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Sacred Singularities: Crafting Royal Images in Present-day Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to address the significance of craftsmanship in the production and decoration of royal images in present-day Thailand, especially portraits of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). In the 1990s, King Chulalongkorn became the object of a nationwide personality cult and as a consequence portraits of the king flooded the country. The explosion of portraits made worshippers want to create a distinction between their own objects and other reproductions, and, by implication, between themselves and other worshippers. Using Igor Kopytoff's notion of "singularization," a paradox is explained: in spite of virtually all portraits being mass-produced commodities, the owners of such images strive for their uniqueness. It is argued that crafting is a specific ritualized practice that singularizes the end product as a fine piece of craftsmanship. A vital aspect of this singularity is the object's making in the open,

in shops or at markets, a practice that visually authenticates each single portrait produced.

Keywords: processes of authentication, Buddhist king(ship), craftsmanship, Northern Thailand, Royal portraits, sacralization, singularization, woodcarving.

Bangkok, January 2008. At the entrance of Ratchadamnoenklang Avenue, a triumphal arch testifies to the ongoing celebrations for King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Figure 1). The arch is one of the thirty-one erected two years

previously by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration as part of the festivities for the king's sixtieth anniversary on the throne, an event that evolved seamlessly into the celebrations for the king's eightieth birthday on December 5, 2007.

The triumphal arch—a construction about ten meters high—consists of two separate archways, each spanning a lane of the wide avenue. The arches rest on a four-poled pavilion over the sidewalks. At first impression, the style is traditional Thai. Each arch carries seven golden crowns, and is festooned with gold and jewels. The decoration on top of the center pavilion

Fig 1 Triumphal arch in honor of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Ratchadamnoenklang Avenue, Bangkok, January 2008. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

consists of one of the royal Thai thrones flanked by two seven-tiered umbrellas, all in silver. Other decorations include guardian angels, mythical beasts, and two golden hares symbolizing 2007, the year of the rabbit. Most eye-catching, however, are over forty portraits of the king, together constituting the iconography of King Bhumibol as a meritorious and modern Buddhist king. Their octagonal frames glitter in the sun, as if set with huge diamonds. The realism of the full-color portraits contrasts with the mythical symbolism of the ornament. Yet, the most overwhelming effect made by these Thai religious and royal decorations—though they are traditionally crafted and covered in sumptuous gilding and mosaics of myriads of tiny, colored mirrors—is established by a very contemporary material. The shine and glitter are produced by colored CDs, probably recycled and then cut into rings and smaller discs.

In Thailand, images of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, or Rama IX, are omnipresent. Huge photographs of the king decorate government buildings, crossroads, bridges, verges, schools, and squares. Everywhere, in the cities and along provincial roads, in the mountains and in the fields, there are billboards, banners, flags, and posters carrying the royal image. In semi-public spaces such as shops, temples, offices, and restaurants, images of the king are on display, as in most people's private houses. The king's image is for sale on mundane objects as well: moneyboxes, clocks, jigsaws, calendars, buttons, and stickers, together constituting another public presence.

Most of the portraits of King Bhumibol are very similar. A small selection of images is used over and over again, and similarity

can also be observed in their framings and decoration. Yet, amid this overwhelming homogeneity, some presences stand out—the triumphal arch, for instance. Apart from its size, the arch derives its outstanding appearance mainly from its craftsmanship. Nor is the arch an isolated phenomenon. Thai craftsmanship was traditionally connected with the court, nobility, and religious arts (cf. Apinan 1992; Peleggi 2002: 21–39). Today, the old crafts retain these associations but have also become part of popular middle-class culture. For the Thai urban middle class, buying or owning craft products forms a means to connect with cultural identity and establish class-specific distinctions.

The objective of this article is to address the significance of craftsmanship in the production and decoration of royal images in present-day Thailand, in the full awareness that this is but one dimension of a complex religious and political phenomenon. A central concept of my analysis will be Igor Kopytoff's notion of "singularization," the process by which a commodity's exchangeability is removed by rendering it unique, through the addition of particular values (Kopytoff 1986). Kopytoff's theory helps to resolve a seeming paradox: virtually all royal images are mass-produced commodities, but the owners of such images strive for uniqueness. The material for this investigation was collected during my research in the 1990s, which focused on the cult surrounding the grandfather of the present king, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), or King Rama V, modernizing ruler of what was then Siam.¹ Since the typical range of portraits of King Chulalongkorn was well known and widely available, having a portrait

made by a craftsman became a popular way to own a copy that was also a unique object. Before starting my discussion of these crafted images, however, I will provide further context on the veneration for the present king and his grandfather.

Promotion of the Royal Image

At first glance, the ubiquity of King Bhumibol may be understood as an expression of the authentic love of the Thai people for their king. Indeed, most of the images also go with the slogan “we love the king” (*raw rak nailuang*), often also rendered as “we [red heart] the king” (*raw [red heart] nailuang*). Thai nationalism has integrated the Hindu-Buddhist view of the king as the apex of society. From this perspective, veneration for the royal image appears as a self-evident continuation of the reverence the Thai have always had for their kings, and the monarchy in general. Yet, the overwhelming presence of the king's portrait is a relatively new phenomenon that accelerated from the 1980s, reaching its zenith only after 2005. This prompts the question of why this love has grown stronger—or, alternatively, why this love increasingly needs to be expressed in public.

The ideology of the Thais' unconditional love for their king is controlled and enforced through a strict *lèse-majesté* law that precludes even the most trivial criticism of the king, or of the monarchy in general (Somchai and Streckfuss 2008). Portraits of King Bhumibol are mobilized to both legitimize and obscure the power of the state and its manifestations. The image of the king functions as a screen to hide longstanding and intensifying societal imbalances and anxieties from view. In the political arena, opinions on

core political issues such as redistribution of wealth, corruption, human rights, and democracy are sucked into a vortex of the persistent political antagonisms, but seem to invariably resurface as elaborations of the one slogan: “we love the king.”

This is not to say that Thai people are passive consumers of the rhetoric of politicians, the elite, and other powerful stakeholders. The promotion of the royal image has evoked unofficial reworkings, reinterpretations, and unforeseen outcomes. One important example of such a reworking is the sudden popularity of King Chulalongkorn many decades after his death. Like other historical Thai kings, King Chulalongkorn has never been forgotten and has always been revered and commemorated. Yet, in the second part of the 1980s, the reverence shifted into a nationwide personality cult (see Nithi 1993). At the time, Thailand was experiencing major economic and social changes (cf. Pasuk and Baker 1995, 1998). The hopes and anxieties that resulted from the explosion of the Thai domestic consumer market after 1985 made many people turn to supernatural support from holy monks, deities, and deceased kings, among whom the spirit of King Chulalongkorn ranked highly (Jackson 1999a; Nithi 1993, 1994; Pattana 2005; Stengs 2009).² The King Chulalongkorn cult may therefore be regarded as one of the many “prosperity religions” (cf. Roberts 1995) that flooded the Thai belief system at the time, “religious movements that emphasize wealth acquisition as much as salvation” (Jackson 1999b: 246; see also Pattana 2008).

That one of the greatest kings of Thai history could become an important source

of spiritual support in such mundane and personal issues as taking exams, success in commercial ventures, finding a spouse, or even winning the lottery seems in conflict with official state-ideological representations of Thailand as a modern Buddhist kingdom. Ironically, in Thai historiography it is King Chulalongkorn who is regarded as the founder of the *modern* nation-state. The school history curriculum teaches that he modernized Thai society by introducing modern (that is to say nineteenth-century) technological innovations such as railroads, waterworks, and electricity, and by reforming the administrative and juridical system. Moreover, he is known as the king who saved Siam from becoming a colony—"the only country in Southeast Asia" to remain independent. It is also taught that King Chulalongkorn cared passionately for his subjects; he abolished slavery and traveled into the countryside in person (and incognito) to learn about the ordinary people's real needs. Chulalongkorn is therefore generally remembered as the Great Beloved King (*phra piya maharat*). In this narrative, he appears as the epitome of Thainess. The essence of his perceived achievements lies in the integration of both independence and modernity into Thai identity. The cult of the Great Beloved King is thus not so much about King Chulalongkorn as a historical figure, but about the image of the king as it has evolved in the social imaginary of the Thai people (see Stengs 2009).

The King Chulalongkorn cult reached its zenith in the second half of the 1990s. At the time, portraits of him—the cult's most important material carriers—could be found all over the country, in particular

in urban areas. Since 2000, it is clear that while this king is still widely worshipped, his predominant presence has given way to expressions of veneration for King Bhumibol. Images of King Chulalongkorn in public and semi-public realms are gradually fading away. Yet, the history of the presence of the two royal images is closely connected. The relation between the two is bound up with three important royal jubilees in the 1980s: the bicentennial of the establishment of the Chakri dynasty and of Bangkok as the Thai capital, in 1982; the celebration of King Bhumibol's sixtieth birthday, in 1987; and in 1988, the celebration of The Record of the Longest Reign. In that year King Bhumibol broke the record set by King Chulalongkorn, who had been on the throne for forty-two years and twenty-three days.³ This latter event, in particular, was the impetus for a wide array of texts and images in which the royal qualities of the two kings were compared.

One of the first books to focus on a comparison between the two kings, *Two Great Development Kings* (*song maharat nak phatthana*), was published by the Office of the National Cultural Commission in 1988. The cover picture is a double portrait, a composition that also appears on one of the triumphal arches erected on Ratchadamnoenklang Avenue. Through the stream of television broadcasts, magazines, and newspapers covering the celebrations, the picture must have reached almost every household in the kingdom.⁴ King Bhumibol, depicted in color, is placed in the front. 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 tones. The composition suggests that the spirit of King Chulalongkorn is literally behind his—living—grandson, approving and supporting him. By extension, the implication is that although King Chulalongkorn died a long time ago, his spirit is still watching over his country and subjects. The composition has inspired a wide range of variations, to be found in coins, medallions, greeting cards, stickers, and posters. Other portraits may be used,

and sometimes prayers or royal symbols are added, but generally the color/sepia distinction is maintained (Figure 2).

It is impossible to distinguish popular imagination from officially promoted images, if only because the official images are influenced by the imagination of the public, and vice versa. Although the celebrations are not solely responsible for the character and scale of present-day devotion to the kings, it seems safe to state that the social

Fig 2 New Year's greetings card depicting King Chulalongkorn (in backdrop) "watching over" his grandson King Bhumibol (in foreground). Photograph: Irene Stengs.

imaginary has been influenced by the jubilees. The celebrations further strengthened the glory of the Thai monarchy as a whole and amplified already existing feelings of veneration for King Bhumibol and King Chulalongkorn. The ample attention for King Chulalongkorn in “The Record of the Longest Reign” celebrations in 1988 may even have given the veneration for this king a decisive impetus for its development into a cult.

King Chulalongkorn Commodities

At the time of my field research (1996–8), King Chulalongkorn’s image was omnipresent. A bewildering variety of paintings, photographs, and statues, the portraits are descended directly from the king’s own

awareness of the power of his own image. He was, after all, a *modern* king. He invited European painters and sculptors to the Siamese court, to have himself (and other members of the royal family) portrayed extensively. In the last two decades of his reign, the king’s image became “public,” something unprecedented in Thai history. His portrait reached the general populace in the form of coins, stamps, picture postcards, and New Year’s greeting cards, which were reproduced on a large scale for distribution, at least in urban and elite environments.

The paintings, photographs, coins, stamps, statuettes, and statues of King Chulalongkorn still live on today, as reproductions in the form of posters, visual compilations, stickers, photo books, New Year’s greeting cards, statuettes, and larger statues, or as decorations on pieces of china, clocks, wedding mementos, key rings, or other everyday objects (Figure 3). These objects can be bought from portrait shops (selling mainly portraits of kings, monks, and deities), amulet markets, or department stores, at temples or spirit medium sessions, or from door-to-door vendors. King Chulalongkorn objects—that is, objects carrying his portraits—are commodities that cross a wide range of price points, the cheapest objects costing no more than five baht.⁵ Apparently, the sacredness of the royal image is not incompatible with mass reproduction.

The explosion of easily available, cheap King Chulalongkorn portraits has inspired a search for the unique. This holds especially for members of the more affluent middle class, who want to create a distinction between their King Chulalongkorn objects and those of others and, by implication,

Fig 3 King Chulalongkorn gift items and mementos. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

between themselves and other worshippers. One way to create such a distinction is to own an authentic object (that is to say, one contemporary with the king's own lifetime), such as an old coin or newspaper with his image. These are both rare and costly. Yet reproductions can also acquire a degree of authenticity through the addition of "unique value." As noted above, Kopytoff has called this process "singularization," and emphasized that it renders a commodity unexchangeable (1986: 68–75). This is not to say that singularized commodities cannot enter a process of re-commodification. The significance of Kopytoff's argument is the insight that "the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things" (Appadurai 1986: 17). Not only are King Chulalongkorn objects commodities that may become unique; as I will demonstrate, singularization may even be regarded as one of the thriving forces of the cult.

There are various ways to make the sacred special, which often coincide. One of these is the use of specific Northern Thai crafts. By having royal images made by hand, modern middle-class people perform their devotion to the king and at the same time distinguish themselves from the "mainstream." The central case study in my analysis will be a temple in the city of Chiang Mai (Northern Thailand), which I will call Wat Doi Chang.⁶ At the time of research, the temple was known (mainly locally) for its life-size gilded King Chulalongkorn statue. Although this object was exceptional, the temple's way of distinguishing itself by creating something extraordinary in terms of size, material, and craftsmanship was part of a wider societal trend.⁷

Showing Making?

Popular sentiments surrounding Chulalongkorn became apparent in the late 1980s. In that period, an increasing number of people came to worship the equestrian statue of the king in Bangkok. In September 1992 a famous Thai movie star, Bin Banluerit, sparked further interest in the cult by declaring publicly (both in the *Thai Rath*, Thailand's most popular newspaper, and on television) that he had survived a terrible car accident thanks to the protective power of an original King Chulalongkorn coin (*rian*), which he wore as an amulet. After Bin's declaration, the number of people paying tribute to the king at the statue increased dramatically, and other centers of worship arose elsewhere in the country.⁸

Although it is unclear whether Bin's media performance might have helped to inspire the development of Wat Doi Chang into a center of the King Chulalongkorn cult, it was in 1992 that the abbot of the temple had a vision of the king in golden attire, with a golden crown, seated on a golden throne.⁹ This vision told the abbot to create a gilded statue in its image, and to start a charity project for orphaned hill tribe boys. Thereupon, the abbot began to search books for portraits of King Chulalongkorn, in order to be able to "see what he had seen." It turned out that the scene had been identical to that in a photograph taken during the king's "Second Coronation" on November 16, 1873 (Figure 4).¹⁰ The photograph provided the guidance necessary for the making of the statue.

In my opinion, we have to understand the above creation narrative as a part of the showing-of-the-making of the statue, with the search for the portrait as the most

significant element in the rendering of the making process. Had the abbot not recorded his story, one would have assumed that the coronation portrait had been the inspiration for the statue. Yet, the abbot claimed that he was not inspired by this image, but by the vision; in fact, the creation of the statue was not the abbot's initiative, but that of the king himself. The abbot saw the portrait only later, in his search for the right image to fulfill his obligation to make the statue. This "reverse" order of creation adds to the singularity of the statue, giving it an "added" spiritual value.

The statue in Wat Doi Chang indeed resembles the "Second Coronation" picture

exactly (Figure 5). Yet, this achievement was not enough to satisfy the abbot, who wanted to guarantee the object's uniqueness. Contrary to what one would certainly think at first sight, the "depth" under the radiant leaf gold "surface" is not a cast image. Its real uniqueness is only revealed at the rear side of the statue. There—the abbot insisted on showing me in person—the craftsman has left a part unfinished, so that we find the proof of its unique quality: it was carved from a solid trunk of teak. Whether it is really made out of a *single* piece of wood must be taken on trust; this showing, or disclosure, is perhaps also a practice of mystification.

Fig 4 Reproduction of the Second Coronation photograph. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Fig 5 The gilded statue made after the Second Coronation portrait. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Northern Thai Craftsmanship

The bare spot that shows the making of the temple's statue testifies to the high level of craftsmanship in Northern Thai woodcarving. An important dimension in the self-presentation of Northern Thailand (or Lanna) is that the region's traditional craftsmanship is still alive. In this image of arts and crafts, Northern Thai or Lanna identity appears as distinct from that of other Thais. Paradoxically, it represents at the same time an indispensable part of Thai national identity, providing a romantic view of the nation's past in the form of cultural artifacts. Tourism being an important major source of income, these authentic crafts have developed into a major industry, which appeals to both foreign and Thai tourists (Cohen 2001; Wherry 2006).

Apart from woodcarving, Lanna Thai crafts include paper umbrella making, fan painting, mulberry papermaking, silk weaving, and chiseled metalwork, as well as more ephemeral arts such as dancing and cooking. At annual trade fairs and in villages-turned-handicraft-markets souvenirs are offered for sale, while at the same time tourists can view the artisans at work. Among the teak elephants and furniture, silverware and jewelry, fans, umbrellas, and traditional sweets, there is a prominent place for portraits of historical kings, monks, or members of the present royal family carved in wood. The abbot's choice for a King Chulalongkorn statue carved in teak must be placed in the context of this present-day popular culture, which highly values heritage (*moradok*) and authenticity (*boran*).¹¹ In this respect, the abbot's choice follows a globally shared, middle-class preoccupation. The making of objects in shops or at markets visually

authenticates each portrait. My argument is that this crafting-in-the-open is a ritualized practice that singularizes the end product through the added value of craftsmanship. Yet, this performance of craftsmanship is at the same time a mystification: it deflects attention from the makers and provenance of the other objects for sale in the same place, as well as the earlier stages of the work.

One of Chiang Mai's most popular tourist destinations for foreign and Thai tourists alike is the Night Bazaar. Many stalls sell original Northern Thai crafts. At the same time one can see craftsmen at work in their workshops. For a unique, large-scale, handcrafted King Chulalongkorn portrait, people are willing to spend considerable amounts. In the words of Tui, an artisan at the Night Bazaar, who at the time specialized in portraits of kings chiseled in aluminum:¹²

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 own such a portrait, even if they have to pay a lot of money for it.

Although Tui makes most of his portraits at home during the daytime, his stall at the Night Bazaar also functions as a small workshop. While Tui continues chiseling, passers-by, especially Thai tourists, enjoy seeing him working. The shop displays a few smaller pieces that demonstrate the various stages of the process. Tui's performance of authentic craftsmanship attracts potential buyers, who ask questions about the origin

of certain portraits, about the price and the time it would take to make such a portrait on commission. Thus, although Tui told me that the object itself shows its making, he acknowledged at the same time the significance of showing this making. Such “making performances” make the tourist’s anticipations come true, so to speak.

Singularization of the Sacred

Both the abbot and the artisan Tui were aware of the importance of the visibility of the making process in the end product. With

Fig 6 The abbot in front of the unfinished Second Coronation statue and a portrait of King Chulalongkorn. The elaborate decoration of roses shows the picture was taken at a Chulalongkorn celebration. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

regard to the performative aspect of the making, however; their positions and interests differ. To clarify this point, I will return to the King Chulalongkorn statue at the temple. When I started my research, the statue had already been made. Yet the abbot had not only ordered the woodcarver to leave a part unfinished, but in order to further preserve the making process he also had photographs made of the statue before its gilding. Most of these pictures are compilations of images of the unfinished statue; others are portraits of King Chulalongkorn or of the abbot himself, sometimes depicted together in a single image (Figure 6). In addition to showing the making of the statue, these compilations point to the spiritual link between the king and the abbot. This is an important dimension in understanding the development of the temple into a King Chulalongkorn cult center. The temple became famous because of the statue’s creation narrative, perhaps even more than the statue itself. This story of making offers proof of the abbot’s special spiritual connection with the king. This compelling combination not only attracted worshippers, but also generated new instances of singularization through craftsmanship and sacralization.¹³

To place the remainder of this story in a proper perspective, it is important to know that for lay Buddhists the sponsoring of temples in cash or in kind is an important means of earning merit.¹⁴ The donation of auspicious objects, such as portraits of King Chulalongkorn portraits, is one such meritorious act. During the period of research the temple received so many portraits that eventually a separate storage space for them had to be constructed. In general, lay donations of religious images

and sacred objects to temples happen on Buddhist holidays, since these days are considered to be the most auspicious. Often such images will undergo sacralization ceremonies, which are also occasions for people to have their own sacred objects consecrated. The ceremonies are also important for the temples themselves. These are well-advertised occasions, both in advance and afterwards. Posters composed of photographs made during one such event—showing the monks and the most important benefactors during the ritual “making process”—testify visually to the import and power of the temple as a producer of sacred objects (Figure 7).

Wat Doi Chang had become an important center for sacralizing King Chulalongkorn objects, and Chulalongkorn Day, October 23, was the ultimate auspicious occasion for such a ceremony.¹⁵ Chulalongkorn Day, the anniversary of the king's death, is an important national holiday. Throughout the country, King

Chulalongkorn is remembered in early-morning wreath-laying ceremonies at local administrative centers. At Wat Doi Chang, however, Chulalongkorn Day is celebrated as a religious holiday, and the preferred day to present King Chulalongkorn portraits to the temple, or to bring in one's own objects for sacralization. Any King Chulalongkorn image—whether mass-produced, an authentic original, or a craft product—could enter this sacralization ceremony (Figure 8).

The context of donating as a merit-earning practice explains the lay sponsoring of the carvings of two further over-life-sized statues of the warrior kings King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605) and King Thaksin (r. 1767–1781). Both kings are renowned for successfully defending the Siamese kingdom against the Burmese, the Thais' archenemy (cf. Thongchai 1994). With the three royal statues placed next to each other in the specially constructed Chulalongkorn *wihan*,¹⁶ the temple reflects the strong nationalist sentiments upon which the King

Fig 7 Detail of a poster testifying to the magnificence of an earlier sacralization ritual, Wat Doi Suthep, 2007. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Fig 8 Objects brought in for sacralization on Chulalongkorn Day 1998, Wat Doi Chang. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Fig 9 Woodcarver posing with a nearly finished wooden portrait of King Chulalongkorn, Wat Doi Chang, 1997. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Chulalongkorn cult is built. The statues depict the Northern region as an integral part of the Thai nation. Yet, as authentic pieces of Northern Thai craftsmanship, they also illustrate the region's distinct identity.

Other, more well-to-do, worshippers were inspired to present the temple with a wood-carved King Chulalongkorn portrait or statue. Not long after I had found my way to the temple, a small, temporary workshop was erected, where woodcarvers were working on King Chulalongkorn portraits of over one meter tall, each carved out of a single block of wood (Figure 9). All portraits were copies of well-known photographs or paintings of the king. Eventually, these carved portraits were placed on the ledge next to the abbot's original statue (Figure 10), their size and craftsmanship making them stand out above the average. On most portraits, the donor's name is clearly carved under the image. By patronizing the making of these exceptional (and expensive) portraits, donors distinguished themselves clearly from the mainstream.

Fig 10 Wood-carved King Chulalongkorn portraits with Chulalongkorn Day decorations, Wat Doi Chang, 1998. Photograph: Irene Stengs.

Although the presence of the nearby workplace accentuated the craftsmanship of the portraits, the woodcarvers never demonstrated the early stages of execution; they only seemed to be more or less finishing the portraits. The rough work had been done elsewhere already, possibly by other hands and using modern power tools (cf. Cohen 1998).¹⁷ The workplace, therefore, was revealing and hiding the making process at the same time. Similarly, the pictorial record of the purposefully unfinished King Chulalongkorn statue included no photographs of the actual carving process. The showing of making, as performed in the temple and adjoining workshop, is a mystification and revelation at once—not

unlike the performance in Tui's shop and the bare spot on the statue.

What do these various omissions accomplish? For Tui, the performance of his craftsmanship was an important way to authenticate his portraits. It was something he would have to do as long as he was to practice his trade. The temple workshop served a comparable purpose: it stressed the authenticity and craftsmanship of the portraits, and strengthened the image of the temple as genuinely Northern Thai. The unfinished spot on the statue is proof of its unique material properties. The photographic compilations, however, tell a more complex story in which the concrete making is of less importance.

For in addition to visualizing the spiritual connection between king, abbot, and statue, they testify to the making of the statue as a sacred object rather than as a material object. Where sacred objects are concerned, the end of the making process does not coincide with the craftsman's final stroke. It is the abbot's "spiritual craftsmanship" that gives such statues and portraits their finishing touch. And it is this making that the pictures show.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939. The name of the country was changed back to Siam in 1945, and renamed Thailand again in 1948.
- 2 The worship of saints—extraordinary venerated monks, living as well as historical—is an important feature of Thai popular religiosity.
- 3 The Chakri dynasty was founded in 1782, when General Chakri seized power and subsequently made Bangkok the new capital of Siam. King Bhumibol Adulyadej is the ninth Chakri king (Rama IX); King Chulalongkorn was the fifth king of the Chakri dynasty (Rama V).
- 4 By the end of the 1980s television reached more than seventy percent of rural and more than ninety percent of urban households. The ratings of the national news are among the highest (Pasuk & Baker 1995: 315).
- 5 At the time, 1,000 baht was approximately equal to US\$25.
- 6 For reasons of privacy the name of the temple is fictitious.
- 7 In Northern Thailand, woodcarving is a heritage craft. The hallmark of a temple in a neighboring district, for example, was its large number of giant wooden couches, all with seats cut out of single pieces of timber. In addition, this temple boasted handcrafted statues of the holy monk Somdet To, carved in jackfruit.
- 8 At the time of my research, thousands of people were coming to the statue every week, particularly on Tuesday evenings, to pay their respects to the king. Tuesday is an important day in the cult. King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday and many believe that every Tuesday night, at 10 p.m., the spirit of the king descends from heaven to enter the statue.
- 9 The phrase "King Chulalongkorn cult center" is my own. The temple appeared to be one of the most important sources of King Chulalongkorn portraits in the city and vicinity. My rendering of the vision and its results are based on the story as told to me by the abbot. I have referred to this empirical material in other publications (see Stengs 2005, 2009, 2012 [forthcoming]). The following interpretation, however, has been developed for the present publication.
- 10 The first coronation took place when the king was fifteen years old (1868), and a regent was appointed. King Chulalongkorn was the second king of the Chakri dynasty to have a second coronation ceremony. King Rama I (the former General Chakri) had a second coronation, organized in 1785 when he moved from Thonburi to Bangkok, making the latter the new capital of Siam.
- 11 The popularity of heritage and authentic Thai crafts and arts is reflected in the increasing number of lifestyle magazines, advertisements, and television drama series situated in a

nostalgic past, and events organized around these themes.

- 12 The working of aluminum is derived from the traditional chiseled silverware for which Chiang Mai is famous.
- 13 Emile Durkheim argued that it was only through setting "a certain portion of their environment" apart that societies could mark out sacred space; Kopytoff sees singularization as "one means to this end" (1986: 73).
- 14 In Theravada Buddhism, merit, karma, and reincarnation are central concepts. A person's karma (*kam*) determines one's rebirth. 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 is accumulated the better one's karma, and, accordingly, the better one's present and future existence. Most Thais, therefore, are continuously engaged in a "quest for merit" (Keyes 1983: 267).
- 15 This is a different sacralization ceremony from the initiation of Buddha statues, which require a so-called eye-opening ceremony (see Swearer 2004). In general, royal imagery does not need explicit sacralization by a ritual expert, but may be charged with further protective powers in Buddhist ceremonies, depending on the owner's needs.
- 16 The temple building that usually houses the main Buddha statue(s).
- 17 This farming out of early, not so profitable, stages of the production process is a common practice in craft production (Cohen 1998: 160).

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