Commodification
Things, Agency, and Identities
(The Social Life of Things revisited)

Wim M. J. van Binsbergen & Peter L. Geschiere
(editors)
This book is dedicated to the memory of
Paul Alexander (1942—2005),
whose incisive research, passionate discussions,
and cheerful personality will be unforgettable to us all

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Chapter 14.

The commodification of King Chulalongkorn:

His portraits, their cultural biographies, and the enduring aura of a Great King of Siam

by Irene Stengs

Introduction

King Chulalongkorn the Great, alias King Rama V, was King of Siam from 1868 until 1910. In the past decade a cult has evolved around this King. Throughout the Thailand, but in particular in the urban areas, the King is extensively worshipped. The image of the King, mostly in the form of portraits and statuettes, is everywhere, in offices, restaurants, shops, private homes, temples, spirit shrines, railway stations and other public buildings.

King Chulalongkorn is famous for two major achievements in particular. Firstly, he modernized archaic Siamese society. Secondly, he successfully managed to maintain the country’s independence in the era of colonization. For these two achievements the King is said to have determined Siamese history amidst contemporary processes of globalization. During the King’s reign many of the changes associated with late 19th century modernization were introduced. He took the initiative for Thailand’s railway infrastructure, educational system, telephony, waterworks, and a new judicial system. He introduced Western art, architecture and medicine. Government and civil service were drastically reorganized

1 The material for this paper was collected during my PhD field research on the Cult of King Chulalongkorn the Great, which was conducted between September 1996 and December 1997, and in October/November 1998. The research was funded by the Programme on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I want to thank Jeroen Beets, Wim van Binsbergen and Jan Kerkhoven for their useful comments.

2 Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939 when Phibun Songkhram was Prime Minister. The country became Siam again in 1944 under a new prime minister (Pridi Phanomyong). In 1947 Phibun Songkhram took over government again, and the country’s name has been Thailand since.
into a centralized, efficient and powerful system. These changes are generally referred to as ‘the Chakri reformation.’ King Chulalongkorn is the fifth king of the ruling Chakri dynasty.¹ The dynasty was founded in 1782 when General Chakri seized power and subsequently made Bangkok the new capital of Siam.

King Chulalongkorn’s modernization of Siamese society was closely connected with his policy of preserving independence. The King introduced modernization modelled after those set in motion by Western colonial administrations elsewhere in Southeast Asia, intending to remain ahead of British and French demands to open his territory for Western trade interests. However, in spite of the enormous effort and the substantial internal impact of the Chakri Reformation, the foreign threat to Siam’s sovereignty did not come to an end. Throughout his reign the King had to deal with foreign aggression and pressure, and in several serious confrontations the Siamese were forced to cede territory to either the French or the British. Hence, the present-day shape of Thailand is the outcome of colonial politics, or as Thongchai puts it:

‘[Siam] was simply the space that was left over from direct colonialism. (...) the space in-between’ (1994: 131).

To the Thai, the fact that Siam – as the only country in Southeast Asia – never has been colonized has always been a source of great pride. It is proof that their country, their leaders and their culture possess unique qualities. These distinctive characteristics are captured by the expression khwam pen thai (‘Thai nationhood or Thai-ness’), a concept introduced in 1911 by King Vajiravudh, alias Rama VI (reigned 1910-1925; Barné 1993: 30).² Through the ingenuity of its monarchs Siam maintained its independence and was transformed into modern nation state. Crucial in the nation’s survival is that its most important institutions, Buddhism and the monarchy, have been preserved ([Barné 1993: 27; Thongchai 1994: 13). Thus next to the meaning of Thai-ness in the context of ‘not having been colonized,’ there is a meaning of Thai-ness as ‘to be able to integrate modernization in a Thai manner.’ In brief, the country’s history during the reign of King Chulalongkorn and the colonial period is perceived as a success story: thanks to the King, modernity stood no longer in opposition to Thai culture, but became a vital element of Thai-ness, and Thailand’s independence and its adoption of modernity testify how the Thai are able to handle the West, and anything Western, on their own terms. By fully crediting King Chulalongkorn with both achievements he has become the symbol, or even the epitome, of this conception of Thai-ness.

This brief introduction on King Chulalongkorn and Thai-ness provides the background of the present tremendous interest in the King, his personality and his achievements. But, if Thai-ness is such a well-preserved quality, why does it have to be reconﬁrmed almost daily in the school curriculum, in the media and, on the level of individual life, through an extensive veneration for a historical King? In my view, this interest in the King, and in the Thai-ness he symbolises, indicates that current global developments put high pressure on Thai identity. In other words, the cult of King Chulalongkorn can be understood as a fulcrum where the tensions between local certainties and the effects of global processes become visible (cf. Meyer 1998b: 177). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with these tensions in detail, but it is important to realise that the period in which the cult emerged coincides with the economic boom that started in 1987, and that this has led to fundamental changes in Thai perceptions of prosperity. In a short period of time a large new middle class evolved. This led to a general idea that a modern middle class life-style (marked by private cars, shopping malls, fast food, cellular phones, air-conditioned houses) and a certain affluence was within everybody’s reach, at least in an urban environment. But at the same time the new possibilities for upward social mobility introduced factors such as changing lifestyles, uncertainties about the ability to maintain one’s acquired position, hopes running too high, and an economy of loans and speculation, all of which converged to make the life of the new middle class uncertain and stressful. Another consequence of the boom was an increasing dissatisfaction with Thai politics and bureaucracy, which were largely perceived as blocking common people’s access to economic opportunities.¹ Middle class entrepreneurs and others with reasonable, but uncertain, incomes were among the ﬁrst to openly show their sentiments for King Chulalongkorn (Nithi 1993). In increasing numbers they worshipped the King at his equestrian statue in Bangkok. Within a few years the cult spread over the country, in particular after the famous Thai movie star Bin Banierut publicly spoke about his strong belief in the magical powers of the King in 1992.

Taking the role of King Chulalongkorn commodities – mainly portraits – in the cult as its main focus, this article will investigate the meaning of Thai-ness in the cult. Furthermore I will address the apparent paradox that King Chulalongkorn portraits can be mass products and sacred at the same time. I will attempt to make clear how the current veneration for the King is both expressed and stimulated by the mass production of the King’s image.

Myriads of portraits

Portraits of King Chulalongkorn are found all over the country in innumerable quantities. These portraits can for instance be obtained at one of the many ‘portrait shops’ selling exclusively (framed) copies of photographs and paintings of historical kings, members of the present royal family and famous monks. Next to these commercial prints, (semi) governmental organizations such as banks and the army regularly bring out new series of King Chulalongkorn commemoration coins and statuettes. Furthermore, a wide range of objects such as clocks, necklaces, coffee-pots, key rings and stickers bearing the image of the King are for sale anywhere. One will run into King Chulalongkorn objects at the market, in bookstores, department stores, fancy fairs, temple shops, and amulet markets. But one may also encounter them through one of the many door-to-door statuette vendors, or

¹ King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand’s present monarch, is the ninth Chakri King.
² According to King Vajiravudh the word Thai had a double meaning, it meant ‘free’ and it referred to the martial race of the ‘Thai,’ inhabiting Siam (Barné 1993: 27-29).
through children selling (home-made) King Chulalongkorn stickers in restaurants at night. There is such a wide range of King Chulalongkorn portraits that buyers can select a particular portrait even according to profession or rank. Thus one will often find the portrait of ‘the King in gown’ in the offices of university lecturers, of ‘the King in naval uniform’ in the offices of navy officers, and of ‘the King cooking a meal’ in restaurants and food shops.

The mass (re)production of these images, together with the commonness of the objects involved, makes that the image of King Chulalongkorn not only appears as an object of veneration but also as an object of commodification. In elaborating on this aspect of commodification my interest is not so much in the (mass) production and marketing of portraits as such, but far more in the question how the image of King Chulalongkorn itself has become a commodity. So, ‘commodification’ in this chapter primarily means ‘turning into a commodity’.

Below I will trace how the commodification of the image of King Chulalongkorn is part of the creation of a shared Thai national identity. At the same time, people use King Chulalongkorn images in shaping or expressing their personal identities as Thai citizens. Inspired by Kopytoff’s idea of ‘the cultural biographies of things’ (1986), I will make these processes visible by presenting the cultural biographies of a number of the King’s portraits. Commodification will prove to be a significant element in these biographies.

Point of departure in Kopytoff’s analysis is exchange as a universal human feature. In all societies things are exchangeable for something else with a comparable value. As exchangeables they are commodities. However, he adds, there are no perfect commodities. Things that at one moment may appear as exchangeable, at another moment or in another situation may become regarded as unique and unexchangeable. In every culture certain things maintain or acquire uniqueness. Kopytoff calls this process, the opposite of the homogenising tendency of commodification, ‘singularisation.’ Reversely, singularized commodities may enter a process of re-commodification (1986: 68-75).

Also for King Chulalongkorn portraits it is possible to make such biographies, in which they alternately appear as commodities or as singularized things with unique qualities. However, when discussing portraits as things, it is important to note that a portrait is distinguished from other things in one respect: it always refers to the person depicted. Therefore there is first need to discuss the nature of portraits as such, and to clarify what I mean by the ‘cultural biography of a portrait.’

**Understanding portraits**

When we look at a portrait we see a thing: it is material and tangible. But we do not only see a thing, we are also looking at the image of the person portrayed. When we are looking at several portraits of one person, we see several separate things but every time we also see the image of the same, unique person. All these portraits share their relationship with this singular ‘original’: the person depicted. This unity of reference transcends the separate material manifestations.

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Between a singular portrait and its copies a similar, even stronger unity exists: 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 propose not to limit the cultural biography of a particular portrait to this aspect of singularity – that is, the portrait as it is embodied in one of its particular, concrete material carriers – but to include its multiple replicas. Only then the biography will be truly able to capture how the original and its replicas have become cult objects. For cultural biographies of portraits of King Chulalongkorn this implies that they should start with the creation of a portrait during the life of the King, to be followed by a process of commodification through (mass) reproduction of copies of that portrait, and end with the singularization of these copies by their individual owners.

The relationship of a portrait with the depicted person is not a quality of the portrait as a thing. It only exists for the beholder of the portrait, irrespective whether the beholder is looking at an original portrait or one of its mass reproductions. Thus evidently a second important relation comes into play, namely, that between the portrait and the beholder. To gain insight in why the King Chulalongkorn cult to a large extent is a cult of portraits, and why a cultural biography of portraits sheds light on processes of both commodification and identity creation, it is necessary to pay attention to the relationship between portrait and beholder. I will discuss this on the basis of the concept of ‘aura’ as formulated by Benjamin in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

The concept of aura contributes to a better understanding of the complex relationships between the person portrayed, the portrait and its beholder. In this essay Benjamin primarily formulates his ideas on the decline of art as a result of the fact that technology blurs the distinction between production and reproduction. In his aesthetics of the emptiness of mass produced images as opposed to the meaningful presence of authentic works of art, Benjamin introduces the concept of aura.

The ‘work of art’ is fundamentally constituted in ritual 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 which themselves remain inapproachable: through the object, powers that essentially never can be encountered directly, are nevertheless immediately there.

‘The essentially distant is the inapproachable. Indeed, inapproachability is a principal quality of the cult image. According to its nature it remains “distant, however near it may be.” The nearness one may derive from its materiality takes nothing away from the distance, which it retains even after its manifestation’ (Benjamin 1977 [1936]: 16, note 7, italics in original).

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 be generalized to 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

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1 *„Das wesentlich Ferne ist das Unnahbare. In der Tat ist Unnahbarkeit eine Hauptqualität des Kultbildes. Es bleibt seiner Natur nach "Ferne so nah es sein mag". Die Nähe, die man seiner Mästerle abzuge win nen vermag, tut der Ferne nicht Abbruch, die es nach seiner Erscheinung bewahrt."*
persons deceased or far away (1977: 21). Similar to the function of a cult object, a portrait makes the person depicted present while remaining far away in space or time.

‘In the cult of remembrance of distant or passed-away beloved-ones the cult value of the image finds its last refuge’ (1977: 21).¹

Thus, according to Benjamin, portraits can have cult value in a ‘cult of remembrance.’ Hence, this cult value only exists for those who know the person portrayed and are emotionally involved with the depicted. The question then arises how the cult value of portraits — only the weak reminder of the cult value of the authentic cult object — could become powerful enough to make them true cult objects again. For an insight in the cult value of King Chulalongkorn portraits, and the aura this cult value lends to any of his portraits, we have to investigate what Thai people know about their King, and to understand the emotions involved.

The general knowledge about King Chulalongkorn circulates in the form of conventionalized stories. Thai people know these stories very well. They are taught at school as part of the history curriculum, they appear time and again in popular magazines and books, they are retold in broadcasts, and they are reconfirmed in the every-day life experiences of many of the more dedicated worshippers, whose experiences in their turn become stories again. With regard to the latter, I am in particular referring to spiritual encounters with the King, which are rather common experiences among worshippers. In the course of such encounters the King always acts and speaks in accordance with the stories.

The King Chulalongkorn stories can be classified into several narratives, each representing a different theme of the King’s biography and addressing particular emotions. Just as the portraits, these narratives are endlessly reproduced and refer to each other. The narratives are, so to say, narrated portraits.² Because of their repetitive character, with the same details, events and heroic moments being recounted over and over, these narratives cannot be understood otherwise than as a hagiography.

For those who know the stories about the King and share in the feelings for the King, beholding a pictorial portrait of King Chulalongkorn can trigger a strong emotional reaction. It is only when emotion and image coincide that the cult value gives a portrait its aura. I will illustrate my argument on narrated portraits and the essentiality of emotional involvement by presenting one narrative, here in the particular form of the story on ‘the King’s visit to Ayutthaya, the Grandfather and the Gun.’

The narrated portrait of ‘sadet praphat ton’ or ‘visiting the countryside’

In a television broadcast of October 23rd, 1998, a farmer from the province of Ayutthaya told the story of the precious gun owned by his family.¹ Some hundred years ago, the grandfather of this farmer had received a group of strangers visiting his village. The leader of the strangers, 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 made a meal at the grandfather’s house. At a certain moment the grandfather expressed his admiration for the stranger’s beautiful gun. The stranger said that, as he was so warmly welcomed, he would appreciate presenting him with such a gun on a next occasion. If the grandfather ever would have 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 had 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, showed no intention to let him enter the palace although he could show the paper the stranger had given him. Then, just as he was about to give up, the gate opened and amidst a large following the stranger came out. The latter recognized the grandfather immediately and invited him to come near. Then, shocked by the sudden insight, the grandfather realized that the kind visitor had been the King himself. But King Chulalongkorn did what he had promised and gave the grandfather a magnificent gun. The gun carried the initials of the King: Ch. P. R. (Chulalongkom Paramaphitthai Rachathirat).

What does this story of the King’s visit to Ayutthaya show? What kind of man do we see? What ideas and sentiments the story addresses? There are several important elements in the story. Firstly, the King went into the countryside incognito. He was recognized as a person of importance, but his true identity was not revealed. Secondly, he was interested in the life and needs of the people he met. He wanted to see how people lived and 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: 229-230). The story of the precious gun is but one example that tells us that the King loved his subjects too much to rely solely on the accounts of, possibly, selfish government officials. Therefore the King decided to go and see with his own eyes how his subjects lived and what their real needs were. In order to be certain that the things he would see would cover reality, it was necessary to travel unrecognized. 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 ruler caring for each of his subjects. There even is an expression that specifically refers to this kind of journeys that King Chulalongkorn made incognito into the Siamese countryside: sadet praphat ton, what can be translated as ‘someone of royal descent making a tour or visit.’²

The compassion with his subjects, and other qualities of the King are so well known

¹ October 23rd, or Chulalongkorn Day, is a national holiday, commemorating the anniversary of the King’s death (October 23rd, 1910).
² See Damrong 1976 [1912] for the origin of this expression and for the importance of the King and his company not being recognized by the local populace.

¹ Original:
‘Im Kult der Erinnerung an die fernen oder die abgestorbenen Lieben had der Kultwert des Bildes die letzte Zuflucht.’

² In connection with the development of this line of thought, I want to thank Raphael Sanchez for sharing his ideas with me.
through the narratives that, when looking at his image people actually may see or feel the King’s love. The portraits directly appeal to feelings of pride, awe and gratefulness towards the King. And since King Chulalongkorn, as mentioned earlier, symbolises Thai-ness, he equally appeals to similar sentiments around Thai-ness. It is this particular emotional involvement, expressed in and fostered by the narratives, that gives the portraits of the King their compelling aura. At the same time, since the King’s portraits are true-to-life, they lend their true-to-life character to the narratives, and thus achieve a special significance as a kind of historical evidence of their truth. This mutual reinforcement between portraits and narratives explains the strong appeal of the cult. However, it is important to realise that in this cult — to follow Benjamin — the portraits not merely establish an immediate presence of the person ‘distant and inapproachable.’ They are just as much a condensation point for the imagination that surrounds the King’s genuine personality and achievements, and more in general for the conceptional universe of Thai-ness. This much wider and stronger appeal gives the portraits a cult value that by far supersedes Benjamin’s cult value of portraits in a cult of remembrance.

**Buddhist kings and their images**

My discussion of the significance of King Chulalongkorn portraits in the development of the cult departs from the recognition that it is far from self-evident that such portraits exist, let alone that so many of them do. 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 from the first century CE on, introduced Hinduism, Brahmanism and Buddhism to the area. Early in the thirteenth century CE, when the heydays of the Khmer empire were over, the Siamese court established intensive religious contacts with (Theravada Buddhist) Sri Lanka, and made Siam a centre of Theravada Buddhism (Wales 1992 [1931]: 12-15). Since then, statues representing Siamese kings were made in the form of Buddha statues, but 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 1992: 336). This coinciding of Buddha and king fits the Theravada Buddhist concept of kingship: kings are future Buddhas (Bodhisattvas). Also the early Chakri kings had such images made, dedicated to themselves or to their ancestors, as objects of homage for the general public. In addition to these public images, other divine figures symbolising kings were made after 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).

True portraiture of royal persons started not earlier than during the reign of King Mongkut or Rama IV (r. 1851-1868), the father of King Chulalongkorn. According to both Apinan and Wales, in earlier periods portraiture of persons was considered harmful to the person depicted because of possible misuse in black magic or otherwise (Apinan 1992: 336; Wales 1992: 173). Wales adds that in the mid-nineteenth century this idea was ‘officially disavowed’ (ibid.). During the fourth reign, the intensified diplomatic relations between Siam and the West also led to an intensification of contacts between the Siamese court 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 should not be understood in terms of worship, as was the case with the Buddha images representing Siamese kings, but as a sign of respect (Apinan 1992: 339, 344).

As a consequence of the — inescapable — diplomatic relations with the West,1 King Mongkut decided to have himself photographed in order to be sent gifts in return. The significance of this decision should not be underestimated. It meant a radical break with the magical fears around portraiture and, as Apinan rightly observes, shows the impact of Western thought on the King (Apinan 1992: 339). Of King Mongkut also some painted portraits were made (after photographs), but it was King Chulalongkorn who, from the early beginning of his reign onward, had himself regularly portrayed in all techniques available. Of two particular portraits of King Chulalongkorn I will give a cultural biography: the ‘Second Coronation Portrait’, and the ‘Le Petit Journal Portrait’. These biographies will illustrate how the King’s portraits contribute to the construction of both individual identities and a shared Thai identity, and how processes of commodification, mass production and veneration interact.

**A cultural biography of the second coronation portrait**

On November 16th, 1873, King Chulalongkorn’s Second Coronation, which marked the end of the regency period (1868-1873), took place.2 During the ceremony, several photographs of the King were taken. At present, especially one particular photograph, depicting the King seated on the throne in royal attire, enjoys a high popularity. It is for sale, often coloured, at the kind of portrait shops described earlier; it can also be found in the many photo books on the King, and it might be included in the mass-produced religious booklets for the laity with a compilation of a variety of religious images with their appropriate prayers (like holy monks, goddesses, particular Buddha statues). In short, this picture of the King is generally known and 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

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1 In 1855 Britain forced Siam to sign the so-called ‘Bowring Treaty,’ named after the British envoy Sir John Bowring. The treaty opened Siam for foreign trade, and abolished the Siamese government trade monopolies (cf. Wyatt 1984: 183).

2 The first coronation took place when the King was only fifteen years old (1868), and a regent was appointed. King Chulalongkorn was the second King of the present dynasty to have a second coronation ceremony. Rama I had a second coronation organized in 1785 when he moved from Thonburi to Bangkok, making the latter the new capital of Siam. Rama VI had a second, grand coronation one year after his — more modest — first coronation in 1910 (which had to take place as soon as possible after the death of the King leaving little time for preparation; Wales 1992: 70). Organising a second coronation one year later gave King Rama VI the opportunity to invite representatives of foreign royal houses and important government leaders (Vella 1978: 14).
The commodification of King Chulalongkorn

The commodification of King Chulalongkorn begins with the popularization of the figure of the King as an important deity. The phra sayam thewathirat, the divinity (deva) protecting Thailand and its inhabitants.

During his reign King Mongkut had a small (twenty cm. high) golden image cast of the phra sayam thewathirat. The King had the statuette cast in a period that Siam experienced great difficulties, namely the increasing pressures on Siam from the West and the threat of being colonized. 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 the booklets with a variety of religious images a photo of the phra sayam thewathirat statue is rarely absent, and pictures (in profile or en face) 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 in many houses.

In the popular imagination a fusion process between the figure of King Chulalongkorn and the phra sayam thewathirat is taking place. According to this line of thought the King has become the phra sayam thewathirat after he died. The idea of deceased Kings still protecting the Kingdom is an ancient notion, and so is the idea of a protective deity. But also the fusion between a deceased King and the phra sayam thewathirat is not exclusively modern. After his father died, King Chulalongkorn had an image cast, in size, costume, and pose similar to the phra sayam thewathirat. There was only one important difference: the face 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 1992: 352).

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

The abbot’s golden vision

One night, in 1992, the abbot of a temple named Wat Doi Chang 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 of the vision. After the vision the abbot started to look in photo books on the life of King Chulalongkorn ‘to see what he had seen.’ It turned out to be the King during his ‘Second Coronation’ as depicted on the photograph.

The temple was poor, thus to allow for the creation of the statue money had to be collected from donations made by people visiting the temple. Wat Doi Chang was a very quiet temple at the outskirts of the city of Chiang Mai. It served primarily as a local temple for the nearby villages, rather than attracting (generally more affluent) people from the city.

But, as the abbot told me, after the vision King Chulalongkorn remained with the abbot. It was through him that the King still could 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 orphans and ‘backward hill-tribe people’ at the same time. The King’s spirit’s concern with their well-being well fits the image of the King as extending compassion to all his subjects, regardless background or ethnic identity.

The combination of both projects (the intended statue and the orphans) made people come to the temple, but in addition people were attracted because it became known that through the abbot King Chulalongkorn often spoke in person. Within a year the temple had raised sufficient funds to have the statue made. At present, five to six years after the abbot had the vision, even worshippers from all over the country (especially many from Bangkok) come to Wat Doi Chang regularly. They come to consult the abbot and support the temple and the orphanage with large donations in cash or in kind.

The abbot wanted the statue to become very special and he certainly has 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, which adds to the already impressive appearance of the statue. But the secret of the uniqueness of the statue is revealed at the back. There the craftsman has left a piece undressed, and do we find the proof of its 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 certainly might 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 is of utmost importance to the abbot that nowhere else in Thailand such a statue has ever existed.

The statue is placed in a wiharn, usually the temple building with the main Buddha statue(s), which was built for the purpose. This does not mean that the wiharn does not house any other images, on the contrary. On a ledge, next to the statue, stands a rather large framed photo of the phra sayam thewathirat. According to the abbot, the King and the divine being are the same, but he does not give much further substantiation to this interpretation, except that the phra sayam thewathirat/King Chulalongkorn will always be present to Vimanmek Palace in Bangkok (one of the King’s palaces and a museum at present) and a regular visitor of the temple asked a woodcarver to make him an exact copy of the statue. This suggests that, in the Thai view, everything possessing exceptional powers deserves to be copied.

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1 Recognizing me, for whatever it was worth, as an expert on King Chulalongkorn images, the abbot put this point to me. I could confirm the statue’s unicity, having never seen a similar specimen before. Somehow contradictory however, two identical statues were made later. The temple had one more made, to present to Vimanmek Palace in Bangkok (one of the King’s palaces and a museum at present) and a regular visitor of the temple asked a woodcarver to make him an exact copy of the statue. This suggests that, in the Thai view, everything possessing exceptional powers deserves to be copied.

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1 One might wonder to what extent King Chulalongkorn might have fostered this belief himself. Anyhow, the popularization of the fusion of this King and the deity certainly is a recent phenomenon.

2 For reasons of privacy the name is fictitious.

3 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.
protect the Thai nation (pokkrong bannyang). This theme, the protection of the Thai Nation, or more precisely, the maintenance of its independence, is the abbot’s principal concern.

His pursuit of royal protection embedded in nationalism also led the abbot to have two other kingly statues made: a more than life-size wooden statue of King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605) and one of King Taksin (r. 1767-1781), which are situated at the left and the right of the King Chulalongkorn statue. With their huge size, their sword and their fierce expression these are awe-inspiring images. As these statues are not gilded, the wood and their craftsmanship qualities are in full view. Nevertheless, the statues are not as impressive as the Chulalongkorn image. With King Naresuan and King Taksin the abbot has a similar relationship as with King Chulalongkorn: all three Kings influence the abbot’s doings, and all are considered to speak occasionally through the abbot’s mouth.

According to the abbot, these three Kings are more important than other Kings of Thai history because they all have saved the Nation’s independence: King Naresuan defeated the Burmese invaders in 1593,1 and so did King Taksin in 1767.2 Both Kings were real warriors. King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony. In the words of the abbot:

‘His weapon was not the sword. His policy was his weapon (nayohai 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 as well as the phra sayam thewathirat, and a fortiori their fusion, represent the enduring fostering and protective powers the nation can rely on. The abbot’s pronouncements and actions demonstrate the importance of royal hagiography in giving meaning and legitimacy to the genesis of the Thai nation. Such hagiographies contribute to the meaning of Thai-ness as ‘independence.’ However, this does not sufficiently explain yet why people like the abbot need such statues or portraits and identify so strongly with this ideological construct of Thai-ness.

Popular interpretations of rebirth, karma and lasting connectedness enable many dedicated worshippers to establish a personal relationship with their Kings. It is believed that karma brings and ties people together in their past, present and future existences. As far as connectedness to a King is concerned, claiming to be a direct relative would be problematic, as such could easily come close to a form of lèse majesté. To explain the abbot’s present involvement with the spirit of the King it was often said that in a previous life he had been a monk at a temple which the King used to visit. Through such a direct link with the King, an individual creates a connection with 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.

This cultural biography of the second coronation portrait shows us that the abbot singularized 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 the 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 statute. 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 singularization of the Second Coronation Portrait in these two ways substantially contributed to the abbot’s strategy of attracting a wider and wealthier public to his temple by incorporating the King Chulalongkorn cult into his spiritual services. The abbot himself has changed from being just an average abbot of a quiet village temple into the widely respected leader of a cult centre.

Sacralized commodities

The abbot’s way to singularise a portrait by having a copy made with unique material qualities is common practise in Thailand. People may invest considerable amounts in hand-crafted portraits of Kings. As almost every portrait of King Chulalongkorn is widely known and widely available, to have them made in an unusual manner is the obvious way to make a copy which is an unique object in its own right. In the words of Tui, a chiselwork artist at the Night Market in Chiang Mai specialising 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 wiharn at Wat Doi Chang are illustrative for this line of thought. The ledge with the photograph of the phra sayam thewathirat image, mentioned before, is further lined with fifteen huge (approximately one meter tall) portraits of King

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1 It is believed that the final battle, which took the form of a duel on elephants between King Naresuan and the Burmese Crown Prince, took place on January 25th, 1593, in the province of Suphanburi. As a commemoration of his victory, King Naresuan erected a stupa (chedi) on the spot where he defeated the Burmese Prince. Much later, Prince Damrong (a half-brother of King Chulalongkorn and known as the ‘Father of Thai History’) 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 Bhumiphol – the stupa was restored and a huge monument, depicting the fighting princes on elephant back, was erected. On January 25th, 1959, King Bhumiphol officially inaugurated the monument and since that day January 25th is commemorated as ‘Army Day’ or as ‘King Naresuan Day’ (cf. Chula 1959: 50; Vella 1978: 207). An artist on the Night Market in Chiang Mai, specialized in ‘paintings on glass’ of the monument, told me that the monument means ‘victory’ and that particularly among government officials it is popular to present each other miniatures or paintings of the monument (or of the duel) at important occasions.

2 In 1767 the Burmese totally destroyed Ayutthaya, the capital of Siam. General Tak (the later King Taksin) managed to regroup an army and to drive the Burmese out only nine months later. He founded a new capital, named Thonburi located opposite the present capital Bangkok, on the other bank of the Chao Phraya river.
Chulalongkorn, each carved out of one single block of wood. All portraits copy well-known photographs or paintings of the King. Their size and craftsmanship are the special qualities to distinguish them from the mainstream. The objects are gifts (thawai) of benefactors of the temple. On most portraits the donor has his or her name clearly carved under the image. By offering such an exceptional – and expensive – portrait, the donor equally distinguishes himself from the mainstream. Amidst the numerous usual copies surrounding them, they reflect the permanent Thai competition in obtaining and expressing status.

For those who do not have the financial means to singulairise a portrait by having a craftwork made, more moderate ways to turn something common into something special remain, for instance by having it sacralized. The crucial concept here is the magical power (sakrit) that potent objects generally are considered to possess. Sakrit is commonly attributed to amulets and other potent objects with images of the Buddha, great kings, holy monks, deities etc. Objects that bear the portrait of the King derive this power directly from the King as he is considered to possess divine powers. The fact that most of the King Chulalongkorn objects are mass-produced commodities to be sold on the consumer market, does not diminish their potential power in any way. 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 for the maintenance of the orphan centre. People who decide to buy such a statuette can have it sacralized by the abbot. For those followers who especially come to Wat Doi Chang because of the abbot’s connection with King Chulalongkorn, this implies that they can have their statuette sacralized actually by the powers of the King himself. Although images of King Chulalongkorn are already considered potent objects because of the power of the King inherent in his depiction, sacralization makes the object even more powerful. The sacralization of objects at Wat Doi Chang is not limited to replicas of the statue or King Chulalongkorn images: the abbot will sacralize potent objects of any nature and wherever they come from. The abbot’s followers, in return, support the temple and its activities financially.

High Commodities

The role of King Chulalongkorn objects as means to generate income is certainly not limited to objects produced and sacralized in temples. King Chulalongkorn New Year cards are a good example of how the King’s portrait has become a mass-produced commodity through the cult, and of the mutual reinforcement of cult and mass production of images. Every year early November marks the new season of New Year cards. Roughly, these cards can be divided in two categories: ‘ordinary’ New Year 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 greetings cards about 30% are cards with portraits of King Chulalongkorn. Illustrative for why and to whom these cards are sent is Mr. Charoen, a teacher at a vocational college in Chiang Mai. He has a framed King Chulalongkorn card on his desk, which was once sent to him ‘by somebody who respects him.’ Since the card is a portrait of King Chulalongkorn, he 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 Mr. and Mrs. Sombun, both of them architects. Since 1991 they have ordered King Chulalongkorn New Year cards to send to their friends, relatives and business relations. Every time they selected another portrait of the King. Next to the usual Thai and English Christmas and New Year wishes they had their names and that of their company printed on the inside. Mr. 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 Mr. Sombun, to send as well as to receive King Chulalongkorn cards is auspicious, that is why it is so important for him to send these cards. Contrary to this consideration – the auspicious aspect – Mr. Sombun sent me a quite common New Year card in Western design in 1998. He had already warned me in advance: due to the economic crisis they could not afford sending the more expensive King Chulalongkorn cards.1

To send a King Chulalongkorn card is thus an accepted way for one’s yearly expression of respect towards teachers, bosses or parents. It is a commodity which remains restricted to the ‘higher’ facets of social life, thus no common commodity. King Chulalongkorn cards are also perfectly fit to send to any customer, because that is always 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 like key rings, pill boxes, miniature portraits, and notebooks. Auspicious occasions require auspicious gifts, and also a small token becomes nevertheless something ‘high’ when bearing the King’s portrait.

How well the status of commodity and of object of veneration go together becomes even clearer when it comes to business gifts. A big liquor shop in Chiang Mai displays a New Year’s gift from Hennessy brandy. It is a small statuette of the King, also featuring the brand name. For worshippers of King Chulalongkorn there is a clear connection between Hennessy and the King: everybody ‘knows’ that the King appreciated a good glass of brandy, especially Hennessy. Consequently, many offerings to the King’s spirit will include a glass of brandy. The importer of Hennessy probably was well aware that the veneration for King Chulalongkorn might increase sales, and has 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 advertisement for Hennessy as well as an object expressing veneration for the King. For those who believe in the powers of the

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1 Rates of frequency are an interesting reflection of the range in popularity of the several members of the present Royal Family. In 1997-1998 I estimated the division of the remaining fifty percent ‘spiritual’ cards as follows: the present King (30%); the Crown Princess (10%); the late Princess Mother (5%); others (the Queen, monks, other kings etc.) (5%); the Crown Prince (0%).

1 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 1000 Baht bank notes (or combinations), which in fact all bear small portraits of the present King. In Thai as well as in English the receiver is wished ’a lot of wealth’ (شروق رخ). The economic crisis reinforced the hope of many that their King will lead the country into a new period of prosperity.
King, the commercial success of the shop is another proof of these powers.

Mrs. Sermsee, owner of a small factory in construction materials, 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 everybody — receive such a portrait, I cannot throw it away, because it is a ‘high thing’ (khong sung), it is a portrait of the King. Furthermore it was already framed, I only had to hang it, so I did. There was no reason not to give 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, then, was to deliver the portrait framed, so as to enhance the chance of its 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 service are both behind the success of the enterprise.

A cultural biography of the Le Petit Journal portrait: King Chulalongkorn in a contemporary European newspaper

During his reign, King Chulalongkorn visited Europe twice, in 1897 and in 1907. On both occasions the European press paid a great deal of attention to the journey. In 1897 this was the more so since it was the first time a Siamese King visited Europe. On September 19th, 1897, during the King’s visit to France, the newspaper Le Petit Journal placed a full-page coloured wood engraving of Chulalongkorn on the front page of its illustrated supplement. Needless to say that in Thailand the original front pages of the Le Petit Journal supplement of September 19th, 1897, are worth a fortune at present (according to the owner of a portrait shop about US$1,800). A Thai friend told me that his mother’s family possesses such a front page portrait. Years ago they had the lucky opportunity to buy it for only 500 baht. Circulating the engraving among his mothers and her sisters solves the problem of how to share a unique object. This is a clear example of the cultural biography of a portrait as a thing: a page of a daily newspaper, clearly a commodity at the time of production, with virtually no value, re-enters a particular commodity market at the other side of the world almost one century later. Subsequently, it becomes singularized, 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 from a newspaper, a wider cultural biography of the picture would include additional layers.

The Le Petit Journal portrait was made after a photograph probably 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 anyhow) that the engraving is made after this photograph: for them, this front page has its own authenticity. A feature in

The Bangkok Post of October 23rd, 1999, on ‘King Chulalongkorn memorabilia’ and the ‘flood of fakes,’ is revealing regarding the importance attributed to authenticity. The article recounts how the high price of ‘genuine antique’ Le Petit Journal issues has lead swindlers to colour-photocopy ‘an authentic one’ which 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 that time even more so than photographs. The mass-produced origin, however, of the original Le Petit Journal issues does not detract anything from its value. The status of authenticity is attributed to the front pages for two reasons: firstly their age and rarity as antiques, and secondly, the fact that they were issued when the King was actually in France himself.

The latter aspect gives the portrait a special place in the field of the nationalist sentiments that are part of the Chulalongkorn cult. In 1997, the centenary celebrations of the King’s first visit to Europe remembered the tour as one of the great events of his reign. One very important theme in the commemorations was that thanks to this visit to Europe and his qualities as a diplomat, the King had been able to save Siam’s independence. During his state visits the European state leaders and monarchs received the King as their equal. Everybody in Thailand knows the story (another narrated portrait), of the visit. The Le Petit Journal front page has a special aura derived from the glory of the King’s trip abroad. More than many other portraits, this portrait is a direct testimony of the King’s achievements during his important and difficult mission, so far away from his country. The depiction of their King on the full front page of a French newspaper still fills many people with pride: it is the direct proof of the indelible impression the King had made on his hosts (and enemies), eventually leading to the saving of the nation from colonization. This specific biography shows how, far more than from its potential to bring the Thai beholders closer to their beloved King, the portrait particularly derives its aura from its potential to evoke emotions related to Thai-ness as glorious independence.

At present, the 1897 portrait is a mass product again, no longer as a wood engraving, however, but as an offset print or colour copy. One can find, for instance, replicas similar in size and colour to an original, miniature replicas as devotional pictures (to be carried on the person), and reprints in books, calendars, or as New Year cards. The portrait has even inspired a producer of New Year cards to a composition of images which simultaneously constitute a composition of narratives. Depicted is another Le Petit Journal front-page, this time a view on the Grand Palace in Bangkok from the river. The view is partly hidden behind the hand-written page of a diary or letter, representing the King’s writings home during his trip. Overlaying these two images, however, and occupying a large piece 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 as basis of the 1897 portrait, that the photograph must have been taken during the same session. In contrast with the 1897 portrait, the King is photographed in profile, and thus, because of the composition of the images, it is as if the King is directing his gaze to Bangkok, to 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 reverse of a post card sent by the King from
Europe, and 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.’ Present-day worshippers of King Chulalongkorn will always include red (or pink) roses when presenting offerings to the King’s spirit. Issuing this composition as a greeting card presupposes that the different stories to which the composition refers are widely known.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper I introduced the notion of ‘encompassing cultural biographies of portraits.’ The biographies presented show that the image of the King appears both in the form of mass products (postcards, business gifts, temple souvenirs, mementoes) and as unique pieces of craftsmanship (statues, woodcarvings). Both the selection of a particular portrait, and the way it is executed, provide room to express individual identity and status. Furthermore, the biographies revealed the portraits’ dependence on conventionalized stories or ‘narrated portraits.’

Without the strategy of following a portrait through its subsequent episodes of creation, reproduction and singularization, this crucial dependence would easily have escaped attention. It is these narratives that give the portraits their aura for those emotionally involved with the King. But as the two biographies have shown, the this emotional involvement concerns not so much the historical King, but rather the interpretation of Thai-ness as ‘independence.’ Here portraits appear not only to connect, as Benjamin says, with persons far away in space or time. The immediate presence of King Chulalongkorn through his portraits also implies a simultaneous and equally immediate appeal to ideas and emotions about Thai-ness, of which the King has become the epitome. It is this potential to appeal immediately to emotions reaching beyond the person portrayed that makes portraits such suitable carriers of strong emotions. And, since any reproduction of a portrait renders the same image, this particular potential makes mass-produced portraits pre-eminently fit to serve as carriers of a mass cult.