal of the fatherly, accessible king of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription. But the phrase from the inscription, so often cited to give, as it seems, a “historical basis” to the king’s deeds, finds no resonance in the daily life of most Thai. “If any commoner in the land has a grievance (...)” to whom could the present-day commoner appeal? The discrepancy between the image of personal concern and accessibility, and King Bhumibol’s actual distance and inaccessibility, becomes the more poignant when one realises that only those belonging to the highest echelons of society have access to the palace. The king’s direct environment has
become an arena where members of the elite compete amongst each other for prestige through the appropriation of King Bhumibol’s image. The continuous stream of initiatives, such as the publishing of jubilee books, the organisation of merit-making ceremonies, and the issuing of commemorative coins by army units, government departments, banks and other public or private enterprises, temples, charity foundations, and relief organisations, should be understood against this background. Leading figures from all over Thai society — aristocracy, professors, top-brass military, politicians, and directors — sponsor and organise such tributes to His Majesty. Their backgrounds and positions ensure them of the cooperation of notables from other circles, as well as of permission from the palace to use official photographs or other images of the king. The most successful even manage to arrange the presence of the king in person.

The attention for King Bhumibol seeks new highs with every anniversary. Apart from the king’s birthday (5 December), the kingdom has celebrated a number of special jubilees, including King Bhumibol’s 50th year on the throne (1996), His Majesty’s completion of the sixth twelve-year lifecycle in 1999, as well as the occasions of His Majesty living as long as King Rama I (the longest-living Thai monarch until 23 May 2000), and His Majesty becoming the longest-living king in Thai history on 24 May 2000. The definite climax in this sequence was His Majesty’s 60th year on the throne (2006), the extensive celebrations of which will continue in those on the occasion of His Majesty’s 80th birthday in 2007. The following case serves as an illustration of how members of the elite use such celebrations and King Bhumibol’s image to promote their own prestige and objectives.

**Five great prestigious medals**

In anticipation of King Bhumibol’s completion of his sixth twelve-year life cycle in 1999, royal permission was given to the Salang Bunnag Foundation in co-operation with the “The Educational Assistance Funds for the Children of Police Officers Who Died on the Line of Duty” to mint Five Great Auspicious commemorative medals (bencha maha mongkhon) in five editions. The Salang Bunnag Foundation was founded by former senator and retired Police General Salang Bunnag, who belongs to an influential branch of one of the most prominent Thai families. Significantly, the king’s 72nd birthday provided not only the occasion to mint the medals as a means “to enhance the prestige of His Majesty the King”, but also the occasion to set up
the Educational Assistance Funds itself. The sale of medals served to raise funds for the Educational Assistance Funds, and the Salang Bunnag Foundation made every effort to make the medals as special as possible. According the foundation’s information, the medals have “undergone an exceptional religious and unique blessing process”. The medals have been sacralised in nine Mangala Phisek Ceremonies (royal pluksek ceremonies) organised in nine of the foremost royal temples, each temple connected with another king of the Chakri dynasty. For each ceremony, a chapter of nation-wide respected monks was invited to conduct the ceremony.

Less prestigious foundations did not manage to have sacralisation ceremonies organised in these nine royal temples, including the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew). Neither would permission have been granted for minting the first royal anniversary medals in 105 years. This implies that less prestigious foundations, or any organisation, company, official, or individual belonging to the higher sections of the middle class, but too far away from the “inner circles” around the palace, must find other ways to present and promote themselves in public. Here the King Chulalongkorn cult offers ample occasion.

The erection of King Chulalongkorn statues in front of the Provincial Administration buildings (see Chapter III), the minting of King Chulalongkorn commemorative medals (see the case of the Siam Commercial Bank, Chapter II), the organisation of consecration ceremonies for King Chulalongkorn images (see Stengs 1998), or the sponsoring of the establishment of a local King Chulalongkorn place of worship (such as Wat Doi Chang or the tamnak of Mae Wan), irrespective of the variety of the individual motives and sentiments involved, may all be regarded as public performances enhancing the esteem of the initiators and sponsors. The middle class participating in the King Chulalongkorn cult therefore can be understood as mimicking the elite’s relations with the court. And because, as explained above, the two kings are truly each other’s equals, participating in the King Chulalongkorn cult does bring societal prestige and opportunities. This parallel opportunity the King Chulalongkorn cult offers to the ever expanding middle class does not imply that the highest circles do not participate. On the contrary, the royal family paid tribute to King Chulalongkorn in the public ceremony on Chulalongkorn Day (see Chapter III), proving the “highest” involvement is possible. The “hidden” key to the massive success of the King Chulalongkorn cult is that participation and self-presentation are open
to anybody at any level, and that there is much more freedom to enter the cult on one's own terms. The latter observation parallels my argument about the gender aspect in the cult (see Chapter III): participating in the cult offers an attainable alternative to those for whom the palace will always remain closed.

**Fearful Fallibility**

The difference between King Bhumibol as a living ideal modern Buddhist King and King Chulalongkorn as a saint in heaven is most clearly articulated around the topic of hope and fear. King Chulalongkorn, the Great Beloved King, appears as potentially anybody’s mental patron (*thi phueng thang chai*) and benefactor, as well as the *phra sayam thewatirat*. As a personal patron, King Chulalongkorn supports individuals in their day-to-day worries: increasing sales, taking exams, and finding a lover. As the nation’s guardian angel, King Chulalongkorn will always protect the kingdom (*pokkhrong banmuang*) with his *bun barami* and will help make it prosper. King Bhumibol, on the other hand, does not appear as a personal patron. However, since he is a proven meritorious king, his *bun barami* is also expected to protect the kingdom and make it prosper. In this respect there is no difference with King Chulalongkorn. Both the myth of the Great Beloved King and the hagiography of King Bhumibol are constructed around the pivotal role of kingship in maintaining the kingdom. As modern Buddhist kings, both are perceived as capable of controlling the negative aspects of global processes and modernity, while allowing full advantage of the positive to be taken. One crucial difference, however, remains: the uncertainty of whether fate will allow King Bhumibol to continue fostering Thailand’s independence and prosperity. Where the myth of the Great Beloved King is complete, and King Chulalongkorn can never fail to do anything but good from heaven, the final paragraphs of King Bhumibol’s hagiography still remain to be written. It is here, as well as in the uncertainty of the eventual succession, that the image of King Bhumibol as a living monarch will never be able to cast off that ominous shadow that follows it: the fallibility of kingship, which, after all is a human affair.

The “twilight zone” of rumours about the royal family partly appeared as a construct to exculpate King Bhumibol from any ill political involvement, while leaving open the possibility of speculations about a king making incorrect choices in future. Against the background of the
Modern Buddhist Kingship

concept of Buddhist kingship, the fear of an incapable successor, however, goes much further than worries about possible direct consequences of his behaviour. The main concern is that such a successor will prove unable to sustain the Thai political cosmos. From Thailand it is not difficult to see the immediate effects of the lack of a meritorious king: in terms of prosperity and stability, a yawning abyss separates Thailand from the neighbouring Theravada Buddhist countries, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. The misery of these war-torn and poverty-stricken countries is what may await the Thai without a king like King Bhumibol.

The observed concern with the king’s failing health and increasing age carries an ominous charge in this perspective: like the rumours about the royal family, it expresses the fear of a failure of kingship. In this deep and general concern, the veneration of King Bhumibol reflects the Thai anxieties that come with modernity and global processes of change, while the veneration of King Chulalongkorn rather reflects the hope for the progress and prosperity that these changes may bring.

The Uncertainty of Modernity

In order to grasp the vital position of the ambiguity of modernity at the heart of the King Chulalongkorn cult, it is crucial to bring together the most important of the many threads we have followed to understand the rapid development of the King Chulalongkorn cult, its entrenchment in urban, middle class Thailand, and the forces impinging on it. The imaginary around King Chulalongkorn has proven to be part of a wider social imaginary surrounding kingship and Thainess, which I have captioned “modern Buddhist kingship”. No political, economic, historical or religious framework can fully account for the content and workings of any given social imaginary, a reservoir of cultural representations, state ideology, hidden- and counter-discourses, recurrent and shared speculations about the body politic and standardised fantasies about evil forces and divine interference. But neither will a sensitive comprehension of any social imaginary be possible without taking these frameworks seriously. This study has attempted to fathom the social imaginary around Thai kingship by placing its rise and vicissitudes in the context of political, economic and religious developments that have significantly influenced late-nineteenth and twentieth century Thailand. The social imaginary around Thainess we meet today, with kingship as the pivot of the orderly arrangement of the Thai social cosmos, has proven to be a modern
phenomenon that, although drawing on traditional idiom, is related specifically to the final 10 to 15 years of the twentieth century. Thus, inevitably, the prism of the King Chulalongkorn cult provided a highly colourful spectrum of Thai society in this specific period.

Apart from “modern Buddhist kingship”, “uncertainty” was another recurrent theme throughout this study. Feelings of uncertainty, experienced on a national as well as a personal level, about economic, political, and religious developments, imply more than a merely fearful attitude towards change. Uncertainty is based on elements of desire, of which expectations of fulfilment are unsure, as well as on feelings of anxiety. The imaginary around modern Buddhist kingship reflects this duality: the more protection and ever-increasing prosperity are experienced, depending on the performance and person of the ruling king, the greater the potential for fear of decline and collapse. This study might be read as an investigation into the ways the Thai social imaginary has sought to remedy the increasing societal uncertainty of the 1980s and 1990s by reworking the idea of Buddhist kingship into a new bedrock of Thai identity, thereby counterbalancing the alienating, anonymising effects of globalising urban culture.

The economic boom of the 1980s, an outcome of local as well as global processes, explains much of the uncertainty that has arisen, to which the 1997 crisis only added. The enormous economic growth of the 1980s caused a rapid increase in income inequality and tended to marginalise large sections of society. The gaps between the urban and the rural, the educated and the uneducated, and the well-to-do and the less-well-off, became ever wider. The increasing social differences put pressure on people at both ends of the line. The strong messages of success, mediated by symbols of wealth (cars, skyscrapers, and luxury), evoked the less-successful’s hope and desire, while simultaneously reminding them of their failure. Those in the middle class, just having escaped their modest backgrounds, had to face a possible lapse into their former situation, while at the same time feeling urged to reach further. The 1997 economic crisis demonstrated that even the wealthy remain vulnerable: many became “formerly rich” overnight.

I began my study with the myth of the Great Beloved King that permeates the cult. The myth appeared to be built upon the historical person of King Chulalongkorn; the history of the Fifth Reign, with as its high points the Chakri Reformation and the maintenance of Siam’s independence in an era of colonisation; the idea of the Buddhist king as
upholder of the political cosmos; and a nationalist ideology constructed around kingship. This material offered the seeds out of which the King Chulalongkorn cult could grow in the mid-eighties. The figure of King Chulalongkorn became the object of a cult when the social imaginary began to articulate prevalent feelings of uncertainty in terms of the myth, while integrating the king’s image with elements derived from official Buddhism, cults around holy monks, and the idea that all sacred things are potent objects.

The myth of the Great Beloved King appeals to the major concerns that underlie the feelings of uncertainty. The king’s interest in the lives of all of his subjects and their well-being, expressed in particular in “the abolition of slavery” and his “visits to the countryside”, addresses uncertainties and frustrations on the level of individual daily life. Concrete experiences of misfortune and adversity, as well as good luck and prosperity, can be phrased in the idiom of the myth: “Thanks to King Chulalongkorn, I … got my job; survived an accident; passed my exam; have a flourishing business; am free to choose my profession.” The latter example shows how “the abolition of slavery” articulates the issue of individual independence, one of the core elements of modernity. On the level of the nation, the same vital theme is addressed in “the king saved Thailand from becoming a colony”. The general tendency is to voice uneasiness with the local effects of the globalising economy by identifying those effects as harmful to Thai independence. On the other hand, the myth also allows for a reconciliation of Thainess with the effects of globalisation. The myth presents the Chakri Reformation as an initiative of King Chulalongkorn to selectively modernise the country through a master plan covering both the nation’s welfare and independence and the maintenance of its cultural and moral singularity. Equating modernity with modernisation, the myth makes modernity an essential attribute of Thainess. But, precisely because this eclecticism of Thai modernity is prerequisite, everything related to modernity can always be judged on its contribution to the maintenance of Thainess.

The King Chulalongkorn myth allows for contradictory interpretations. As the founder of the modern Thai state, the Great Beloved King may be invoked to legitimise the state’s authority, but equally to articulate criticism of its malfunctions. The myth may be used to legitimise the unbalanced division of wealth by declaring prosperity a just reward for moral conduct, but also, just as rightfully, to contest the unbalance by referring to the king’s wish for his subjects’ welfare. In this tug-of-war
about the true interpretation of King Chulalongkorn's image, the cult appears as an arena where interest groups, individuals, and business and government organisations advance their views. This potential of harbouring contrasting interpretations is another factor that helps explain the cult's vigour.

Myth is only one dimension in understanding how the veneration of King Chulalongkorn could quickly develop into a thriving cult. Since every Thai has been brought up with the image of King Chulalongkorn, reworkings of the myth could easily set in. Equally, where the worshipping of saints and the use of potent objects were common means of invoking fortune and warding off all sorts of dangers in everyday life, invoking the powers of the Great Beloved King fits well with established religious practices. The king, as it were, was called forward from an already existing pantheon once his specific qualities were needed. Media attention and commercial initiative further enforced the cult's momentum, increasing its public presence and making cult objects widely available for worship and display. Due to publicity and commodification, the King Chulalongkorn cult has become a regular and natural part of the Thai public sphere.

Amidst the cult's various appearances in the public sphere, the king's portraits stand out because of their omnipresence and their particular role in sustaining the cult. As a cult object, any King Chulalongkorn portrait has the potential to establish an immediate link between the beholder and the world of Thainess related in the myth of the Great Beloved King. A special quality of portraits is that each reproduction equals the original in its potential to establish such a link. This explains the mass production of portraits in a personality cult. The enormous number of King Chulalongkorn portraits on display in public or semi-public places (shops, offices, temples) reflect the general importance of expressing one's association with Thainess. Simultaneously, these portraits counterbalance the anonymity of urban space by filling it with Thainess.

We have seen that, although King Chulalongkorn's face can be found virtually everywhere, the cult remains mainly a middle class phenomenon, with a special role for relatively successful middle class women in particular. The cult offers these women opportunities to take a leading role in public religious affairs, a domain hitherto dominated by men. The more active women in the networks around King Chulalongkorn cult centres demonstrate their involvement by wearing — sometimes ostentatious — King Chulalongkorn medallions. The message of the King
Chulalongkorn lôkket, however, is more than that of active participation alone: its use by this specific group of women makes the locket a sign of societal success, wealth, and modernity as well. Here, participation clearly appears to have a performative dimension: the cult allows manifesting and distinguishing oneself. This aspect of performance also explains the cult’s appeal to the lower strata of urban society, for whom wealth is only an enticing prospect. Participation allows anybody to present himself as part of the world of modernity and success. In this respect, the King Chulalongkorn cult is part of a Thai urban lifestyle, characterised overall by a joint display of wealth and religiosity.

The King Chulalongkorn cult not only offers a platform to stage oneself as a part of the world of Thainess, but also to perform as being a better part of this world in a better way than others do. From this point of view, displaying King Chulalongkorn lockets, donating King Chulalongkorn portraits, erecting King Chulalongkorn statues, and sponsoring King Chulalongkorn cult events, is part of a competition in morality. This competitive morality is one of the compelling forces that keep the social imaginary on its track.

A solid emphasis on the performative aspects of participation would entail the danger of overlooking the significance participation has for the individual worshipper. On the level of daily life, for example, King Chulalongkorn has the role of a personal patron who is always accessible to everybody who needs him. Individual accounts of personal encounters with or interventions by the king, in their turn, may become part of the body of stories testifying to King Chulalongkorn’s accessibility. Stories articulating personal experiences in terms of the King Chulalongkorn myth cannot be but confirmative. This is another mechanism that forces the social imaginary to continue its taken course. Consequently, accessibility tends to become the essence of King Chulalongkorn’s image, making the king ever so important in the personal lives of his worshippers.

Accessibility is but one element of Buddhist kingship that constantly gains in significance in the social imaginary. The way the episode of “1976” was lifted from King Bhumibol’s biography without leaving any fissure in the history of the monarchy is illustrative of the importance of the idea that a Buddhist king is the upholder of the political cosmos. By laying the blame of engagement with the right-wing military, and violence with others, the image of King Bhumibol remained pure, leading a flawless King Bhumibol to remain the living embodiment of modern Buddhist kingship.
The intensifying imaginations around Thai kingship are forced even further by the shadows that grow alongside with them. For a part, this “fearful side” of the King Chulalongkorn cult reflects the eerie side of any dealing with the supernatural, an eeriness that we have seen, for instance, in the figure of the Intermediary, and gruesome stories about what may happen when ritual is not conducted properly. On another level of interpretation, this dark side reflects people’s concrete fears for personal disaster or falling behind. A different shadow that follows “modern Buddhist kingship” appeared from the hidden discourse around the fear of a possible failure of kingship, by failure of the ruling king or an unfortunate succession. Perhaps this is the most crucial element for understanding the emergence of the King Chulalongkorn cult. The exalted expectations have made modern Buddhist kingship a task that surpasses the capacities of any mortal king.
Notes

Introduction

1. The following description is compiled from field notes taken this evening.
2. At the time 1,000 baht was approximately US$25.
3. The charismatic power that stems from having command of those qualities that are called the “Ten Kingly Virtues” (thotsaphit ratchatham): charity, morality, self-sacrifice, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction (see Chapter I).
4. Originally, a khatha consisted of (Pali) words once spoken by Buddha and therefore considered to have auspicious power when recited, but there are many khatha (some in Thai) that have been modified or are actually of a later or even recent date (see Chapter II).
5. Actually, Thoden van Velzen uses the term “collective fantasy”, in the 1995 article. In personal communications in the course of writing this book, and in later publications, he prefers “social imaginary” (Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering 2004).
6. In social theory “modernity” has been approached in two main streams. One, drawing on Max Weber, understands modernity primarily as a rationalisation of social structures (for example, institutionalisation, bureaucratisation, professionalisation). The other, more anthropological, approach sees modernity primarily as a condition of social imaginary in which modernity is a project, an idea or an ideal. Since this book is mainly about ideas and expectations, my interpretation of modernity follows the latter approach, finding inspiration in such authors as Appadurai (1996) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1993, 2001).
7. The Chakri dynasty was founded in 1782 when General Chakri seized power and subsequently made Bangkok the new capital of Siam. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand’s present monarch, is the ninth Chakri king.
8. Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939 when Phibun Songkhram was Prime Minister. The country’s name was changed back into Siam again by
Pridi Phanomyong’s government on 7 September 1945. In 1948, Phibun Songkhram took over government again, and the country’s name has remained Thailand since (Reynolds 1993: 20).

9. The perception of 1855 as the turning point of Siamese history, however, does not imply that the developments in Siam during the Fourth and Fifth Reigns are the mere outcome of the Bowring treaty, nor that Siam had been isolated from the wider world before 1855. Siam’s opening up to overseas trade and international relationships has taken many steps both before and after 1855 (Brummelhuis 2005: 57–8; Terwiel 1983: 172; Terwiel 2005: 161–4).

10. Until the early 1850s, the Indian government was responsible for all Anglo-Siamese affairs. Thereafter, Anglo-Siamese affairs became the duty of the Foreign Office in London (as Siam was an independent country) (Xie 1988: 22–3).

11. During King Chulalongkorn’s reign, the French occupied Sipson Chuthai (now a province of Laos) in 1888. In 1893 the Siamese ceded the left bank of the Mekong River (presently part of Laos) to France, in 1904 the Lao regions on the right Mekong river bank opposite Luang Prabang and Champasak, and in 1907 the western part of present-day Cambodia. In 1909 the four tributary Malaysian sultanates Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu were ceded to Britain (Thongchai 1994: 151).

12. One aspect of these preparations consisted of inviting foreign experts to help Siam with the establishment of modern institutions. During the Fifth reign altogether over two-hundred advisors have been working for the Siamese government. For example, the Revenues Development Office (1875), the Royal Telegraph Department (1875), the Post Office (1881), the Survey Department (1885), the Department of Foreign Relations (1885), the Department of Public Instruction (1887) and the Royal Irrigation Department (1902) were set up with the help of foreign advisors to the government (Brummelhuis 2005: 67).


15. The position of uparat is often, confusingly, translated as “second king”. However, only Prince Wichaichan’s father and King Mongkut’s brother, Prince Chudamani, had been appointed as actual second kings (phra pin klaa) with relevant powers (Wyatt 1984: 182).

16. At the time, the king wanted to visit Europe already, but Suriyawong did not agree and proposed India instead (Terwiel 1983: 218).
17. Although King Chulalongkorn had twenty-six (half)-brothers, only Prince Sawat went to Europe (London) for study (Terwel 1983: 245, note 80). Some of the most prominent brothers, like Prince Damrong and Prince Thewawong, went to Europe later with the explicit assignment of gathering ideas on how, such as modern administration or an educational system could be organised (ibid.: 254). There were, however, other princes who studied abroad in these early years, such as Prince Prisdang Chumsai, who was a son of King Nangklao (Rama III).

18. Ministerial positions held by King Chulalongkorn’s (half)-brothers: Prince Devawongse, Minister of Foreign Affairs (1885–1923); Prince Damrong, Minister of Interior (1892–1915); Prince Narathip, Minister of Finance (1887–93); Prince Naris, Minister of Public Works (1889–93, 1899–1905), Minister of Finance (1893–94), Minister of War (1894–99); Prince Mahit Ratchaharitthai, Minister of Palace (1887–96), Minister of Finance (1896–1906); Prince Sirithat Sangkhhat, Minister of Finance (1894–96), Minister of the Privy Seal (1896). One brother, Prince Sommot, became the king’s private secretary and was appointed Director of the Privy Purse Department (which dealt with the finances of the royal household) in 1893. In 1892 nine of the twelve ministers were King Chulalongkorn’s brothers. In 1906 still only four ministers out of twelve did not belong to the royal family. Battye, in this respect, speaks of the “prince-regime” (1974: 370).

19. Quoted and translated by Battye (1974: 268). Quotation taken from “The Presentation of Opinions on Governmental Reform Submitted to King Chulalongkorn from the Royal Princes and the King’s Servants in 1885” (Chaonai lae kharatchakan krapbangkhomthun khwammen chat kanplianplaeng ratchakanphaendin R.S. 103 [Bangkok 1967: 56]).

20. King Chulalongkorn’s first son to become minister was Prince Chantaburi (born in 1874), who was installed as Minister of Finance in 1908 and would keep that position until 1923.

21. Quotation taken from Murashima’s summation of the petition, as included in the compilation “The Presentation of Opinions on Governmental Reform Submitted to King Chulalongkorn from the Royal Princes and the King’s Servants in 1885” (Chaonai lae kharatchakan krapbangkhomthun khwammen chat kanplianplaeng ratchakanphaendin R.S. 103, pp. 21–5; Bangkok 1967: 56) (Murashima 1988: 84).

22. Quotation taken from Murashima’s summation of “King Chulalongkorn’s Speech Explaining Governmental Reform” (Phratchadammat nai phrabat somdet phrachulachom klao chao yuhua son thalaeng phaboroma ratchathibai kaekhai kanpokkhrong phaendin), held in 1888 (Bangkok 1927) (ibid.: 85–6).

23. One of the petitioners, the aforementioned Prince Prisdang Chumsai, Siam’s first overseas diplomat (in London), had to leave Siam in 1890/1891 (Brailey 1989: 15–23).
24. See Peleggi (2002) for a detailed study and interpretation of the conscious use of modern, western practices, techniques and objects by the Siamese monarchy (in particular during the Fifth Reign) in the shaping and refashioning of the royal elite’s image and identity.

25. Before 1882 only two coins with an image of King Chulalongkorn were issued: the first in 1871 on the occasion of King Chulalongkorn’s eighteenth birthday (the first Siamese coin ever carrying a monarch’s image); the second in 1876, on the occasion of the inauguration of Bang-Pa In Palace in Ayutthaya. The first stamp with an image of the king was issued in 1883.

26. The compilation was probably inspired by a British lithograph depicting the British queen amidst her ancestors (Anake 2000: 11).

27. There even was a plan to produce “equestrian statue match boxes”, but this part of the project was cancelled because of the drawing’s poor quality.

28. Apinan (1992b) has a detailed account of the visits King Chulalongkorn paid to European artists and the ordering of portraits and sculptures.

29. The law on lese majesty was introduced in the 1890s, and has remained part of Thai legislation ever since (Sulak 1996: 48–9). Thailand’s latest, but in the meantime abrogated, constitution (1997) contains an article to protect the king from any criticism. The stagers of the coup of 19 September 2006 issued an interim constitution on 1 October 2006.

30. The declaration of war against the United States was never formally delivered.

31. There is a vast (historical) literature on kingship in the Indianised states of Southeast Asia (Bali, Burma, Cambodia, Champa, Laos and Thailand). For a review of this literature, except for Bali, see Hagesteijn (1989). For a history and analysis of Balinese kingship see Schulte Nordholt (1996).

32. The total increase between 1984 and 1996 in non-agricultural employment was eight million, while peak season employment in agriculture shrank by two million in the same period (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 84).

33. The percentage of people in this category with white-collar jobs rose from 9.85% of the total workforce in 1960 to 22.2% in 1990. Ockey places the following occupations in this group: professional, technical and related workers; administrative, executive managerial workers and government officials; clerical and related workers; sales workers and service workers (1999: 234–5).

34. First of all, the generic use of the label “Chinese” or “Sino-Thai” is problematic and misleading (Bao 1995; Walwipha 1995). Among the Chinese in Thailand, there is considerable heterogeneity arising from place of origin, dialect, and cultural practices. The migration history and ethnicity of the Chinese in Southern Thailand differs greatly from, for example, that of the Chinese whose ancestors migrated to Bangkok, and their respective assimilation
histories and relations with the Thai are equally varied (Wålwpaha 1995: 50–1).

35. Worshipping Chao Mae Kuan Im and participating in the Vegetarian Food Festival are related phenomena. Chao Mae Kuan Im is generally regarded as “the patron of vegetarianism” (Hamilton 1999: 9), a vegetarianism which in practice means abstinence from beef (ibid.: 7). On modern Thai asceticism, see also Stengs, forthcoming in 2007. ???

36. Also King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605) deserves to be mentioned. King Naresuan is in particular popular in military circles. He is worshipped for defeating the Burmese in 1593 and hence, for his contribution to the maintenance of Thai independence (for more on the social imaginary around King Taksin and King Naresuan, see Chapter II). However, King Naresuan was not of Chinese descent, and has no specific significance for Sino-Thai.

37. Scholars who study “popular culture” acknowledge the concept’s problematic connotations (see Fabian 1995 in particular), but the idea behind popular/public culture as a field of study is clearly culture as praxis, “a vast complex of thought, representations and performances” (ibid.: 3).

38. In 1995, the Thai Farmers Bank Research Centre estimated that four billion baht (US$150,000,000) would be spent on “fortune telling related consultancies” during the year. The report concluded that the “business” was on the increase, see <http://tfb.co.th./tfrc95/nov/fortune.htm>.

39. The Council of Elders is an advisory body to the Supreme Patriarch (somdet phra sangharat) of the Sangha. The Council of Elders consists of the Patriarch, all monks with the ecclesiastical title somdet and several monks with the status of racha khana (Tambiah 1977: 253–4).

40. Most officials in the department are educated former monks (Tambiah 1977: 299, 351).

41. For reasons of privacy the name of the temple is fictitious.

42. During my research, the abbot’s fame grew. The number of people who came for personal consultations increased rapidly, leaving the abbot hardly any time for himself during the daytime. Early in 1997, he felt forced to introduce office hours.

43. The portraits I found in the city had been distributed at the temple’s festivals.

44. Her name is fictitious, too.

45. King Chulalongkorn coins were often distributed during these Sunday sessions.

46. The full name of the Prayers Society is Jinapanjara Suttam Prayers Society (Chomrom Suatmon Phrakhatha Chinnapanchon/Society for Chanting the Venerable Chinnapanchon Formula). I have not used a fictitious name for this organisation because, unlike the abbot and the spirit medium, the Prayers Society explicitly seeks publicity for its activities.
Chapter I

1. Sixty-three per cent of the Thai youth entered secondary education in 1994 (source: Ministry of Education, in Pasuk and Baker 1998: 146). Enrolment in primary education also improved during the last decades. The present generations will have followed at least the legal minimum of six years of primary school education (ibid.: 128, 133).

2. Enforcement of these regulations is not always strict. It is, for instance, not allowed to produce films with actors dressed as a monk or novice (cf. Hamilton 1993). In a recent (1999) movie by Director Nonzee Nimibutr (Nang Nak, Mrs. Nak), however, the highly venerated, historical monk Somdet To (see Chapter IV) and his novice have an important role. The movie became one of the greatest successes in the history of the Thai film industry. Within one week it generated more than three million dollars in revenues (it took the film Titanic three months to reach that sum in Thailand), and the director has not received one single complaint about the appearance of Somdet To (Interview with Nonzee Nimibutr, 5 February 2000). In the same year, however, the controversy about the making of the film Anna and the King reached its zenith. Due to the high Thai sensitivity concerning the portrayal of the king (not King Chulalongkorn but his father, King Mongkut or King Rama IV), the director (Andy Tennant), even after having re-written the script five times, could not get permission to produce the film in Thailand. Circulation of the film in Thailand is also prohibited. This indicates the Thai sensitivity in matters relating to royalty and the image of kings. Nonzee deemed it impossible to make a movie about the reign of King Chulalongkorn, with the king figuring in the story.

3. The increase in revenues from advertisements rose with 25 per cent a year since 1985 on, to an amount of 36 billion baht (US$1,15 billion) in 1994 (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 48).

4. A clear example were the attempts of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa (Prime Minister in 1995–96) to control the stream of scandals and negative opinions on his corrupt politics by closing down Mong Tang Mum (A Different Perspective), an action that met wide critical opposition. The programme was one of the country’s most controversial talk shows at the time. This, and several other suppressive measures, did not save Banharn and his government from political failure. See Hamilton (1993) for an overview and analysis on media and censorship in Thailand.

5. Identifying kings as national heroes is not a recent phenomenon. In 1977, Anderson, comparing Thailand with other (colonised) Southeast-Asian countries, wrote: “The heroes of Thai children school-books have not been journalists, union leaders, teachers and politicians who spent years in colonial jails, but above all the ‘great kings’ of the ruling house” (1977: 21). See also below for the promotion of hero-kings in the early twentieth century.
6. An example is *Banthuk Sayami/Siam Recorder*, a writers’ association (*samnak khian*) which during my research published at least six books with “King Chulalongkorn” as the main topic.

7. In particular the big banking groups that since long finance the two channels leased by private companies (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 47).


9. Swearer renders the Ten Perfections as generosity, virtuous conduct, restraint, wisdom, endeavor, tolerance, truthfulness, resolution, loving kindness, equanimity (2004: 16).

10. For the development of this line of thought I want to thank Raphael Sanchez for sharing his ideas with me.

11. The epithet was given to the king during his reign on the occasion of his fortieth anniversary of his accession to the throne (see also Chapters II and V).

12. Quoted from the series *Thorinan Thin Thai* (Sovereigns of the Thai Realm).

13. Ibid.


15. The seven 1904 letters appeared in the two-monthly journal *Thawi Panya* in 1905. Prince Damrong wrote these letters as a fictional royal page, named Song Anuphap (Damrong 1976 [1912]: 4–5). The 1906 accounts were written as a regular diary under the Prince’s own name.


17. The first railway was opened in 1893 and connected Bangkok with Pak Nam (a village at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River).

18. The waterfall is named after the king’s visit: “the visit (*sadet*) of his excellency (*than*)”.

19. Like the books *Samutphap Ratchakan Thi Hal/A Pictorial Record of the Fifth Reign* and *Phrabat Somdet Phra Chulachomklao Phra Chao Krong Sayam/H.M Chulalongkorn, King of Siam*. 
20. King Chulalongkorn was the first Siamese king to use a cipher, the above mentioned Thai abbreviation of Chulalongkorn Paramaphithai Ratchathirat, Ch.P.R. (and not Ch[C].B.R., see Munier 1998), following the European (in fact, British) custom. As with any other place of interest road signs guide visitors to the king’s monographs (lai phrabat).

21. In the prince’s own words: “When I was preparing this book I considered that using an official style and idiom would make it less interesting to read then using the style and idiom of a story” (Damrong 1976: 4, translation IS).

22. The publication was distributed in the form of a so-called “cremation book” (nang sue ngan sop). Such books or booklets were especially published on the occasion of the cremation of a person of high rank.

23. Quoted from Samutphap Ratchakan Thi Hai/A Pictorial Record of the Fifth Reign, 1992, p. 81.

24. The Siamese kings of course were well aware of the potential threat from nai with a large number of phrai som. They therefore regularly issued laws and decrees aiming at reducing the number of phrai som, while increasing the number of phrai luang (Akin 1969: 32).


26. The images in the wax museum are actually made of fibreglass to withstand the tropical climate.

27. See for instance the Thai Cultural Newsletter, October 1997 or the Bangkok Post Outlook, 9 October 1996. The images also feature in television series like Thoranin Thin Thai (Soil of the Thai Land).

28. The construction of the throne hall started in 1908 and was completed in 1915.

29. The composition was inspired by the Vatican fresco “School of Athens” (1510–11) by Raphael Sanzio (Apinan 1992a: 282).

30. The artist has chosen another original to portray the king in full person: the photograph of King Chulalongkorn and Queen Saovabha Phongsri taken during the royal inauguration ceremony of the first part of the Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima railway (the Bangkok-Ayutthaya section) in 1896. On this photograph, the expression of the king’s face is very friendly indeed.

31. In 1868 King Mongkut (Rama IV) issued the first royal edict to restrict the growth of slavery due to gambling. The edict required the consent of the wife before a husband could sell her or her children into slavery (Feeny 1989: 294).

32. Cf. Phrabat Somdet Phra Chulachomklao Phra Chao Krung Sayam/H.M Chulalongkorn, King of Siam, Bangkok, 1991: 127. Thai Cultural Newsletter, October 1997. For the importance attributed to Thai kings in the prevention of “civil wars”, see Chapter V.
For a detailed overview on the royal edicts of the abolition of the slavery and corvée systems, see Engel 1975: 97–8; Feeny 1989; 1993.

In Thailand, 12 is an auspicious number, particularly when it concerns human age, and so are its multiples. Reaching the age of 24 years is thus the auspicious occasion of the completion of the second cycle.

By freeing the slaves the king made merit (tham bun). In essence his deed is a particular form of the still common custom of making merit (generally on one’s birthday or on auspicious days) by the somewhat paradoxical habit to buy the freedom of turtles or birds, which are offered for sale at temples for this specific purpose. An example is the release of 999 turtles by sailors of Sattahip naval base on the occasion of Queen Sirikit’s 66th birthday in 1998 (see The Bangkok Post, 24 August 1998).

For a thorough critique of the use of the word that, see also Akin (1969: 104–12).

De Koning van Siam, die ons land met een kort bezoek vereert (…) door velen ten onrechte voor eene soort van Negerkoning gehouden — is een zeer beschaafd en verlicht Aziatisch Vorst, die in ontwikkeling en staatsmanswijsheid hooger moet staan dan de Mikado van Japan, en evenals deze, erop uit is, zijn land de weldaden der Westersche beschaving te verzekeren (…). Hij spreekt vloeiend Fransch en Engelsch en kan dus overal zonder tolk terecht. Daarbij wist hij, waar hij kwam, zich bemind te maken door zijn vriendelijkheid en voorkomendheid.

Kullada Kerboonchu, a political scientist from Chulalongkorn University, feels differently: “In fact, the royal trip made such a strong favorable impression that people there still remember and speak about it” (quotation taken from The Bangkok Post, Outlook, 22 November 1997).

Quoted from Klai Ban — Fern von Zuhause, Far from Home, Loin des siens (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, European Studies Programme, 1997).

Although he lived in the United States for several years, the professor seemed to have no association with Magnum as a type of gun.

Between September 1996 and October 1997 three books from Phaladisai’s hand on King Chulalongkorn were published by Banthuk Sayam/Siam Recorder (see also note 7). In the same period Banthuk Sayam/Siam Recorder published at least three other books on King Chulalongkorn, all composed by “Kanyabodi”, a newspaper journalist’s pseudonym. According to Phaladisai, the initiator of this writer’s collective, Banthuk Sayam’s major objective was to “preserve knowledge from the past”. He said in the course of an interview, “In the era of King Rama V and King Rama VI there were still many wise and clever people. At present the number of such people is less, much less. If we throw away (thing) the old stories (rueang kao) of these people, we are actually throwing away wisdom. Banthuk Sayam attempts to preserve this wisdom” (Interview with Phaladisai, 26 August 1997).
42. The king’s decision to visit Russia shows his awareness of contemporary inter-European power relationships. In 1892 France, Great Britain and Russia had concluded a friendship treaty and formed the Triple Alliance.

43. The significance of “The Picture” was reconfirmed by Prince Subhadrasis Diskul in the opening lecture of the conference organised by the European Studies Programme of Chulalongkorn University to commemorate the centennial of the first voyage, and the National Identity Office, in its publication *Thailand in the 1990s*, gave “The Picture” a prominent place in the chapter on the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The caption reads: “This picture (…) was widely published to enhance Siam’s international position at the height of the colonial threat” (1991: 23). “The Picture” is popular among Thai diplomats and military, serving as a symbol for and proof of Thailand’s good diplomatic relationships. (Notes taken during the lecture of Charnvit Kasetsiri at the conference.)

44. “The Picture” was printed in the 12 September 1897, issue of *L’Illustration*. “The Picture” generally seen today is a copy of the photograph itself rather than a reproduction of the wood engraving used in the newspaper, which I never saw displayed or depicted. By way of comparison, the newspaper context substantially contributes to the appeal of the portrait in *Le Petit Journal* (see Chapter II).

45. The monk’s words are quoted from *Phra borommarup song ma [The Great Venerable Equestrian Statue]*, 1994: 36–7, original in Thai, compiled by Phalandisai Sittithankit (Bangkok: Amarin). Although the author renders the story in all its details — including the Pali words of the magic formula — he ends with the remark that he could not find any historical evidence to support the account.

46. Quoted from *Thai Kitchen* (2000: 122) written by Sombat Plainoi (Bangkok: Office of the National Culture Commission). The Office of the National Culture Commission falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The task of the ONCC is to promote and disseminate “the national cultural development” (quoted from the Thai Cultural Newsletter, 12 (2), March 1997, a monthly of the ONCC).

47. Quoted from *Bangkok Post, Outlook (The trip that changed the Nation)*, 22 November 1997.

48. The gap between the European and Siamese in the appreciation of betel chewing and its effects could not have been wider. Women took care to make their black teeth “shining black” and touched up the light spots with black pigment (Smith 1982: 80). Whereas in mid-nineteenth-century Europe false teeth were made of ivory, King Mongkut, who had lost all his teeth by the age of 46, had a set of teeth made from Sappan wood, which is deep red in colour (ibid.: 43).

50. Quoted from *Bangkok Post, Outlook* (“A meal fit for a King”), 21 December 1997. The narrative emphasises that the king’s visits to Europe were not leisure trips, but rather strenuous, worrisome expeditions. There was much at stake and it was hard for the king to leave his kingdom behind for such extended periods of time. He made sacrifices, giving up personal comfort and pleasures for the well-being of his subjects. In particular, he missed his family, Thai food, and the daily massage by one of his favourite royal consorts. An important source is the king’s letter to Mae Lek (dated 6 May 1897) about his discomfort while being in a storm at sea. Everybody, including the king, get seasick. The king describes his difficulties with sleeping (because of the noise of the storm and of objects falling and moving back and forth). He is unable to reach the guard to get food and water, and hours pass before the king is served. He longs for rice, chilly dip sauce and lemon, but there is only French food, which he does not want. The letter is found in Phaladisai’s *phra borommarup song ma* [The Great Venerable Equestrian Statue] 1994: 38–9.

51. Girl’s education, mainly in the field of nursery and midwifery, started some ten years later. In 1897 Queen Saovabha opened a school for midwives (cf. Smith 1982: 60).

52. For instance, upon his return from Singapore and Java he introduced a new court dress-code for men, which involved a mixture of European-style uniforms and traditional Thai clothing. The *phanueng*, a sarong folded like a kind of plus-fours, was maintained. “They were made of silk and of different colours, with royal blue for official wear, with which they wore European silk stockings and shoes” (Chula 1960: 223–4).

53. Quoted from *Bangkok Post, Outlook* (*The trip that changed the Nation*), 22 November 1997.

54. The National Identity Office is a governmental organisation responsible to the Office of the Prime Minister. It is charged with promoting national culture through various media.

55. See for instance the cover story of *Sinlapa Watthanatham/A& Culture*, April 1997 (p.119).

56. King Chulalongkorn’s awareness of potentially negative consequences of polygamy for his image in the West is illustrated by an account written in 1891 by Prince Pritsdang (1852–1935, a grandson of King Rama III). The prince describes how a German jewellery trader with exceptionally good access to the court “got a little out of favour” after he had informed his agent in Germany about who were the king’s “queens”, “semi-queens” and “favourites”, in an attempt to make sure that every item ordered was correctly packed “(…) while His Majesty wants to make it known that there is only one Queen and one wife, the rest are by force of custom forced upon him and are only concubines” (Pritsdang in Brailey 1989: 76). This awareness, in my opinion, is also reflected in the fact that King Chulalongkorn only
had himself formally portrayed with Queen Saovabha, and never with any of his other wives.

57. From *Rak raek khong ratchakan thi ha* [The First Love of King Rama V] by Lawan Chotamara, 1978: 17–8. My research assistant was convinced that the author of the book (a woman) actually was a man. According to her, no woman would have been able to get such intimate information. Coincidentally or not, during my research the story was only told to me by men, as a good joke.


59. This might seem to come close to Weber’s defining principle of the state, the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (cf. Taussig 1992: 115), but the opposite is actually the case. The perception of this monopoly of the use of violence as being legitimate results from the ideological power of the idea of the state. It legitimates what is illegitimate.

60. In 1991 Thai Police seized a huge quantity of Saudi Court jewellery, stolen and sent to Thailand by a Thai gardener one year earlier. The major part of the jewellery soon disappeared from the police office, and many items sent back to Saudi Arabia appeared to be counterfeits. In the course of cover up attempts, several Saudi diplomats were killed.


63. See Chapter V for a more elaborate account of this event in relation to the image of the present monarch.

64. The woman urged me to check the newspapers as it would be very interesting for my research. My research assistant checked the whole month of October 1976 of the *Thai Rath* (and, to be sure that there had been no misunderstanding, of October 1973 as well, as this month was also characterised by unrest, student protests and violence), but the search was fruitless. Evans (2002) quotes a parallel story from *The Bangkok Post* of 15 June 1996, about the horse of the equestrian statue of King Taksin (r. 1767–81). A Bangkok resident told the newspaper that “[a] lot of people heard the horse neigh and its hooves clatter on the ground when there were bloody incidents in Bangkok, like May 1992 and October 1973” (2002: 169).

Chapter II

1. Upon arrival the queen will receive a garland (*phuangmalai*) from those awaiting her.

2. King Chulalongkorn is commemorated on 23 October (Chulalongkorn Day) with the presentation of wreaths (*phuangmala*) (see Chapter III).
3. Apart from the title, the book contains no further English text. To my interpretation, the regular appearance of English on King Chulalongkorn objects reflects the association of the king with modernity.

4. From the English “locket”. As any /Thai noun, lokket denotes both the singular and the plural. See Chapter III for the significance of the lokket (especially with King Chulalongkorn images) for modern women.

5. The manner in which Bun beautifies the lokket strongly reminded me of the way he beautifies himself. When I got to know Bun, he had just had his third facial plastic surgery (costing 50,000 baht). Just as with the coin, a small beautification may be added, but the project as a whole is never complete.

6. Phra phuttha chao luang is another title used to address King Chulalongkorn or to speak about him. The title, which literally means “Royal Buddha”, demonstrates the idea of a Buddhist King as a future Buddha. Although every Thai/Siamese king is a phra phuttha chao luang (cf. Skrobanek 1976: 23), at present the title specifically refers to King Chulalongkorn.

7. Since June 1988, King Bhumibol Adulyadej has been the longest ruling monarch in Thai history. The king is presently also the world’s longest ruling living monarch.

8. Strictly speaking, barami refers to the “Ten Perfections” (thotsabarami), the ten highest forms of Buddhist practice, which do not entirely parallel the “Ten Kingly Virtues” (thotsaphiratchatham, see Chapter I). See the Photchananukrom Phutthasat, chabap pramuantham /Dictionary of Buddhism, 1994: 284–6. In popular conception, the “Ten Kingly Virtues” are called “barami”, however.

9. Charnvit quotes from one of the four chronicles on King Uthong, the founder of Ayuthaya (r. 1351–69): “When he arrived in the Ayudhya area ‘people saw that he was a phumibun [a man with merit]: they then assembled and agreed to have him as their king’” (Charnvit 1976: 61).

10. This idea is in contradiction with the law of karma, although this contradiction generally is not resolved (Obeyesekere 1963: 22–6; Spiro 1982: 125). Theravada Buddhists, moreover, explain their condition only rarely as the consequence of previous karma, and consequently as a motivation for resignation. Instead, people actively engage in merit-making to influence their present and future condition, as well as that of others (relatives, spouses, ancestors) by merit-transference. See Keyes (1983) for an elaborate analysis of popular Theravada Buddhist conceptions of the relation between karmic theory and the idea of merit.

11. For the sharing of merit by individuals with an extraordinary amount of merit, see also Keyes on Khru Ba Sri Wichai, a Northern Thai monk (1982: 149–80).
Salvation in the Buddhist sense means reaching nirvana (nipphan), that is, the end of suffering. Gananath Obeyesekere, in his account of the relationship between man and deity, does not mention merit transfer through a deity’s compassion. According to Obeyesekere, man and deity are linked through merit transfer “in a complex ethic of mutual self-interest (…)”. The worshipper transfers merit to the deity — who is perceived as a potential Buddha — and by doing so enhances the god’s “salvation prospects”. The deity “in turn may reciprocate by assisting the worshipper to achieve his immediate mundane objectives” (1968: 26). The difference probably lays herein that compassion is a pivotal Buddhist virtue, while Obeyesekere actually refers to Hindu or Brahman concepts of divinity.

Of course, it is actually karma that causes effect, and not merit as such. With regard to the unpredictability of the working of merit/karma, Obeyesekere speaks of “psychological indeterminancy”. “The past determines the present which (combined with the past) determines the future” (1968: 21). The problem is that one cannot know how the present existence will influence the future, or how the past influences the present. A Buddhist has no knowledge of his past karma — his sins [bap] and good deeds [bun] — which implies that anything good or bad may happen suddenly (ibid.). This applies equally to the working of the karma/merit of kings. Akin quotes from the annals describing the death of King Taksin: “When the bun of Chao Taksin expired and he died, his age was 48 years” (1969: 12).

Chapter V will return to the importance of bun barami when discussing the veneration of King Bhumibol. I have included the veneration of Thailand’s present monarch in this study because it forms part of the background from which the King Chulalongkorn cult can be understood.

With the remainder of the funds collected, King Vajiravudh later established Chulalongkorn University.

See Peleggi for a detailed depiction and analysis of the “longest reign” celebrations (2002: 132–8). The inspiration for the celebrations probably came from the Golden Jubilee celebrations organised for Queen Victoria’s 50th year on the throne in 1887, and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1897. Crown Prince Vajiravudh took part in the pageant of the latter (ibid.: 133). See also Chapter III for the prince’s inspiration by other British royal anniversaries (he studied in Britain from 1893 until 1903) for the institution of Chulalongkorn Day.

1997 Catalogue price: 90.000 baht (US$2.500) for the whole series of seven in mint condition.

The entire inscription of the title comprising the epithet is Phrabatsomdet Phraboromsongmahachulalongkorn Phrachulachomklaochaoyuhua Piya Maharat.
21. For the events taking place on Thursday evenings, see Chapter IV. Saturday has no particular meaning in the cult. Most likely, the convenience of the weekend hours just fits urban lifestyle.
22. Indicative of the importance of the statue is the fact that most people call the square lan (phra) borommarup songma, “Plaza of the (Venerable) Equestrian Statue”, which is officially the name of the precincts around the statue. The official name of the entire square is Suan Amphon.
23. The grass vendor (see the Introduction) also rents out altar tables and mats, although most people bring these items themselves.
25. According to Theravada Buddhist teachings, as the Buddha reaches nirvana, his karma ends and its effects cease.
26. See Chapter III for a specific account of a phutthaphisek ceremony organised in the context of the King Chulalongkorn cult.
27. A similar observation is made by Spiro with regard to the support of deva in Burma: “(...) these gods can and do assist when they are asked to do so — again, however, only on the condition that the petitioner is a pious Buddhist. They will not assist immoral persons” (1982: 153).
28. After this session neither Num nor her parents ever visited a medium again.
29. As the Weekend Market has no longer been held at Sanam Luang since the 1980s, this story is probably situated in the late 1970s.
31. “Im Kult der Erinnerung an die fernen oder die abgestorbenen Lieben had der Kultwert des Bildes die letzte Zuflucht.”
32. Appadurai, however, argues that commodification and singularisation are not entirely exclusive of each other (1996: 17). The significance of Kopytoff’s argument is the insight that “the commodity is not one kind of thing rather then another, but one phase in the life of some things” (ibid.).
33. The first coronation took place when the king was only 15 years old (1868), and a regent was appointed. King Chulalongkorn was the second king of the present dynasty to have a second coronation ceremony. King Rama I had a second coronation organised in 1785 when he moved from Thonburi.
to Bangkok, making the latter the new capital of Siam. King Vajiravudh, or, King Rama VI, had a second, grand coronation one year after his more modest first coronation in 1910. This had to take place as soon as possible after the death of the king, leaving little time for preparations (Wales 1992: 70). Organising a second coronation one year later gave King Vajiravudh the opportunity to invite representatives of foreign royal houses and important government leaders (Vella 1978: 14).

34. Certain Siamese chronicles, including the “List of Kings” (dated 1767), give a dynastic history from the death of the Buddha, via the great Indian Buddhist king, King Asoka, to a king of Angkor and — a legendary — Phraya Kraek. In this way the history of King Uthong and Siam becomes part of the history of Buddhism (Charnvit 1976: 4, 71).

35. One might wonder to what extent this belief might have been fostered by the series of *phra sayam thewathirat* coins which were regularly issued between 1890/1891 (R 109) and 1906/1907 (R 124). These coins bear the king’s effigy on one side and a depiction of the *phra sayam thewathirat* graciously seated on the three symbols, taken from King Chulalongkorn’s seal, with Erawan, the three-headed elephant representing Siam’s “three regions” (north, centre, south) and the symbols representing the dependencies Laos and Malay. The *phra sayam thewathirat* coins are in size and design almost identical to the contemporary British penny. The posture of the *phra sayam thewathirat* resembles that of Britannia. A seated Britannia “carrying with her associations of national strength, empire and well-being”, has been a constant motif on British coinage during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Van Wie 1999: 61). However, a real fusion of King Chulalongkorn and the deity is a recent phenomenon.

36. Unless otherwise indicated this section is based on the information I collected during my visits to the temple and the conversations I had with the abbot.

37. I myself, as an “expert” on King Chulalongkorn images, served as an ideal frame of reference for the abbot to ascertain himself of this last point: I indeed had never seen such a statue except this one. As a sign of its success, however, two identical statues have been made later. The temple had one more made, to present to Vimanmek Palace in Bangkok (one of the king’s palaces and nowadays a museum, see Chapter I), and a regular visitor of the temple asked another woodcarver to make him an exact copy of the statue. This shows how everything with power asks to be copied.

38. It is believed that the final battle, a duel on elephants between King Naresuan and the Burmese Crown Prince, took place on 25 January 1593, in the province of Suphanburi. In commemoration of his victory, King Naresuan erected a stupa (*chedi*) on the spot where he defeated the Burmese Prince. Much later, Prince Damrong started a search for the remains of the stupa. He finally identified ruins discovered in 1913 as King Naresuan’s stupa.
During the reign of the present monarch — King Bhumibol — the stupa was restored and a huge monument depicting the fighting Naresuan on elephant back was erected. On 25 January 1959, King Bhumibol officially inaugurated the monument and since that day January 25 has been commemorated as “Army Day” or “King Naresuan Day” (cf. Chula 1959: 50; Vella 1978: 207). An artist on the Night Bazaar in Chiang Mai, specialised among other skills in “paintings on glass” of the monument, told me that the monument means “victory” and that it is popular, particularly among government officials, to present miniatures or paintings of the monument (or of the duel) on important occasions.

39. In 1767 the Burmese totally destroyed Ayutthaya, the capital of Siam. General Tak (the later King Taksin) managed to regroup an army and drive the Burmese out only nine months later. He founded a new capital, Thonburi, located opposite the present capital Bangkok on the other bank of the Chao Phraya river.

40. Also these ideas are related to the concept of merit-transference (see above). Merit-transference strengthens and enhances social (community or kinship) bonds, not only in the here and now, but over several existences (chat) (cf. Keyes 1983).

41. Many of the King’s wives had a more modest background, given his policy of marrying girls from all over the country (see Chapter I).

42. To my interpretation, Jill’s depiction of “the abbot as a womaniser” only refers to his looks, particularly the wrinkles he shares with the king. Whether she suspects the abbot of actual womanising is irrelevant.

43. According to Masquelier, in a fascinating account of the significance of clothing in the Nigerian bori spirit cult, “(...) the spirits’ attire is the medium through which people create, and subsequently relate to, and communicate with, bori deities” (1996: 68) — an observation equally relevant to Thai spirit medium sessions (see further Chapter III).

44. That is to say, apart from the surviving copies in cloth- or leather-bound volumes which decorated the libraries of the Paris bourgeoisie, and nowadays occasionally pop up at flee-markets, auctions, or antiquarian booksellers from an estate. These actually form intermediate stages of singularisation and re-commodification.

45. Cf. the portrait of King Chulalongkorn and Tsar Nicolas II (see Chapter I “The Picture”).

46. Contrary to the “secular” cards, which are regularly sized, the “spiritual” cards may measure up to the size of A3 paper, making them more a poster than a post card.

47. In 1998 a new type of card with a new kind of New Year’s wish was added to the steady repertoire. These cards depict 100, 500 or 1,000 Baht bank notes (or combinations), all bearing portraits of King Bhumibol. In Thai as well as in English the receiver plainly is wished “a lot of wealth” (kho hai
ruai). The economic crisis reinforced the hope of many that their King will lead the country into a new period of prosperity (see further Chapter V).

48. On 25 June 1907, the king was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Law at Cambridge University.

49. Among navy officers, Krom Luang Chumphon Khet Udomsak (1880–1923), or “Sadet Tia”, one of King Chulalongkorn’s 33 sons and known as the “Father of the Royal Thai Navy”, is a more popular object of worship. As Sadet Tia was Prince of Chumphon, a Southern province, the prince is also venerated in the South of Thailand in particular (see Figure 16).

50. The location (Ruang Ton Palace, the king’s country house in Bangkok) and the king’s dress (stripped to the waist, only wearing a sarong) are part of King Chulalongkorn’s sadet phrapat ton image. For the significance King Chulalongkorn, as a modern “working monarch”, attributed to relaxation and country life, see Peleggi 2002: 91.

51. Quotes taken from the Preface (Sombat 2000). The book, a compilation of articles written for a household and cuisine magazine, was originally published in Thai. The ONCC took the initiative for an English translation to educate “the patrons of Thai restaurants” all over the world and “the countless millions tourists to Thailand” on “the development of Thai cuisine and the culture of the Thai cuisine from past to present” (ibid.).

52. The offering of apples, black coffee, red wine, cigars and Winston cigarettes (see Introduction) are other examples of the association of the king with Europe and modernity.

53. Great importance is attributed to the signature of King Chulalongkorn. Many new copies of images of the king (especially photographs) are provided with a copy of his signature to emphasise the “authenticity” of the object (see frontispiece). This may well result from the king’s own policy around the use (or deliberate non-use) of his different signatures for different persons and circumstances.

54. The most expensive coin, named “Gold Swiss Antique” was made of pure gold (46.6 grams) and cost 60,000 baht (99 pieces made); the cheapest — described as “polished copper” — cost only 250 baht (5,555 pieces made). It is significant that the number of each coin made, according to its value, was 99, 199, 555 or 5,555 pieces. This is not accidental: 9 and 5 are considered to be auspicious numbers. The number 9 is always associated with royalty and rituals, while the number 5 refers to King Chulalongkorn himself, being Rama V. A similar observation can be made for the prices of the objects offered at the temples, as in the earlier described cases. Those prices also contain as many 9s as possible: the amount of money spent is a lucky number. The number 9 is considered the most auspicious number: the Thai word for 9, kao, sounds the same as the kao in kao na, which means progress and prosperity.
Chapter III

1. On 9 June 1946, the day that King Ananda Mahidol died, the reign of King Bhumibol began. On that day an investiture ceremony for the accession to the throne was held. The coronation ceremony, however, took place in May 1950 after the king’s return from his studies in Switzerland earlier that year (see Chapter V).

2. Taksin Day falls on 28 December, the day that General Tak was crowned King of Thonburi in 1768. Naresuan Day (or Army Day) falls on 25 January.

3. King Chulalongkorn married the then Princess Saovabha Phongsri (1863–1919) in 1878. She was the 66th child of King Mongkut and hence, a half-sister of King Chulalongkorn. The king had also married her two elder sisters, Queen Sunanda Kumariratana (see below) and Queen Savang Vadhana. In 1895, Queen Saovabha was bestowed with the title “First Queen” (Somdet Phraboromma Ratchini), the title awarded to the mother of the heir-apparent. In that year Prince Vajiravanahit, the eldest son of Queen Sawang died and the succession passed to Prince Vajiravudh (the later Rama VI), Queen Saovabha’s eldest son.

4. That is, the specific gesture to salute the king or queen, the thawai bangkhom. See below.

5. As second coronation day, 16 November had been a significant day in the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of King Chulalongkorn’s accession to the throne in 1908. The first coronation day, 11 November, was clearly more significant. Not only was the equestrian statue unveiled on 11 November, but the king also held a “first stone-laying ceremony” for the construction of the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall. King Vajiravudh decided to hold his first coronation day (which, as said before, had to take place within one month after King Chulalongkorn’s death) also on 11 November. This probably explains why people gathered at the statue on 16 November and not on 11 November, as that day all attention was directed at the coronation.

6. One difference is that Victoria Day was celebrated on the queen’s birthday (24 May).

7. Wat Phra Kaeo is the temple connected with the Grand Palace and built within its precincts. The temple houses the Emerald Buddha, Thailand’s most revered Buddha image.

8. As King Rama I, II and III have never been portrayed, the artist had to make the statues after descriptions provided by contemporaries. In particular, in the case of the statue of King Rama I (r.1782–1809) this was problematic; at the time the project started (1869), only four elderly people who had actually seen this king remained alive (Apinan 1992bI: 342; Wales 1992: 170).

10. Indications that Vajiravudh Day existed can be found in Wales. He writes: “On the anniversary of the death of King Rama V and that of King Rama VI, the relics of these two kings only are honoured, each on the appropriate day (...),” and: “The fifth anniversary (1930) of the death of King Rama VI was celebrated on an unusually grand scale, the ceremonies extending over three days, 25th, 26th, and 27th November” (Wales 1992: 171, 172).

11. Rajavat is the royal Thai (ratchasap) word for a fence decorated in royal style.

12. The overall organisation of the official Chulalongkorn Day celebration is the responsibility of the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority.

13. The exhibition at the Royal Plaza on Chulalongkorn Day has been in existence for a long time. It is assumed that the Bangkok Metropolitan Authorities, the organisation in charge of the organisation of the wreath-laying ceremony, are also responsible for the exhibition and its yearly theme. For further information, see Chapter V on the significance and meaning of the linkages between King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol.

14. This is probably a development that started in the late 1980s. The King Chulalongkorn statue in front of the city hall of Yasothon, for instance, was erected in 1988 or 1989 (Akin 1992:18). The statue in front of the provincial hall in Chiang Mai was erected in 1992. Earlier, the citizens of Chiang Mai presented their wreaths to a wood-carved portrait of the king at a renowned school in Chiang Mai (Juppharat High School). At that time, the provincial hall was located in the heart of the city and lacked sufficient space to conduct the ceremony. After the construction of the new provincial hall outside the city boundaries, members of the local elite erected a new, larger-than-life sized statue of the king. Since then the ceremony has been performed at the provincial hall.

15. Of many people who had followed higher education, most had participated in the ceremony only a few times, some even only once or never at all. Even students of Chulalongkorn University, which was established with the remainder of the money collected for the equestrian statue and still strongly associated with the king, only participate in the ceremony in their first year.

16. In 1995 the Boon Rawd family was even included in the Forbes' billionaires list (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 56).

17. According to Kasian, “Thais are well aware of ‘the un-Thainess’ of beer as an alcoholic drink originally brought in from the West. There even is no ‘Thai coinage’ for the word ‘beer’, only a foreign sounding transliteration” (2002: 224, note 28).

18. Bencharong is a Thai five- (bencha) coloured porcelain, and was also produced in China.

19. Sir Thomas Sanderson, a British diplomat in Bangkok, wrote in 1892: “Not long ago the King took a fancy to making a collection of rare china in sets
The whole official world goes about the country in search of rare china: they would go and would divest themselves of their high rank and haughtiness and stoop low to beg, borrow, purchase and use threats to obtain the object of their wishes from the poor and the rich” (T.H. Sanderson in Brailey 1989: 54). According to Sanderson, the king favoured those who brought him nice objects, while those who did not succeed were neglected intentionally (ibid.).

20. The colours of the other weekdays are as follows: red for Sunday, yellow for Monday, green for Wednesday, orange for Thursday, blue for Friday, and purple for Saturday.

21. See Chapter V for more details about this category of television programmes.

22. The foundation’s actual emblem consists of a purple pagoda-shaped background. The royal emblem is gold and positioned above the heart in red, with the map in white and drops of blood in red as the foreground.

23. For this interpretation I am indebted to Sermsee Boonsoot.

24. Although I am writing from a different perspective, I would like to notice how this conception of essential emptiness of a mythical image largely parallels Lacan’s thinking about what he dubbed the point de capiton. Reading “the Great Beloved King” for “the nation”, the following quote would well fit my argument: “In the point de capiton a particular signifier is called to incarnate a function beyond its concreteness, it is ‘emptied’ from its particular signification in order to represent fullness in general and be able to articulate a large number of heterogeneous signifiers. The nation is clearly such an empty signifier that serves as a point de capiton uniting the whole community …” (Stavrakakis 1999: 80).


26. The motive of immediate retaliation upon taking away something from a sacred place without consent is paralleled in other stories. See, for instance, Terwiel for a story about a child which became seriously ill after taking away some incense sticks from a shrine (1994: 50–1). See also The Bangkok Post Horizons Feature of 24 April 1997 for a story on special stones that should not be taken from a cave on Hat Nai Plao Beach in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

27. Spirit mediums are often supposed to be able to speak phasa thep. The abbot of Wat Doi Chang regularly spoke in phasa thep.

28. The content of such stories is remarkably persistent. Nithi presents a very similar story: in Chiang Mai, a fire destroyed a house, but left a King Chulalongkorn altar undamaged. Newspapers as well as television reports paid ample attention to the miracle (1993: 23). This miracle is thus recurring theme, comparable to Bin Banluerit’s (the movie star) miraculous salvation from a car accident. It is equally part of the body of stories on the powers of the king.
29. *Tamnak* literally means “princely residence” or “palace”, but is also used to refer to the abode of a medium.

30. The backgrounds of Somdet To and Luang Pu Thuat will be dealt with in Chapter IV. For more details on Khru Ba Sri Wichai, see below.

31. Deities are believed to live on a higher plane of existence (one of the heavenly abodes) than ghosts, who are considered to roam the earth (or hell). Ghosts are mostly associated with malevolence or with the souls of people who died violently, such as through murder or in a traffic accident (*phi tai hong*) (see also Wijeyewardene 1986: 167).

32. Chao Phi is the elder brother of Chao La; Chao Noi is the younger brother. Irvine’s Small Lord stereotype applies to Mae Wan’s Chao La and Chao Noi. They are thus very similar but can be clearly distinguished by their different dresses. See Wijeyewardene for a more detailed description of a female “Chao Noi”, which thus also applies very well to Chao La (1986: 222–3).

33. The *yok khru* ceremony is an annual ritual organised by a medium to honour the spirit (*khru*, teacher), from which the medium derives her power in divination and healing. For this occasion the medium invites all other mediums that derive their power from the same spirit, or, in other words, that belong to the lineage of the same teacher-spirit (see Tanabe 2002: 55).

34. This is certainly not the case for central Thailand. Suchart Kusitiwong (the founder of the Huppha Sawan, which will be the subject of Chapter IV) was already a medium for both Somdet To and Luang Pu Thuat in the late sixties.

35. This relatively recent identification of mediums with modern heroes of Northern Thai and national Thai history leads Irvine to distinguish between modern (urban) spirit mediums and traditional (rural) spirit mediums. Apart from the importance attributed to nationalistic ideology, modern spirit mediumship also emphasises the medium’s Buddhist qualities. Modern and traditional mediumship “mark the extreme poles of a continuum on which differently “traditional” and “modern” mediumship positions can be placed” (Irvine 1984: 322, note 6). Mae Wan is a good example of a spirit medium who freely combines traditional spirit mediumship (the stereotypical, non-Buddhist figure of Chao La) with its modern variant (the national hero King Chulalongkorn, and the holy monks).

36. Chao Dara Ratchami is an object of wider veneration in Northern Thailand. Here, the King Chulalongkorn cult offers an opportunity for regional elaborations expressing regional identity. Northern Thai identity, however, was not a specific topic of research for this project. For modern spirit mediumship and Northern Thai identity, see Morris 2002, Tanabe 2002.

37. Generally at such occasions donations are made to each of the monks. These include a “ready to take” saffron-yellow bucket, filled with food (instant noodles, drinks) and utensils (toothbrushes, soap), as sold in shops selling temple necessities and supermarkets. According to Terwiel, in his detailed
description of the sangkhathan, the ceremony can only take place in the morning, as monks do not eat after noon (1994 [1975]: 177–9). However, I observed several occasions where sangkhathan was held in the afternoon. Probably, with the current existence of “ready to buy” buckets with preserved food, there is now no need to immediately eat the presented food. Hence, at present, sangkhathan ceremonies can also take place in the afternoon.

38. Of course, one could debate which position is higher: that of the director of the school or that of the kamnan. The positions are difficult to compare, however. Kamnan is an elected (temporary) position, to be held next to one’s actual profession (for instance, that of farmer), while the position of a school director (as is the case with that of a governor) is an appointed, full-time occupation. Furthermore, contrary to the sub-district head and the village headman, the director and the governor both wear the formal white civil servant uniforms.

39. Personally, I wonder whether the bank’s employee had asked or obtained permission to present the wreath in name of the bank.

40. Wilai thus actually had her experience at the Ratchanuson.

41. The photograph Wilai refers to was taken on 10 July 1897 in the gardens of Alexandra Palace in St Petersburg. King Chulalongkorn, Crown Prince Vajiravudh, and Tsar Nicolas II with his wife and sister are seated in front. Behind King Chulalongkorn stands a European man, whom David resembles very much indeed. This man, however, is not an Austrian general but Count Muravieff, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (see A Pictoral Record, p. 180).

42. The photograph is printed in Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam (1994 [1908]) with the caption “Buddhist Priest and Disciple”. It probably always has been a popular picture. At that time it was also reproduced as a postcard.

43. A similar observation has been made by Apinya (1993) for the Thammakai, one of Thailand’s larger modern reform movements. At the Thammakai temple, wan phra always falls on a Sunday.

44. The hat refers to the popular portrait depicted in Figures 8 and 14.

45. Only once the king was seen making a phone call himself (though one of the followers dialled the number). He made this call in order to persuade one of his wealthier clients to donate 10,000 baht for the kathin ceremony, organised after the Chulalongkorn Day celebrations on the afternoon of the 23rd.

46. The absence of the narrated portraits “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony” and “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery” is noteworthy. Possibly, this part of the king’s image was less meaningful for either the medium or the more involved part of the audience; predominant interest was in immediate prosperity. The latter is well expressed in the image of the “cause of khwam charoen”.

47. “Royal Buddha”, see Chapter II, note 6.
48. At the time, however, Khru Ba (venerated teacher) Sri Wichai was the major symbol of Northern religious resistance against the Bangkok-based Siamese Sangha domination, and thus was not appreciated by the central authorities (cf. Keyes 1982: 157). Already during his lifetime he was considered Northern Thailand’s most venerated monk.

49. This association with the portrait is actually part of the general sadet praphat ton image of King Chulalongkorn. Mr. Tom, for example (the former Jazz musician quoted in Chapter I) did not refer in particular to this portrait when he explained why the king would always support the Thai people: “King Chulalongkorn was like somebody of the people. He used to cook himself, wore simple clothes, just like any ordinary Thai.”

50. According to Tambiah, Somdet To was “[h]istorically, perhaps the most famous amulet maker and sacralizer, as judged by present-day Thai assertions and beliefs. (...) King Chula in particular is said to have had much belief in his sanctity and to have patronized him” (1988: 219).

51. Women are considered to contain a polluting power, corrupting the sacred power of monks and certain places. Therefore women should not touch monks or their robes. Neither are they allowed to touch the most sacred Buddha-statues or, as is the case in the north of Thailand, to enter the places of the temple considered most sacred, for instance the precincts of the pagoda.

52. The coincidence of the birth of a boy with a violent natural phenomenon is believed to indicate that a great man is born.

53. The mounting of these ornaments indicates the completion of monastic buildings (cf. Wijeyewardene 1986: 96).

54. The wihan received this name during the Chulalongkorn Day celebrations of 1998. The name (Prince Chulalongkorn Wihan) was chosen because the gilded statue depicts the king/prince during the coronation ceremony. Wihan Luang Chao Fa Chulalongkorn is also analogous to the name of the temple’s stupa (chedi chao fa).

55. In 1998 there were at least as many people, but the ceremony was shorter. Roses totalled an estimated 10,000.

56. This corresponds of course with the Thai Sangha (the clergy) as a male domain, consisting of abbots and monks, in which women cannot have any official or institutional recognition. In a similar vein, the consecration of objects, the making of amulets and the potential of becoming a saint are largely restricted to men (monks).

Chapter IV

1. My observations are largely limited to the North and Greater Bangkok.

2. The title somdet (Somdet To) is an exception. Most luang pho have been abbots (chao awat) (cf. Peltier 1977). Somdet To, apart from being the abbot
of Wat Rakhang, had the rank of phra phutthachan (venerable teacher), the highest title awarded to monks in service of the palace (ibid.: 97, note 1). Because of his high rank he was addressed with the title somdet (comparable to “excellency”). The epithet achan (teacher) To instead of Somdet To is also frequently heard. Moreover, using the epithet Luang Pho instead of Somdet, as I have been told, is not only inappropriate but also confusing. The name Luang Pho To refers to an Ayutthayan monk who was specialised in black magic (sayasat) and whose amulets are popular particularly among thieves and machos (nakleng). Somdet To’s powers, on the contrary, stem from his excellence in “Buddhist qualities”, including his knowledge of the scriptures, his meditative skills, and his compassion (metta, loving kindness, see also below).

3. As with all nouns in Thai, luang pho may denote both the singular and the plural. For example, the same is true for tamnak, phra thudong and chedi (stupa).

4. According to Nyantiloka (Buddhist Dictionary published by the Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), the thudong practices are “wearing patched-up robes, possessing only three robes, going out for alms, not omitting any houses on the almsround, having only one meal a day, eating out of the alms bowl, not accepting food presented afterward, dwelling in forest areas, dwelling under a tree, staying in the open or in caves or abandoned houses, visiting or staying in a cemetery, being content with whatever shelter is provided, and sleeping in the sitting position” (Kamila 1997: 301).

5. In a similar vein, Taylor speaks of a “chedi cult” (stupa cult) (1993: 154–64). The veneration of certain monks is partly expressed in the construction of huge, costly stupas, containing relics of the deceased monk. The cults of amulets, chedi, and luang pho are largely one phenomenon, each reflecting a great need for supernatural support in its own way.


7. When answering my question of how the abbot knew for certain that he saw Luang Pu Thuat, and not another monk, Charoen told me that the looks of Luang Pu Thuat were already known, pointing to a huge poster of a wax statue of the monk. In an earlier vision to an artisan, Luang Pu Thuat had manifested himself, describing himself in such detail that the man was able to make a portrait truly resembling the monk. This explanation implies that the Luang Pu Thuat cult was already in development before 1954.

The earliest miracle attributed to Luang Pu Thuat is said to have taken place in 1942 (cf. Hauser 1977: 59–60).

8. For Thai amulet collectors, such “modern” amulets are as genuine as traditionally styled amulets. They distinguish two categories of genuine amulets:
amulets made by luang pho and ancient amulets found at old temples and historical sites (see for instance the FAQ page of Lek Watruak's website on Thai amulets: <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Teahouse/1428>).


10. The connection made between the legend (taman) of Nang Nak and Somdet To is not an invention of the director of the movie. The Prayers Society, for instance, disseminates small cards with a special, short Somdet To khatha, (khatha metta maha niyom, or the Great Favorite Compassion Formula), which, according to the card, Somdet To “instructed to Nang Nak” (son mae nak phra khanong).

11. As they are supposed to be late nineteenth-century amulets made by Somdet To himself, phra somdet amulets show the Buddha on a three-, seven-, or nine-layered pedestal and not the effigy of Somdet To. Even still, the cult of Somdet To can be equally considered a cult of portraits, as portraits of the monk in the form of photographs, posters, and statues are found everywhere.

12. Between 1960 and 1975 the Bangkok population almost doubled to 5.9 million. It was also the period in which the urban economy began to accelerate and employment in infrastructural projects, and service- and manufacturing industries, sharply increased (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 186–7). The number of “ordinary officials” in government service, for instance, expanded from 75,000 in 1944 to 250,000 in 1965 (ibid.: 288).

13. Somdet To’s full name was Phra Phutthachan To Phrom Rangsi.

14. From 1985–95 the Thai economy was the fastest growing economy in the world, with an annual growth of GNP of 8.4%. Second in line was Korea with a growth of 7.7% (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 1, 337).

15. “Direct sale” companies work through a pyramidal structure of “members”, each member trying to find new members through whom one can increase one’s own sales. Amway sells cleansing agents and cosmetics; AIA, insurance; and Giffarine, mainly cosmetics.

16. I am referring here, for instance, to the Thammakai movement. In the 1990s as many as 100,000 people attended their mass meditation meetings. Other examples are the huge cult centers around Chao Mae Kuan Im (such as “Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan Im” in Bangkok and Chiang Mai), and the increasing popularity of the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket. These phenomena are all part of a performative urban spiritualism (see also Pattana 2005).

17. The Marble Temple is one of the most prestigious royal temples in Bangkok. It was built to the orders of King Chulalongkorn in 1899 after a design of Prince Naris. The temple is renowned as being a blend of Thai, Chinese, and European architecture and is executed in marble imported from Italy.

18. The standard programme is conducted without any involvement of monks.
19. In some provincial towns, small praying groups have also been established. In the Northeastern city Khorat, for instance, a group of 20 people gather every Saturday at the statue of Thao Suranaree, a local heroine who is believed to have played a crucial role in defeating Lao invaders in 1826.

20. At first, the name of the organisation was Samnak Pu Sawan; in the 1970s this was to be changed into “Samnak Huppha Sawan” or “Huppha Sawan”. All names are interchangeably used both within the organisation as well as by outsiders. I will follow this custom.

21. This is according to some members and volunteers of the Prayers Society. None of them, however, was able to give any numerical estimate.

22. In 1998, I estimated approximately 600 people at the King Chulalongkorn monument (against 400 in 1997); 100 at the Rama VI monument (against 50 to 60 in 1997); and 150 at the King Taksin monument (against 100 in 1997). In 1997, I estimated 40 worshippers at the Rama I monument.

23. The phra khatha chinmapanchon (a Pali-text) is chanted (suat mon) three times. The organisation translates this suat mon as “praying”. However, other texts, in Thai that are spoken or sung collectively, contain an element of praying in the sense of directing oneself to a higher power verbally, explicitly and with a well-articulated request or aim. The latter has to be distinguished from kae bon (see Chapter III) as the votive element is lacking.

24. Unless otherwise indicated, this section is based on information dispersed by the Prayers Society. Used are Fighter for Humanity, A Summary: Ariyawaso Bhikkhu (Prof. Dr. Suchart Kosolkitiwong), Prasert Sukhothanang (comp.) (Bangkok: Samvichit Printing Press, 1995); Sam naksu phuea santhiphap [Three Fighters for Peace], by Natthawut Wakhonphin (comp.) (Bangkok: Samvichit Printing Press, 1996); Prawatsat natongcharuek kanthamlai huppha sawan mueang sasana /The Destruction of the Religious Land of Huppha Sawan. A record of Religious Persecution, 1992, Dr. Choompol Swasdiyakorn and Co-Workers (comp.) (published both in English and Thai. Although in the book no organisation or publisher is mentioned explicitly, it certainly is a publication of the Samnak Pu Sawan); the Thai/English language booklets Khwamwang suthai manut/The Last Hope of Mankind; and an English language full-colour leaflet distributed in 1996 by the “Samnak Pu Sawan Fellows’ Society” (hereafter SPSFS). The heading of this leaflet reads: “Samnak Pu Sawan Fellow’s Society, Founder: Acharn [achan] Suchart Kosolkitiwong under the Patronage of Tao Maha Brahma Jina Panjara”. Whether in Thai or in English, the contents of all these publications largely overlap. See also Jackson (1988) for a historical overview (1966–88) and analysis of the Samnak Pu Sawan and its founder (“The Hupphaasawan Movement: Millenarian Buddhism among the Thai Political Elite”, Sojourn 3 (2): 134–70).

25. This information is derived from an interview with Mr. Prasert conducted on 1 November 1998.
27. Literally, samnak means “residence”. The word often refers to houses or buildings that are not part of an official temple, but where monks or other people with a religious or spiritual role in society reside. Its meaning is thus very close to tamnak.
28. In the first instance, this was because of the contacts the Cambodian Prince (later King) Sihanouk established with Peking in 1956–57. Later (1958), this was because of the dispute about the territorial rights over a famous Khmer temple site (the Phra Wihan temple) located on the Thai-Cambodian border (Thak 1979: 254).
30. Sarit actually conducted a coup d’état twice, in 1957 and in 1958 respectively.
31. In the Samnak Pu Sawan’s conception, the spirit world consists of three realms: the world of the Brahmin Gods (phromma lok), the world of Deities (thewa lok) and the world of Hell-beings (narokka lok).
32. Wan siang pue dap is a variation on wan siang pue taek, another common indication for “The Day Gunfire Erupted”. For the importance Suchart attributed to the Na Bua incident, see for instance the booklet “Wan Siang Pue Dap” (The Day when the Gunfire Ended), compiled by Special Reporters of the Yuk Mai Newspaper, 1977 (the Yuk Mai Newspaper was published by the Samnak Pu Sawan). This booklet gives an account of the ceremony “The Day when the Gunfire Ended”. In 1998 the Prayers Society was preparing an English translation of the booklet.
33. The anticommunist policy had a polarising effect on society. While posters were distributed “showing a fierce demon, representing a communist destroying wats [temples] and places of worship, cruelly torturing the monks together with the words ‘if communism comes, Buddhism, wat and monks will be destroyed’” (Somboon quoted in Irvine 1982: 68), this fierce anticommunism negatively affected many farmers. Land was confiscated for road construction without compensation, taxes on land close to these roads were increased and no attention was paid to the farmers’ real problems (theft, banditry, corruption and police abuse). Many of the affected farmers rather tended to develop a sympathetic attitude towards communists since their key promise was to bring such practices to an end (Thak 1979: 266–8).
34. I borrow this phrase from Prasenjit Duara (cited by Kelly 1998: 867).
35. For this view on the role of the United Nations in the development of global consciousness, I am indebted to Peter Pels.
36. In the organisation’s own transcription: Tao Maha Bhrama Jina Panjara. The organisation’s teachings have adopted the term “Bodhisattvas” from...
Mahayana Buddhism. Reynolds & Reynolds define a Bodhisattva as “(...) a being who, having attained the possibility of entering Nibbana [Nirwana], vows to delay his realisation of the final goal in order to become a Buddha and lead others to salvation” (1977: 55, note 7). In Theravada Buddhism, however, striving for enlightenment is quite strictly an individual affair, to be realised in “arahantship”. Contrary to the Mahayana Buddhist Bodhisattva concept, arahantship has no connotation of the salvation of others, although the “spiritual emanations” of arahan can positively influence worldly affairs. The active interference of Somdet To and Luang Pu Thuat in worldly affairs (the figure of Thao Maha Phrom Chinna Panchara remains rather vague) make them indeed appear more like Bodhisattvas than arahan. Possibly, Suchart’s Chinese family background plays a role here. I am indebted to Jovan Maud for sharing his ideas with me (see also Maud [forthcoming]).

37. Phra Anan was actually a controversial figure himself: he was forced to resign as a police officer on the accusation of organising an anti-government police demonstration during the mid-1970s. The demonstrators even managed to enter and sack the Prime Minister’s house (Wijeyewardene 1986: 23). After his resignation, Pol. Maj. Anan entered the monkhood.

38. It is almost impossible to translate this expression, as the idiom is strange in Thai as well. However, huppha sawan could be translated as heavenly valley, and mueang sasana as religious land. Since the Samnak Pu Sawan began to work on the ”Religious Land of Huppha Sawan”, the organisation (has) used the name Samnak Huppha Sawan.

39. The site fell under the responsibility of to the Department of Fine Arts. The Director-General of the Department of Fine Arts of that time, Luang Vichitvatakarn, was, or had become, a devoted follower of Suchart (cf. Jackson 1988: 162).

40. A more literal translation would be: the Global Inter-religious Society. In some of the publications the IFR is called “the International Federation of Religions in association with the United Nations” (see for instance Narthawut 1996: 68).

41. The Department of Religious Affairs is part of the Ministry of Education. It is responsible for communication between the government and the Sangha (the Thai brotherhood of monks), as well as the administration of most Sangha affairs — for instance, the registration of monks, the succession of abbots, and the construction of temples. Most officials in the department are recruited among educated former monks (Tambiah 1977: 299, 351).

42. The word “jinnapooto” is a contraction of the three names of the Bodhisattvas.

43. The Thai view on the dark era combines two themes. First, in the Hindu cyclical system of time, reckoning the world is now in the era of kaliyuga, the era of moral decline and misery. The kaliyuga, considered to have started
in 3102 BC, is the fourth and final age of the present aeon and will last for 432,000 years. Second, it is believed that the teaching of Buddha will not last forever, but will gradually decline. In the Buddhist year 5000, the Buddhist religion will have disappeared entirely and a new Buddha (the Buddha Maitreya) will appear to teach the Dharma again (see Terwiel 2001; Pattana 2005: 469–70).

44. The size of these two most prominent statues was equal, but the Buddha statue was placed on a higher hill than the Jesus statue.

45. The permanent residents of the Religious Land consisted of a mixture of monks, nuns and lay people. No numbers are available.

46. Between 1977 and 1981 he made eleven foreign “missions” (one to the USA, two to Europe and eight to several Asian countries) (Natthawut 1996: 64–5).

47. Suchart wrote letters to Kurt Waldheim on the “Cambodian Problem” from 1975 until 1981 (Phichai 1994: 6–7). Letters were also sent to Jimmy Carter, the former Shah of Iran, and to Ayatollah Khomeini proposing solutions for the Iran hostage crisis (ibid.: 8–9).

48. Another event which Suchart and the Huppha Sawan still consider of great importance took place in 1981 when Suchart “was appointed ‘the World Peace Envoy’ of the World Constitution and Parliament Association” at the “4th annual conference of the World Constitution and Parliament Association in Denver, Colorado” (see for instance Phichai 1994: 4). The status of the World Constitution and Parliament Association is unclear to me.

49. In particular, he despised Gen. Prem Tinsulanond (First Army Commander until 1979 and Prime Minister between 1980 and 1988) because of his moderate “anticommunist” policy. It is reported that Suchart even once went so far as calling him an “aunt, with dangling breasts and a shrunken penis” (ibid.: 25). Although Wijeyewardene does not explicitly state that Suchart meant Prem, from other things Suchart said it is certain that he did (see also Jackson 1989: 158–60).

50. Both Irvine and Wijeyewardene start their study on Northern Thai spirit mediumship with some observations on the Bangkok-based Huppha Sawan, briefly acknowledging the significance of Professor Khhum to the organisation (Irvine 1982: 85–6; Wijeyewardene 1986: 23). In both studies, these observations are only remotely related to the main object of study. Apinya, writing on the Thammakai and Santi Asoke Buddhist reform movements, also pays some attention to the Huppha Sawan (1993: 62–4). In her study, the organisation functions as an example of one particular type of religious response — i.e. rightwing — towards modernity. Two studies take the Huppha Sawan as their main subject, the article of Jackson (1988) and the dissertation of Yagi (1988).
51. In 1998, the Prayers Society republished the paper in a volume entitled *Winyan Sat/Science [sic] of Souls*. The book was presented during a Saturday prayer session at the King Taksin statue (31 October 1998). A slideshow organised for the occasion showed pictures from Professor Kh lum's collection of photographs depicting supernatural phenomena invisible to the human eye, particularly spirits (see the case of Professor Dhephanom below).

52. The spirit of Napoleon, for instance, was still serving his term in the thirteenth level of hell because of his responsibility in the large death toll of the Napoleonic wars. The spirit of Napoleon had spoken in French, but because Professor Kh lum had recorded the session on tape, Somdet To in a later session could translate Napoleon's words into Thai, after which Professor Kh lum translated the Thai into English. The same procedure was followed for the sessions with the spirit of Jesus (who spoke in ancient Hebrew) and the spirit of Mohammed (who spoke in the language of spirits).

53. From Interview 18 August 1997.

54. The professor regularly appears in newspapers and magazines to present his view on the possibility of life on other planets. See for instance *The Nation*, 6 July 1997 or the cover story of *HI-Class Magazine*, August 1998.

55. The same interest in photography occurred in the European Spiritualist scene from the early 1870s, when photography was considered “a witness which cannot be deceived, which has no preconceived opinions, which cannot register ‘subjective’ impressions; a thoroughly scientific witness…” (Wallace 1896: 211, quoted in Pels 1995: 83). See Van der Veer for a detailed account of the rise of spiritualism in Britain (2001: 58–66).

56. The presentation was given by Mr. Suttaya Watchaphai, an autodidact researcher in this field.

57. Already Professor Kh lum had conducted research with Professor Stevenson on “people remembering former lives” in Northeast Thailand (see *The World of Soul* [1972]). Stevenson, connected to the University of Virginia School of Medicine, has published his work on “cases of reincarnation” in a variety of scientific journals, including *Contributions to Asian Studies*, *the Journal of Asian and African Studies* and the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (see Stevenson 1970, 1972; and Stevenson and Story 1970). Much of his research was funded by the Parapsychology Foundation, an American organisation.

58. Interview with Dr. Naiphinich, 28 October 1998.

59. On 23 February 1991, a group of army officers — known as the “Class Five Group” — staged a coup d’état. They installed a governing council, named *khana raksa khwam sangop riaproi haeng chat*, or the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC). Immediately after the coup, measures restricting the press, labour unions and other democratic organisations were taken.
The Class Five Group owed its name to the fact that its key army members were all graduates of the fifth batch of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy (Cho Po Ro). The coup-stagers also included air force and navy officers, who graduated from their respective academies in the same year as the fifth batch officers (1958). The coup was staged under the codename “0143”, 01 referring to the Buddhist year they graduated (2501 BE), 4 forces (army, navy, air force, police) and 3 military academies.

60. In 1987 the World Peace Envoy went to Japan, Sri Lanka, Mexico and the USA. The publications of the Prayers Society make no reference to Suchart’s arrest in late 1987, nor to the fact that he was sentenced to jail for one year in 1988. The list of “Religious Missions for Peace” does not show any significant interruptions, as Suchart was released on bail almost immediately. In May 1988 he had already left again for another mission to the United States.

61. Unless otherwise indicated, this section is based on an interview with Dr Phichai Tovivich held on 7 February 1997.

62. In the organisation’s publications on the teachings and activities of Suchart before he entered the monkhood, Suchart is usually called the “World Peace Envoy” (thut santiphap haeng lok). His followers addressed him as phanathan (your Excellency) (Jackson 1989: 155). Since his second term as World Peace Envoy (from 1987 to 1992), this has changed to “achan Suchart (Dr Suchart)” and even “Professor Dr (satsarachan) Suchart”. The list “Awards and Honours received from Foreign Countries” mentions an “Honorary Doctorate Degree of Humane Letters (LHD)” from John Dewey University Consortium of America (1987), the title “Honorary Doctor of World Peace” presented by Parthasarathy International Cultural Academy, India (1989), and a “Dignity Degree of Doctor of Divinity” presented by Trinity Bible Research Centre, India (1989). His followers not only addressed him as achan, but most foreign institutions and individuals also addressed their letters now to Dr Suchart or Professor Dr Suchart Kosolkitiwong. It should be noted that the title achan expresses esteem for respected persons with a particular knowledge, skill, or proficiency, and that its use is certainly not limited to an academic context. Achan is comparable to the traditional Western use of “Master”, including its non-academic usage.

63. Until this very day Suchart remains the spiritual leader.

64. He knows this because it was told to him by the spirit of Somdet To. The spirit medium is Suchart, who is the spirit medium for the three Bodhisatativas.

65. This may seem in contradiction with my observation in Chapter II that monkhood puts restrictions on spirit mediumship, as dressing up according to the possessing spirit would imply a literal disrobing of the monk. But in this case, the monk Phra Ariyawanso is possessed by the spirit of the monk Somdet To, circumventing the dressing problem.
66. Hinduism, Judaism, Shintoism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Zen, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Sikhism, and Baha’i. The exhibition is divided into 12 “corners”, each dedicated to one religion. In the corners, the following are on display: photographs of the religions’ main places of worship; religious paraphernalia (if available); photographs of religious leader(s) or, if existing, photographs of the religious leader(s) with Suchart and/or photographs of the religious leader(s) with King Bhumibol.


68. A.D. 1999: The World in Disaster; B.E. 2542: The Ways for Survival/1999 Lok Phinat; 2542 Phaen Ya Rot, Compiled by Associate Professor Dr Phichai Tovivich. The English translation is published as “To Celebrate the Auspicious Occasion of His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great’s 6th Cycle [Birthday] Anniversary 5th December 1999.”

69. Throughout the period of research, Nostradamus was a big hit. The predictions were widely read and regularly discussed in the media. The translation by Prof. Charoen Watanasin was a bestseller in 1997 and 1998. Dr Phichai thus shares his interest in Nostradamus with many other Thai. The host of the popular television talk show Ti Sip (10 PM) told the audience in a broadcast dedicated to the prophecies that he believed in the predictions, although only 50–50. He said that “the world wouldn’t explode as he [Nostradamus] may have suggested, but there is a trend that the world would be wrecked by war” (quotation taken from The Nation, 27 February 1988).

70. According to Craig Reynolds, this idea is “an invention of modern Buddhist consciousness” (Hamilton 1993: 374 note 1). However, an inscription made in 1357 by the Sukhothai King Luethai mentions that the Buddha had already predicted that his teachings would not last forever. King Luethai also believed that the Buddha era would last 5,000 years. For King Luethai, however, the year 2000 BE (1456/7), and not 2500 BE, was significant, as by then the Buddhist scriptures would be lost. Without the meritorious effect of being able to recite or to listen to the scriptures, the chance of a good rebirth would decrease tremendously (Terwiel 2001).

71. See The Nation, 7 June 1997. The article quotes, among other attendants, both Dr Phichai and Prof. Dr Dhephanom.

72. Quoted from The Bangkok Post, 22 February 1998. The article again quotes Prof. Dr. Dhephanom, “well-known for his contacts with aliens and chairman of the Mind Research Institute” (i.e. the Reincarnation Club).

73. The song is titled Phra Piya Maharat (Great Beloved King). Its musical style is in-between a German schlager and a Russian folk dance, with a touch of opera. The song breathes a rather Western atmosphere, however. As with many other songs from the Prayers Society’s repertoire, Phra Piya Maharat was written and composed by Mr. Prasert.
74. King Bhumibol was hospitalised on 15 March 1995, suffering from a narrowed artery substantially blocking the blood flow to the heart. The king underwent cardio-vascular treatment and was discharged from the hospital on 27 March 1995. Dr Phichai did not mention the surgical treatment in his account of His Majesty's recovery.

Chapter V

1. Although named “Buddhist kingship”, the concept is actually an amalgam of Buddhist, Brahmin and animist elements to which European, constitutional notions have been added in a later stage (see Tambiah 1985; Peleggi 2002).

2. In this respect I disagree with Jackson who states reversely that the image of King Bhumibol and the institution of the monarchy increased in popularity when these had become linked with what he calls “the symbolic complex of prosperity religions” to which the King Chulalongkorn cult belongs (see Jackson 1999b: 301–4).


4. King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–35) had left for England in 1934. After his abdication in 1935 the revolutionary government appointed his ten year old nephew Prince Ananda Mahidol, a grandson of King Chulalongkorn, as his successor. King Ananda (Rama VIII, r. 1935–46) remained in Switzerland where he lived with his mother, younger brother and sister, before moving to Thailand in December 1945. After his mysterious death in June 1946, he was succeeded by his younger brother, Thailand's present king.

5. The veneration for the two kings is not entirely comparable. As King Taksin was executed by General Chakri, the later King Rama I (see also below), the position of King Taksin as a hero in Thai history is less one-dimensional than that of King Naresuan. Moreover, King Taksin’s Chinese ancestry makes him, in addition to being a great Thai king, a particular hero of the Sino-Thai community. Finally, in my opinion, the image of King Naresuan is generally more appealing than that of King Taksin. Because of King Naresuan’s personal combat with the Burmese crown prince, this king embodies “Thainess as independence” stronger than King Taksin does.

6. I use the terms “saint” and “hagiography” not as strictly religious concepts, but as wider anthropological terms to denote extraordinarily outstanding persons and the biographies thereof. A saint could be described as a person, whether deceased or still living, of iconic status and an exemplary embodiment of one or more virtues. The biography of such a person, whether oral, written or pictorial, becomes a hagiography when the narratives are structured to
highlight these aspects, image and imagination taking over. In this sense, sainthood also includes secular personalities like political leaders, sport heroes, pop idols, scientists, and founders of important companies (cf. Hopgood 2005). I certainly do not intend to use the term saint in the Buddhist sense of arahan (see Chapter IV, note 35).

7. I have never seen King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit's oldest daughter, Princess Ubolratana (born 5 April 1951) appearing in the royal news. The princess had to relinquish her royal title in 1972 when she married a foreigner, the American Peter Jensen. Princess (or actually “Lady”) Ubolratana was completely “off-topic” until the 1990s (cf. Marks 1977:56).

8. Two buildings of Vimanmek Mansion, a “King Chulalongkorn museum” (see Chapter I), house a permanent exhibition of photographs by King Bhumibol (H.M. King Bhumibol's Photographic Museum). Photographs by the king were also exhibited, for example, at The World Trade Centre in Bangkok in 1997. Photographs by the king appear in almost all books of some standing about the king or the royal family.

9. The photograph that probably most strongly expresses the king’s intention to reach “every nook and cranny” of the kingdom is the one in which King Bhumibol climbs a narrow mountain track seated on a tiny horse.

10. The association “sweat/hard work/poor health” was often expressed to me by referring to the king’s heart condition, for which he had been hospitalised in March 1995 (see Chapter IV, note 73).


12. King Vajiravudh used the pen name Phra Ruang, which could refer to either King Ramkhamhaeng or Phokhun Si Intharathit (founder of the Sukhothai Kingdom and father of King Ramkhamhaeng), as well as to the whole Sukhothai dynasty (Vella 1978: 209).

13. Again, King Vajiravudh has most probably been inspired by British custom, since the British coronation throne contained the Stone of Scone or Stone of Destiny, the ancient coronation stone of the Scottish kings taken to England in 1296. In 1996 the Stone was restored to the Scots, and is presently kept in Edinburgh Castle.

14. Books used for this section are: Maharat [Great Kings], published by the Social Welfare Department in 1988; Phraratchaprawat ro kao phrabat somdet phrachaoyuhua The History of Rama IX. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, published by Aksaraphiphat in 1996; Concepts and Theories of his Majesty the King on Development, published by the Royal Development Projects Board in 1997; Thailand, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the Golden Jubilee, 1946–1996, published by The Nation in 1997; King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Thailand’s Guiding Light,
published by The Bangkok Post in 1997. Further sources of material were “Follow in his Majesty’s Footsteps” and other TV series like “50 years Ten Kingly Virtues” and “The Royal Signature on the Kingdom”, and websites like <http://www.kanchanapisek.or.th/talents> and <http://www.baanthai.com>.

15. The picture also appeared on a stamp, one of a series of eight, issued to commemorate the king’s 60th birthday (5 December 1987). The accompanying text in the Thai Postage Stamps Catalogue of 1998 (CD-ROM version) says: “His Majesty the King is greeted by a hundred years old woman during his visit to the Northeast.” This implies that the photograph was taken in 1955 (see below for the significance of this visit).

16. During the opening, the royal anthem (phlaeng sadudimabarat) is played and the audience is obliged to stand.

17. One should not underestimate the effect of awarding prizes to HM the King. Once the king is awarded a prize, other institutions and organisations cannot do otherwise than following the example set, as no person in any field can be superior to the king.

18. See for example the book “Concepts and Theories of his Majesty the King on Development” (Naeokhit lae thritsadi kanphathana an nuang ma chak phraratchadamri phrabat somdet phrachaoyubha), published (both in English and Thai) by the Royal Development Projects Board in 1997.

19. King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Thailand’s Guiding Light, The Bangkok Post jubilee book (1997): “In the past two years HM seems to have been more attentive to people in Bangkok, giving advice to the governments (…) about traffic and flood problems. (…) No one denies, however, that HM has channelled most of his efforts into improving the lives of poor people in remote parts of the country. ‘HM has built up his prestige with his own hands’” (p.31).

20. The personal ingredients include: dried flowers from the garlands presented to the king, which the king in his turn dedicated to the emerald Buddha; dried flowers from the garlands at the royal regalia; His Majesty’s hair (which is collected after each cutting); pitch and paint used by the king for his sailing boat.

21. Ruang Phra Mahachana is the 539th story in the Tripikata, the canonical Theravada Buddhist scriptures.

22. These four maps depict the meteorological conditions the hero of the story, Mahajanaka, met along his route — first on his ship and then swimming after a tropical cyclone destroyed the ship — to the “Land of Suvarnabhumi” (suannaphum, the mythical Golden Land supposedly referring to a prospering area in mainland Southeast Asia).


24. These numbers include the coup d’état of 19 September 2006 and the interim constitution issued on 1 October 2006.
25. See Hewison (1997) for an overview of what he calls the “standard total view” of the Thai monarchy, shared by Thai and foreign observers, on the central and natural position of the king in upholding Thai democracy.

26. The coupists justified their action with the following reasons: “(...) royal assassination plots, corruption, parliamentary dictatorship, politicians harassing government officials and disrespect for the military” (Callahan 1995: 101).

27. The protests actually began with the hunger strike of the well-known non-violent activist and former Member of Parliament, Chalart Vorachart. When Chamlong began his hunger strike on 6 May, Chalart had already been fasting for nearly one month in front of the parliament building. However, only when the more charismatic and popular Chamlong engaged in the struggle, did the fasts really attract public attention (see Callahan 1995:104–7).

28. The proposed constitution evoked the largest demonstration since 1976 (on “1976”, see below): 70,000 people participated (others even mention a number of 100,000 (Anek 1993:113)). In reaction, Suchinda promised not to become prime minister (Callahan 1995:104).

29. The exact death toll is still a matter of dispute. Relatives of the victims, organised in the May Heroes Committee, have not yet given up attempts to convince the government to start a search for the bodies of people who disappeared during the crackdown. These bodies are believed to be hidden in 20 places in the country, all under military jurisdiction (see for example The Bangkok Post, 19 May 2001).

30. A similar tactic was followed in the aftermath of “1976”. In September 1978 amnesty was granted to everyone who had been involved in any wrongdoing related to the October 1976 massacre (see below). Thongchai: “(...) it was not hard to see that the real benefits of the amnesty went to the state, the police, and all the perpetrators, since the bill ruled out any possible trial in the future” (2002: 254). The then prime minister, Kriangsak Chomanan, emphasised that the amnesty was granted by the king and the crown prince (ibid.).

31. This quote is an example of how “October” (tula) from the name of the 1973 crisis has evolved into a general label to indicate the violent mid-seventies. Thongchai made a similar observation in his 1999 Keynote Speech at the Thai Studies Conference in Amsterdam.

32. Carabao is the Tagalog word for water buffalo. The group produced an album in 1986, titled Prachathipatai (Democracy). After the May 1992 crackdown, music from the album was used by the pro-democracy opposition to underline their perspective on the May Events (Callahan 1994: 124).

33. Pom had bought her posters from a poster seller on the same market. The 25th anniversary of 14 October 1973 in 1998 likely boosted the interest in 1992 posters.

35. Officials of the “Chinese Benevolent Organisation” [the Po Tek Tueng, an organisation dedicated to the transport and cremation of people wounded or killed in traffic accidents, fires, and other (urban) disasters] reported to have handled more than a hundred corpses that day (Bowie 1997: 28).

36. The military were far from united. In fact, the military that supported the NARC belonged to a different faction than those who orchestrated the Thammasat massacre. Entering into details on the military power struggles, however, would lead me too far from my actual subject: the fissure in the image of the royal family. I therefore refer to Bowie (1997), Girling (1981), Morell and Chai-anan (1981), and Thongchai (2002) for detailed analyses of this episode.

37. Another illustration of the increasing alliance between monarchy and military is offered by the tremendous rise of the number of people charged with lèse majesté: from nine cases in the 1950s to more than hundred in the 1970s (Streckfuss 1996: 59).

38. The students have always denied intentionally insulting the crown prince (Marks 1977: 60), and up until the present it remains unclear what has actually happened (see Thongchai 2002: 249). Whether or not the incident occurred is irrelevant to my argument.

39. Only the CPT definitely turned against the king in the course of 1977, accusing the king of being fully responsible for the 6 October violence. However, with this point of view the CPT held an isolated position in Thai society (Marks 1977: 70).

40. Morell and Chai-anan remark in regard to “The Prediction of Rama I” that “[t]his prophecy is commonly known to many educated Thais verbally, although it is seldom seen in writing” (1981: 309).

41. In 1976 the maximum imprisonment for lèse majeste offences was increased from 7 to 15 years (Sulak 1996: 48).

42. Rates of frequency are an interesting reflection of the range in popularity of the several members of the present royal family. In 1997/98 I estimated the division of “royal and spiritual” New Year’s greeting cards as follows: King Chulalongkorn 50%; King Bhumibol 30%; Somdet Prathep 10%; Somdet Ya (the late princess mother) 5%; others (the queen, monks, historical kings etc.) 5%; the crown prince was absent. Within this genre of New Year’s greeting cards, one category deserves special attention: cards depicting two members of the royal family together. Particularly popular combinations are King Chulalongkorn with King Bhumibol (see below), or, also often seen, King Bhumibol with Somdet Ya. The latter is the more remarkable as one
realises that relatively few cards depict the king and the queen together. This, however, may be interpreted as a reflection of the social imaginary of the royal couple’s disturbed relationship (see Stengs 1999). Jackson interprets the presence of the princess and absence of the crown prince on New Year’s greeting cards as reflecting “popular anxieties about the monarchy that cannot discussed openly” (1999b: 304).

43. In this respect, I disagree with Jackson who reversely states that the image of King Bhumibol and the institution of the monarchy increased in popularity when they had become linked with what he calls “the symbolic complex of prosperity religions”, to which the King Chulalongkorn cult belongs (see Jackson 1999b: 301–4).

44. Quoted from Usnisa Sukhsvasti, “Suan Luang Rama IX. A Nation’s Tribute to its King”, Thailand Illustrated 6, no. 2 (1988): 31–5. The park would be a gift “that would stand the test of time and symbolise the loyalty of all Thai subjects” (ibid.: 32). A public park was considered most appropriate, as such a project would encompass all the king’s major concepts of promoting the welfare of his subjects, i.e. “the development of land for public uses, the preservation of animal and plant life, the prevention of flooding within the city limits, while at the same time providing the luscious environment and spacious surroundings for the people of Bangkok and its suburbs in contrast to the crowded and polluted city centre” (ibid.).

45. Phattha is a very positive word, meaning “good” (di), excellent (prasoeet), progress (charoen), beautiful (ngam), charming (narak) and auspicious (pen mongkhon).

46. This information is derived from a leaflet printed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, headed “Resume of the Survey on the Public’s Opinion” (prawat ekasam samruwatpratcham) (n.d.).

47. The procedure and motivation behind this gift is rather opaque. The king had already been given the title of phattha maharat on 5 December 1963, also as a gift from “the people”. In 1987 the king had thus been already maharat for 24 years. The title phattha maharat, however, appears to have been hardly used or remembered, although I have seen it at times.

48. By the end of the 1980s, television reached more than seventy percent of rural and more than ninety per cent of urban households. The ratings of the national news are among the highest (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 315).

49. Jackson observes an integration of King Chulalongkorn’s image with that of King Bhumibol. He analyses this process as the integration of the image of the monarchy into what he calls “the symbolic complex of prosperity religions” (1999b: 302–8). In my view, however, the prevailing perception of kingship is the integrating factor between both kings’ images. This perception is intrinsically part of the image of the monarchy as well as of a symbolic universe of which Jackson’s “symbolic complex” is but one expression. By
studying “the symbolic complex of prosperity religions” and “the image of the monarchy” as separate phenomena linked only a posteriori, Jackson misses the point that both are rooted in the same Buddhist cosmology. This is a consequence of Jackson’s a priori construction of “the symbolic complex” as a separate object in Thai social reality.

50. Nevertheless, King Bhumibol is not an entirely “secular” saint. His charisma is partly rooted in Buddhist kingship, implying always a tinge of godliness, as expressed in the concept of sommutti thep (“assumed divinity”). The king, as a sommutti thep, is considered to belong to both the world of ordinary people (lōkiya) and to the world of the enlightened (lokutana).

51. To give an impression of the narrow connection between the highest echelons of society and the prestige derived from links with the court: on the occasion of Coronation Day 2000 (5 May), 13 women were awarded royal decorations and given the rank of khunying (lady). Six of these women were the wives of, respectively, the Defense Permanent Secretary, the Supreme Commander, the Navy chief, the Air Force chief, the National Police chief, and the First Army chief (see The Bangkok Post, 5 May 2000).

52. On 23 May 2000, King Bhumibol reached the age of 72 years, five months and 19 days or 26,469 days. King Rama I died on 23 May 1809, 26,469 days old. For this occasion a government committee, specifically installed for the purpose, organised a ceremony (sama mongkhon, in which the king asked King Rama I for permission to live longer). On 23 May, a temple connected to King Rama I (Wat Suwandaram in Ayuttaya) started renovations, and a book comparing the two kings’ lives was to be published. On May 24, the day King Bhumibol broke King Rama I’s record and the “Royal Long Life Ceremony” was celebrated (see The Bangkok Post, 23 May 2000 and The Nation, 24 May 2000).

53. The information for this case is derived from the Salang Bunnag Foundation’s website, <http://www.thaisalang.com> [June 2001].

54. The five medals depict King Chulalongkorn on “The Abolition of Slavery Medal”, King Bhumibol on the “King Rama IX The Great Medal” and the “Royal Yachting Medal” (the well-known image of King Bhumibol sailing his yacht), Queen Sirikit on a medal dedicated to art promotion, and the Princess Mother on the “H.R.H. Princess Mother Medal.”

55. Salang Bunnag was one of the high-ranking officers who led the 6 October 1976 attack on Thammasat University in his then function of Police Commander of the Crime Suppression Police (Thongchai 2002: 253). His image as the “toughest cop” of the Royal Thai Police received new impetus in 1996 through his “solving” of a confrontation with a gang of drugs dealers, known as the “Suphanburi massacre”. Upon learning that they were dealing with General Salang, the gang surrendered. Next, the captives were, in full
presence of the press, led back into the rice fields and later shot when out of view (Associated Press, 5 June 1999).

56. The other temples involved were Wat Pho (connected to King Rama I), Wat Arun (King Rama II), Wat Ratchaorasaram (King Rama III), Wat Ratchapradit (King Rama IV). Wat Benchamabophit (King Rama V), Wat Bowoniwet (King Rama VI), Wat Ratchabophit (King Rama VII), Wat Suthat (King Rama VIII) (see <http://www.thaisalang.com/e5mang.htm>).
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