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## **Thai anti-colonialism: Economic nationalism and the end of the Chakri imperium**

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**Abstract:** *Much has been written on how Siamese rulers disseminated a conservative Thai nationalism to buttress the authority of an autocratic state. Less attention has been paid to how critics of the throne reworked the polity from below. A survey of press opinion from the early 20th century makes it clear that elite representations of the nation were contested from the outset. This was particular true in discussions of national economy, a terrain thought by many to have fallen completely into foreign hands. Alarmed by the apparent semi-colonial standing of their homeland, economic nationalists drew a sharp distinction between the Chakri dynastic order and the Thai nation, arguing that the former had been maintained at the latter's expense. Significant here is the extent to which anti-colonial themes figured in Thai nationalism of the period. It suggests that Thai nationalist discourse developed along similar lines as the other nationalisms of Southeast Asia, emerging for a time as a popular critique of empire and a movement for self-rule.*

**Keywords:** *Thai, economic nationalism, anti-colonialism, Chakri dynasty, Siam*

### **1. Introduction**

The official history of Thailand, a state-backed 'tradition' that was disseminated during the Cold War period, elides all traces of the nation's tumultuous beginnings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Children are taught instead that their polity emerged fully-formed some seven hundred years earlier only to be shepherded into the present by a succession of like-minded patriarchs. Textbook accounts of Siam's deft handling of the Western imperial threat are emblematic of the approach. To protect the kingdom's independence, Chakri kings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are held to have turned their imperium into a European-style nation-state, centralizing its political administration, marshaling patriotic support for dynastic rule and even drawing up plans for representative government. Museums, monuments and public holidays buttress the narrative. So do stringent *lèse majesté* laws and a state security apparatus that readily acts in defense of the throne.

If initially supported by English-language scholarship, Thailand's royalist-nationalist history has been subject to growing criticism. In 1978, the renowned Southeast Asianist Benedict Anderson published a seminal critique, "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies", in which he noted, among other things, that Siam was also subject to European encroachment and warranted comparison with semi-colonial regimes in the region (Anderson 1978). He argued as well that the kingdom's survival as a semi-independent polity was the result of European policy, not Chakri reforms. Anderson's later reassessment of royal nation-building was equally controversial. In contrast to earlier studies, which depicted King Vajiravudh as the 'father' of the modern Thai nation, Anderson concluded that the monarch was engaged in a Machiavellian effort to preclude the spread of popular nationalism and demands for self-rule (Anderson 1991). Royal

nationalism was suddenly suspect - an 'official' discourse cobbled together to shore up the authority of a status quo elite.<sup>i</sup>

In response, Thai specialists shifted their gaze to royalism's 'other' – the country's political left. In a 1983 essay, Craig Reynolds and Hong Lysa took stock of the growing body of work, in English and Thai, on Marxism in a Thai context, noting among other things, how social critics of the mid-1970s drew upon earlier texts from the 1940s and 1950s to construct a rival account of the Thai past (Reynolds and Hong 1983). Its basic outlines were provided by Udom Sisuwan in his 1950 *Thailand: A Semi-Colony*, a study depicting Siam as a feudal kingdom that fell under European imperial control. The result was a "twofold exploitation" of the country that, according to Udom, lasted until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; although the absolute monarchy was eventually ended in 1932, the new government failed to check the power of the traditional elite or change the prevailing imperial economic order.

Of comparative recent origin, this academic discussion of Siam's compromised independence remains partial and incomplete. A survey of early 20<sup>th</sup> century press opinion suggests that nationalists of the period thought the Siamese economy had fallen completely into foreign hands. Alarmed by the semi-colonial standing of their homeland, many drew a sharp distinction between the Chakri dynastic order and the Thai nation, arguing that the former had been maintained at the latter's expense.

## **2. Identity Conflicts and Proprietorial Disputes**

Are we really independent? ... Aren't the country's biggest commercial concerns all in white hands? And don't white hands possess boundless tracts of timber in the North as well as the mines and rubber plantations of the South? And aren't white hands running all of the government's important departments, managing its revenue and overseeing its expenditures? As far as rights are concerned, white hands clearly hold more than the country's owners ... A European acquaintance of mine ... used to think that Siam was one of his country's colonies. Now, he considers it to be their indirect colony (*khloni khong khao doi thang om*) - one which they maintain without bringing in foreign administrators and spending large sums of money (*Suphaphurut* 1930).<sup>ii</sup>

The above passage, an excerpt from an essay which was published in a popular Thai literary journal several years prior to the overthrow of Siam's absolute monarchy, is presented here in support of the seemingly unwarranted appellation Thai anti-colonialism. As Siam was never subject to direct European imperial encroachment, it has often been assumed that the kingdom had little need for 'liberation' at a later stage. Thai nationalists writing in the final years of the Chakri imperium thought otherwise. Many drew a sharp distinction between the prevailing dynastic order and the nation, believing the former to have been maintained at the latter's expense (Copeland 1993: 51-80).

A central concern was the Thai economy, a domain which was only just being conceived through 'a dramatic process of imaginative abstraction and representational labor.'<sup>iii</sup> A century earlier, Siam had been the monopoly enterprise of a hereditary ruling class. Change came in the period after 1855 with the accommodation of European imperial interests, the gradual elimination of slavery and the decline of *corvée*. A national economy - a proprietorial domain for Thai commercial activity - was not the immediate outcome, however. Instead, British capital and a

steady influx of Chinese labor gave rise to an expanding sphere of collaborative endeavor, a close approximation of the pluralistic colonial economies that were developing in neighboring countries (Van Roy 2017: 248).

There things remained. Treaties with the imperial powers made it difficult for the government to depart from a *laissez-faire* economic policy. So did convention: Siamese subjects had long been looked upon as a source of tax revenue and conscript labor; that dynastic authorities should suddenly concern themselves with improving the livelihoods of those at a lower station in life struck many as excessive (Brummelhuis 2005: 352). In the final decade of his reign, King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) emphasized that his newly-formed Ministries of Agriculture and Public Instruction would be used to assist with the kingdom's development, giving rise to extensive plans for large-scale projects and programs. Most were never implemented; after his death, the budgets of both ministries were cut (Baker and Pasuk 2005: 88-89).

The new king Vajiravudh (1910-1925) showed little interest in economic development. When an official from the previous administration published the kingdom's first treatise on political economy, he openly ridiculed the author and his contention that Siam was a land of impoverished farmers in need of governmental support.<sup>iv</sup> In his view, Siamese poverty was a fiction arising from 'false comparisons' with the West (Vajiravudh 1915a). The Siamese were not poor; they had plenty of food and there was not a single 'real' beggar to be found in the capital. Those who claimed poverty spent too much money on clothes, extra wives and gambling. The author's 'negative' perceptions of Siam stemmed from his foreign education, his use of European class categories was inappropriate in 'a land where all but the king were equal' and the study of political economy was only popular because of a misapprehension that it could help people 'to get rich without lifting a finger' (Vajiravudh 1915b). Anyone who had travelled at home and abroad could attest to that fact that the realm had 'fewer poor people than anywhere else in the world' and besides, the notion that the government was responsible for alleviating poverty was absurd (Vajiravudh 1915d). Parents could 'hardly be expected to support their full-grown children', let alone take responsibility for their actions; karma alone assured that they would 'receive as much good or evil as they deserve' (Vajiravudh 1915e).

Vajiravudh's primary contribution to the development of a Thai economy was a decision to break with a long-standing policy of treating the imperium's burgeoning population of ethnic Chinese as Siamese subjects who contributed to the prosperity of the realm. Politics dictated the reappraisal. Local Chinese had grown restive; stirred by the spread of Han nationalism and Sun Yat-Sen republicanism, a population previously divided by dialect, lineage and economic standing was evolving into a cohesive political community. The danger this posed to dynastic authority was made manifest in 1910, when a well-orchestrated protest over an increase in the Chinese head tax brought the capital to a standstill, and more ominously still in 1911, when republican forces toppled the Manchu Qing. In early 1912, after a plot to overthrow Vajiravudh was discovered within the ranks of the Siamese military, Acting Minister of War and heir apparent Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath blamed 'individuals of Chinese descent' who were 'influenced by developments in China' (*Straits Times* 1912).

The court responded with a series of restrictive measures (Van Roy 2017: 194-5). In 1913 a citizenship act was promulgated, giving the government jurisdiction over anyone born within the

confines of the kingdom. The decree and an accompanying law on surnames were wishfully assimilationist, reclassifying subjects of the realm as Siamese nationals and obliging them to make use of Thai-sounding surnames. Other proscriptions followed: a prohibition on private associations engaging in political activities; an administration reorganization to facilitate closer governmental scrutiny of the capital's Chinese districts; and a private schools act stipulating that children educated in the kingdom be instructed in Thai.

At the urging of his brother Chakrabongse, Vajiravudh also drafted a series of polemics, a number decidedly anti-Sinitic in tone, for the Bangkok press (NA 1912). At a mid-year cabinet meeting, the prince remarked upon the challenge which rising nationalist sentiment posed for dynastic authority: people were coming to perceive the kingdom as their own and felt compelled to pass judgment on the government and its policies in consequence. The Chinese were in the habit of criticizing the government and the Thai wanted to do so as well. This, in itself, was not necessarily bad; the problem lay with the fact that people had little knowledge of state affairs and were unable to think for themselves. They took their opinions from foreigners and were 'inclined to believe everything they read in the papers'.

To promote a favorable climate of opinion, the government had long provided subsidies to a number of local publications, including the kingdom's principal English-language newspapers - the *Bangkok Times*, the *Siam Observer*, and the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, the latter two of which also published Thai-language editions.<sup>v</sup> At the behest of the prince, patronage was extended to include 'the more moderate' of the kingdom's three Chinese-language dailies, *Chinosayam warasap*.<sup>vi</sup> *Phim thai*, a Thai-language daily, was also acquired to act as 'the voice of the throne' and Vajiravudh was encouraged to 'seize the press as a weapon' to use against court critics (NA 1912, 1927b).

It was an ill-advised move. Over the next four years, the king made extensive use of the government press to instruct his subjects on a broad range of topics. His style proved controversial. His use of a pen name left room for rebuttal. As a result, his essays were dogged from the outset by the rejoinders of literary opponents who often succeeded in drawing the monarch into unseemly debates. Newly-appointed nobles on crown payroll, the king's editorial team at *Phim thai* invariably wrote in his defense. Elsewhere, he was subject to growing criticism.

The response to his writings on the 'Chinese threat' is a case in point. In the wake of the plot against his government, the monarch made frequent use of the republican experiment in China to explain how disastrous self-rule could be for people who lacked the requisite knowledge to make it work (Vajiravudh 1913a, 1913b, 1918a, 1965). The revolutionaries, he concluded, had achieved little more than China's 'Mexicanization', producing a democracy where political debates were resolved with revolvers and bombs (Vajiravudh 1913c) Were it not for the country's new name ('a name far too long for any but a Chinaman with lots of time on his hands to remember') and its new flag ('a crime far uglier than anything ever perpetrated by the Manchus') the Chinese government would have been beyond classification: a republic in which 'people were not permitted to have a voice', an assembly that was 'forbidden from consulting with anyone' and a head of state who served as 'the world's first absolute president' (Vajiravudh 1914a).

He was equally critical of the Chinese in Siam. Initially, he targeted the community's more politically-active members, the ideologues who 'used newspapers as mud-slinging machines' to

'spread sedition and discontent' and the 'self-styled patriots' who 'grew fat on the blood of their compatriots' by collecting donations for 'so-called patriotic causes' (Vajiravudh 1914b, 1915f). In later essays, he grew unabashedly racist. The Chinese, he decried, as the 'Jews of the Orient' - a people whose 'misplaced arrogance' made them unassimilable; 'a plague of locusts' that had descended on Siam for the sole purpose of gathering up as much wealth as possible before returning home; a people with no loyalty to the realm. He proposed a ban on their emigration and more disturbingly, threatened to afford those already living in Siam with a treatment akin to that which the Jews had received in Russia (NA 1914).

It was a remarkably divisive rant. Even within the pages of the government-backed press, the king's views were openly called into question. The editor of the *Bangkok Times* noted that the Chinese were far too important to the commercial life of the kingdom to be excluded proposed that the government make an effort to teach them in how to be good citizens (*Bangkok Times* 1914). At *Chinosayam warasap*, feelings ran higher. Risking his newly-acquired government subsidy, the paper's owner publicly broke with the throne, calling upon readers to oppose any who would have them hate their 'fellow citizens':

... for who would dare to suggest that there is anything worthwhile in our announcing to the world that we may have to start treating a foreign-language group residing in our country in the same way that the Russians have seen fit to treat their Jews, or that this could possibly be a wise policy aim of our government? Moreover, who in the world would think that there is anything either appropriate or fair in choosing to criticize a diverse race of people at a time when we are receiving their help and they remain loyal to us (Sieow 1914)?

So that readers could judge for themselves whether he constituted a threat to the realm, he went on to explain how he perceived his 'duties' as a Sino-Thai, noting that he was obliged to look after his family and, as a newspaper publisher, to make sure that 'people of all races' were received justice. Beyond this, he believed himself free to ignore the dictates of political leaders, foreign or domestic. He could agree with their ideas, but only from a sense of right and wrong and in this case, he felt there was 'nothing right' about maligning 'fellow citizens of Chinese descent (Sieow 1914)'.

Another of the paper's contributors made a pretense of being concerned over the meaning of the Thai compound *prachop-soplo*, a word denoting sycophancy or obsequious behaviour (Talum 1914). He claimed to have heard that *soplo* carried the negative connotation of intentionally deceiving a superior, while *prachop* meant to speak in a manner pleasing to those above one's station in life, a type of behaviour which was not necessarily bad. A dictionary published by the Ministry of Public Instruction gave no indication that the meaning of either word was negative and instead indicated that both referred to deferential speech or deportment, their meanings differing only with respect to degree. Remarking that *prachop* behaviour was so widespread as to make people misconstrue that it was acceptable, he expressed the opinion that the meanings of both words were decidedly negative and to make his point, he narrated a tale in which:

... a group of *nakprachop* [sycophants] were sitting around a man of great wealth and position, each of them considering what they should say to please him. While they were still thinking, the rich man noisily farted. Without blinking an eye, one of the more skilled of the flatterers

immediately chimed up: 'Has someone just opened a bottle of perfume? What a truly enchanting fragrance!', and proceeded to look back and forth as if he really expected to see someone holding a bottle of perfume. At this, the rich man raised his eyebrows and replied: 'Ah ... that must be my fart... but farts are usually supposed to stink, aren't they? If mine are fragrant, I may have come down with some type of disease.' No sooner had he finished speaking than the *nakprachop* began fanning the air in front of his nose, inhaled deeply, and said: 'Oh, m'lord? Well, yes ... in fact, it is starting to stink now after all (Talum 1914).'

It was only at the end of the tale that the writer clarified his intentions by remarking that the story reminded him of the press commentary published in support of 'Jews of the Orient', an essay which had been 'noisily released' to the public a few days before.

There were also many writers who agreed with the king but of these, a number openly wondered how the Chinese had come to dominate the economy in the first place (*Phim thai* 1914a, 1914b). The conclusion, reached by commentators from this time onward, was that 'the powerful men of the realm' had 'no one to blame but themselves' for the fact that the country was being overrun by outsiders; they alone were responsible for leaving the Thai 'unable to compete with the foreigners in their own homeland' (NA 1915). The debate grew so heated that Vajiravudh sought to bring it to an end, ostensibly 'for the sake of the Chinese who were born in Siam and have lived here for generations' (Vajiravudh 1914c).

He may also have been alarmed by the turn the discussion was taking. From 1915, his essays frequently met with broader critiques of his writings and reign. One of the earliest, 'Wheels in the Mud' (*lo tit khlon*), was a response to Vajiravudh's 'Mud on the Wheels' (*khlon tit lo*), an extended polemic in which the king sought to correct the myriad shortcomings of Siamese youth (Winai 1915). Its author, *Phraya* Winai Sunthorn, claimed to be writing in order to point out a number of 'bad habits' Vajiravudh had failed to mention, habits 'far more harmful than loose morals' in that they created 'divisions' within the nation. Included in his list were:

taking advantage of each other without regard for the unity of the group as when men of wealth and position exploit those less powerful than themselves; [the habit which] some of our society's more fortunate members have of listening to those in their immediate circles while ignoring the advice of any beyond its fringe until they can no longer comprehend the real nature of things or the condition of those below their own station; and the habit which some influential men have of generously looking after their personal followings while treating all others with disdain (Winai 1915).

He also made short work of another royal essay of the period, 'True Nationhood' (*Khwampenchat doythaejing*), by writing of rulers 'who made fools of themselves' by teaching people how to love their nation.

It was the start of a literary rebellion. Over the next few weeks, the *Daily Mail* received eighteen essays written in support of Winai and his arguments (*Bangkok Daily Mail* 1915). The newspaper's editor commemorated the shift by publishing 'the War of the Pens' - the kingdom's first political cartoon (Traipin 1992: 51-52). Satire and caricature were poised to become the staples of a critical 'political journalism' that flourished despite the best efforts of the government to shut it down (Copeland 1993: 42-50). When the first installment of 'Wheels in the Mud' was published, officers

of the court were dispatched to find its author, who went into hiding (Winai 1915). The *Daily Mail* was soon brought to heel; the king purchased it and gave it a close courtier (NA 1927a). In a bid to assure that the kingdom's other foreign-owned publications refrained from publishing 'tasteless remarks,' he also ordered that a comprehensive press act be drawn up (NA 1916).<sup>vii</sup> To keep 'undesirables with a little money in their pockets' from entering the newspaper trade, it stipulated that publishers possess a minimum capital holding of a hundred and fifty thousand baht, a third which was to be lodged with the government as a surety bond. Proprietors, foreign and domestic, were to be held 'completely accountable' to the laws of Siam. The Ministry of Interior was also authorized to bring legal action against any publication featuring: news of matters likely to pervert the public morals; the proceedings of any meeting not open to the public; material likely to create a breach of the peace, and any material considered to be insulting to the royal family or threatening to the form of government and its institutions. Out of concern over the response of the foreign diplomatic community, the act was never adopted but a less stringent measure was later used to prosecute the owner of *Chinosayam warasap*.

Court critics simply published elsewhere. By 1917, the local newspaper trade was flourishing and the vernacular press was fast becoming a forum for articulating a popular Thai nationalist discourse, a central tenet of which was the need to address foreign domination of the economy (Copeland 1993: 55-80). Some writers continued to fret over the position of the Chinese. Others argued that the 'real Jews' were the Europeans (*Mangkhn daeng* 1923). In either case, dynastic authorities were held to account for developments.

Unable to silence his critics, Vajiravudh left off engaging them, retreating to the palace to write for an in-house journal of limited circulation, *Dusit Samit*.<sup>viii</sup> His essays of the period reflect his frustration: in one, he promised to 'studiously ignore' the views of any who disagreed with him and 'throw away' all outside contributions; in another, he 'apologised' for failing to lecture the government on its duties; in a third, he explained that his new journal would differ from others in that it would make no pretence of 'serving as the voice of the people' when criticizing the crown (Vajiravudh 1918b, 1918c, 1919).

### **3. Conjuring up a Semi-Colony**

A hundred years ago, the wealthy and the powerful bought their slaves directly. Now that we have entered the 'civilised' age, the powerful countries of the world simply force the weaker into indirect slavery, a type no less complete than the previous form. We must awaken! It's far too late already ... the country is falling under the permanent oppression of outsiders (*Sayam riwiv* 1926).

In the 1920s, Thai economic nationalism came into its own. Trope mapped the grounds for concern. Siamese wealth was transformed into the 'blood of the nation,' its circulation 'essential for national development,' its dissipation 'a principal cause of national weakness and collapse' (*Pakka thai* 1926a; *Thai num* 1929a; *Ratsadon* 1929; *Lak muang* 1929b). Inequity, the gap that yawned between those at the top of the social order and those at the bottom, was suddenly malignant;

parasites, foreign-born and domestic, were held to be 'bleeding the nation dry', leaving little 'but the skin and bones (*Si Krung* 1930, 1931b).'

It was a given that the Thai economy was controlled by foreigners. Commerce was 'completely into their hands' (*Thong thai* 1926; *Pakka thai* 1927g; *Si krung* 1928b). They had monopolized the nation's banking and money supply, its domestic market for raw materials and its overseas shipping (*Kro lek* 1927; *Pakka thai* 1927c). Their labourers were 'flooding the country,' making it 'impossible for the Thai to find work in their own home,' while their merchants were 'sucking Thai blood to the marrow' through the importation of high-priced merchandise (*Pakka thai* 1927g; *Bangkok kanmuang* 1928; *Lak muang* 1928). They were also gathering up huge tracts of Thai farmland (*Pakka thai* 1927b; *Thai num* 1928; *Si krung* 1928a). The nation had become 'an indirect slave' (*khikha thang om*) of outsiders (*Si krung* 1929, 1931a).

*Khwampenthai*, a term denoting both 'Thai-ness' and freedom, was redefined in economic terms. Wealthy nations and wealthy people were free do as they pleased but the poor led contingent existences (*Thai num* 1929b; *Lak muang* 1929a). They were 'free (*thai*) in name only ... obliged to live under others with bigger fists' (*Pakka thai* 1927a).

Money alone guarantees Thai-ness/freedom ... and as for those who barely scrape by, saving nothing, ... mired in poverty, they live poised on the brink of disaster ... without strength, without power, at the mercy of events ... poverty not only denies them the respect of others, it deprives them of self-respect as well. They cannot rely upon themselves, they are not free within themselves and so they must turn instead to others (*Pakka thai* 1927i).

Prosperity was perceived to be the key to independence, the means of escaping the exploitation of foreign and domestic oppressors alike. Poverty was the fault of the dynasty. As the kingdom's rulers retained full authority to negotiate treaties, formulate policies and allocate resources, they were clearly 'more responsible than anyone else' for the country's lack of development (*Pakka thai* 1926b; *Si krung*, 1931c). They also possessed a disproportionate share of the nation's accumulated capital in an age when most of their fellow nationals remained poor. (*Ruam khao* 1927; *Si krung* 1928; *Thai thae* 1931c). They enjoyed a freedom which their lower-class compatriots lacked and were the only ones capable of placing everyone on equal footing (*Si krung* 1931d; *Pakka thai* 1927g; *Lak muang* 1929d; *Thai thae*, 1931d).

For these reasons, continued government inaction and fiscal conservatism met with growing hostility. At best, *laissez-faire* economic policies were viewed as a poor approach to national development, leaving the rich and powerful 'completely at liberty to prey upon the foolish and the weak' (*Si krung* 1930; *Thai thae* 1931a). At worst, Siamese elites were construed to be openly collaborating with foreigners to 'drink the blood of the poor' (*Pakka thai* 1927f). Some argued that the kingdom's rulers had been 'tricked' by their European advisors into leaving the nation at the mercy of foreign exploiters (*Thai thae* 1931b). Others believed that they acted from greed alone with scant regard for the economic future of the nation as a whole (*Sayam riwiw* 1927; *Lak muang* 1929c). On occasion, they were even held to be motivated by a belief that foreigners were superior to their own countrymen (*Pakka thai* 1927d). The conclusions drawn were the same: efforts to protect the national economy were needed to save the Thai from being transformed into 'scrap-eating dogs ... like the American Indians, the Malays, the Burmese, the Khmer, the Vietnamese,



and the peoples of India ... whose mouths no longer have voices, whose guns no longer carry bullets' (*Pakka thai*, 1928).

Demands for intervention were given greater urgency by developments of the period. Vajiravudh died in 1925, leaving the kingdom deeply in debt. To redress matters, his successor Prajadhipok cut public spending and reduced government employment, unpopular measures which met with considerable criticism. The 'recovery' effected was also short-lived; by the end of the decade a global economic downturn disrupted the economy anew.

#### **4. 'Thahan asa' [Volunteer Soldier], 'An Appraisal of the Nation'**

How shall we judge people who revere foreigners while belittling their fellow nationals? After living here but a short while, foreigners are thought to have a good understanding of our affairs. Why are our own people not held to have a better understanding? ... Governments must rely upon citizens to defend the country ... granting them a political voice so that they can protect their own interests. In Siam, we do just the opposite, ignoring the voices of the country's citizens while giving rights and benefits to foreigners. Because of the support foreigners receive from our government they now possess what is rightfully ours (*Thahan asa* 1931d).

In the months prior a 1932 uprising that ended the absolute rule of Chakri monarchs, dynastic authority was subject to a number of withering critiques put forward by writers who combined the concerns of economic nationalists with a semi-historical analyses and calls for self-rule. Published in September 1931, a scant nine months before a self-styled 'People's Party' seized power to establish the kingdom's first constitutional government, Volunteer Soldier's eight-part 'Appraisal of the Nation' [*Ramphoeng thung chatprathet*] is a prime example of this evolving Thai anti-colonialist discourse.<sup>ix</sup>

Like a number of his contemporaries, the author drew a sharp distinction between dynastic authority and the Thai nation, arguing that the former had been maintained at the latter's expense. The kingdom's rulers were said to have preserved their power by giving away territory and granting extraterritorial status to foreigners, allowing them to exploit the realm's resources and people, who were denied the right to defend their political and economic interests. These self-serving policies were held to have undermined the unity of the government and the people; rulers and subjects related 'as masters and slaves, each turning away from the other ...growing further apart by the minute' (*Thahan asa* 1931a).

People were said to have 'lost all hope' that the nation would ever prosper and concluded that the poor were likely to remain so all of their lives. This was because Siam's rulers had 'adopted the outward trappings of Western society without adopting any of its substance.' Rather than addressing 'blatantly obvious' problems, they dispatched a stream of officials overseas to study the conditions prevailing in foreign lands. Meanwhile, the wealthy few continued to 'farm on farmer's backs', squeezing them with taxes and usurious rates of interest. As a result of this 'shadow-puppet

development', Siamese rulers had come to erroneously believe that their kingdom was 'already civilised' (*Thahan asa* 1931b, 1931c).

According to the writer, the nation's survival demanded radical change. Siam's development was being left entirely to outsiders; commerce - 'the most important aspect of national life' - had fallen completely in their hands. The kingdom's rulers 'revered foreigners while belittling their fellow nationals' and were only interested in the accumulation of private wealth and the promotion of personal well-being. Those at a lower level in society were being left to fend for themselves. Whenever they complained of such matters, they were accused of 'arrogantly rising above their station in life' by individuals who clearly had no understanding of the nation's problems. If they had, the writer argued, the kingdom would 'long ago have attained a level of development similar to the countries of Europe' and foreigners would never have been permitted to 'mingle among us while stuffing their pockets with our goods ... seizing our rights, leaving the Thai to eat the crusts that remain' (*Thahan asa* 1931e).

To 'save the nation from total collapse', the writer called upon Siam's rulers to 'stop creating a civilized veneer for the country which belied the condition of its people' and work instead on real solutions for the nation's problems by actively developing industry, commerce, and agriculture. Among other things, he proposed that quotas be placed on foreign imports, that immigration be capped, that money be made available for the development of Thai business, that tax relief be provided to the country's farmers and that efforts be made to find work for the capital's unemployed (*Thahan asa* 1931f, 1931g). He also advised that people be given a voice in their own affairs, for only thereby would they come to understand that they were the owners of the kingdom and start working together like the other peoples of Asia to assure that foreigners did not become their permanent overlords (*Thahan asa* 1931c, 1931h). Until concrete steps were taken to 'protect the kingdom's Thainess/freedom', foreigners would remain 'the lords of Thai trade and finance' while the Thai were 'free in name only ... in no better shape than if we had come to Siam from China ourselves.' (*Thahan asa* 1931d).

### **5. *Chanyakhacha* [Wise Elephant], 'What Siam Needs'**

One could forgive the loss of Siam's wealth if it were the result of governmental backwardness. After all, the backward are not omniscient and when they interact with intelligent people who have their hearts set on taking advantage of the dull-witted, they generally suffer losses. It is far more vexing, however, when our resources are given away by self-serving individuals who are determined to look after their own interests at the expense of their fellow nationals (*Chanyakhacha* 1932d).

'What Siam Needs' (*Krung sayam tongkan arai*) is another example of the anti-colonial critiques that were publicly circulated in the period just prior to the overthrow of the Chakri dynastic order. Published in January of 1932, the serialized essay offered a 'comprehensive diagnosis' of Siam's 'economic affliction' at a time when the kingdom was said to be 'one step away from death.'<sup>x</sup> The author began by recounting the history of Siam's illness, explaining how the various 'cures' adopted by the court had actually contributed to the kingdom's malaise. The kingdom's rulers were said to have spent a considerable amount of time and money acquiring 'special medicines' from foreign lands, turning Siam into a 'peculiar country where East actually does meet West', an unhealthy state of affairs which hastened the kingdom's economic decline. Instead of correcting their mistakes,

they thereafter sought to 'save their seats' by treating the kingdom's illness with 'propaganda' (*propakanda*), a pointless effort in that the kingdom was not 'pretending' to be ill but rather was suffering from a 'severe squeeze.' Siamese rulers, he concluded, had little understanding of how to restore the kingdom to economic health (*Chanyakhacha* 1932a, 1932b).

Worse, they were contributing to its deterioration. Recognizing that their kingdom lagged far behind the West, they had launched a peculiar program of 'self-strengthening ... strengthening themselves at the expense of their fellows' (*Chanyakhacha* 1932c). Instead of creating 'a field for all of the sheep to graze in' they produced 'a country with too many lions' - arrogant beasts with 'overdeveloped senses of superiority.' This had weakened Siam and left it susceptible to three additional ailments - 'political oppression' (*ponlitikon oppretchan*), 'economic domination' (*ekhanomik dominechan*), and the 'immigration system' (*immikreting sittem*), all of which had devastating consequences for the kingdom's condition (*Chanyakhacha* 1932d). Apart from a few doses of 'all-purpose medicine' - the promotion of public education and health care - the government had done nothing more to keep the kingdom from 'wasting away' (*Chanyakhacha* 1932e).

In a final instalment, the writer reminded his readers of the importance of working together to 'throw off the foreign economic yoke' (*Chanyakhacha* 1932f). He asked that they reflect upon:

Our forests, our mines, and our electricity supply, all of which have fallen completely under the control of foreign countries. Foreign domination of these activities has drained off large amounts of Thai money ... and laid waste to our national resources in a way which no other enemy ever could. Think for a moment! The Siam Electric Company alone has recently announced a capital holding of twenty million baht, money which the company has snatched from all of us. And consider as well all of the timber and mining companies which are working to profit at our expense ... in any given year, tens of millions of baht flow out of our country ... if we allow the flow to continue, we'll be left with little more than our flesh and bones, if we don't die altogether (*Chanyakhacha* 1932f).

## **6. Kulap Saipradit, 'Humanism'**

The powerful, those well-born individuals with money and titles, take pleasure in having everyone adopt their polite modes of speech. I won't venture to say who benefits from this but the nation definitely does not ... Can we honestly say that we have taken stock of our true situation in Siam? I only hear them uttering falsehoods about how this fellow really doesn't need to eat for a few days, or how that one is capable of enduring suffering, or how there isn't any pressing need to make changes, leaving us free to do as we've done in the past (Kulap 1932c).

Kulap Saipradit's three-part essay 'Humanism' (*Manutsayaphap*) was also published in January of 1932. At the time, the author had already established a literary reputation under the pen name 'Si Burapha.' Irritated that many of his contemporaries attributed critical press commentary of the period to influential members of the nobility 'as if commoners were incapable of doing anything on their own', he arranged to publish 'Humanism' under his own name. The essay gave rise to

considerable discussion in the period press and led to sedition charges being filed against the publisher of *Si krung*, which was briefly shut down (*Si krung* 1932).

In his initial installment, Kulap explained how the Thai, ostensibly a free race whose members had 'as much right to think their own thoughts as the other peoples of the world', had allowed themselves to be 'enslaved' by the opinions and beliefs of others (Kulap 1932a). Most people, he believed, had given too little thought to such fundamental questions as 'who we are, what role each of us has in the development of the country and the nation, what rights we have, and how we should exercise them under the framework of the law.' Because of this, most remained oblivious to the true nature of their own society. Instead, they continued to 'act in inhuman ways' and believe in 'unreasonably and evil things.'

A second installment, 'The Erroneous Belief that the Powerful Are Always Correct,' offered a discussion of how the 'lies and falsehoods' of Siamese society were perpetuated (Kulap 1932b). Among other things, Kulap noted that popular taste was dictated by authority at a time when power resided with a self-serving upper class. As a result, people throughout the country continued to believe that their rulers could do no wrong and willingly 'turned black into white' on their behalf. Thus, in an age when 'most people remained uneducated and many of the educated remained uninterested in looking after the affairs of their compatriots', authority provided its own justification with 'pretty language' and the powerful remained at liberty to 'spread falsehoods throughout the land.'

In a final essay, Kulap considered where things might be heading (Kulap 1932c). He held out hope that peaceful change was still possible for, although power 'invariably had an impact on popular perceptions', the 'source of authority' could shift over time, passing from kings to orators, from members of the upper class to the poor before ultimately coming to be shared by all of the members of a given society. At the same time, he noted that when rulers 'continually turned truth into lies ... oppression and mutual dishonesty' could also lead to violent change. If, for example, a father had no money to buy food for his family, he could still assure their happiness by setting aside concern for himself and sacrificing a few of his delicacies so that everyone had enough to eat. If, as in Siam, he sought instead to convince those in his care that they had no real need to eat, relations were likely to become strained to a point where it might be necessary to 'force those in power to stop lying to themselves' and start looking after 'the interests of the majority.'

## **7. Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion raises further doubts about the accuracy of Thailand's prevailing royalist-nationalist tradition. In contrast to the textbook rulers of high school history classes, Chakri rulers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were often depicted in unflattering terms by writers who argued that the dynasty was prospering at the nation's expense. Part of a broader debate over the Thai nation, such views make it clear that Thai nationalism was from the outset a contested discourse that involved a degree of radical thought.

This recognition sheds light in turn on the part played by nationalism in the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy. In his memoirs, Thep Phanthumsen (*Phraya* Songsuradet), a career military officer who served as the chief strategist for the 1932 putsch, referred to many of the criticisms leveled at dynastic authority in the decade prior its overthrow: self-serving rulers, arrogant and

incompetent administrators and the dire consequences this had for the nation - underdevelopment and economic loss (Naranit 1984, 24-25). That these concerns were shared by Thep's fellow conspirators is evidenced by the People's Party announcement of 24 June 1932, a document which was read to an assemblage of rebel army officers and cadets, distributed in the capital as a handbill and repeatedly broadcast over state radio. It decried the royal administration as a collection of ill-qualified princes, sycophants and corrupt officials who squandered the wealth of the country, ruling 'oppressively and without principal ... treating the people like slaves and animals ... farming on

their backs ... sucking their blood ... leaving them to go hungry'. In this latter telling, Chakri absolutism was decried as an impediment to national advance.

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Anderson borrowed the expression "official nationalism" from Hugh Seton-Watson, who used to ridicule the patriotic proselytizing efforts of European autocrats seeking to stave off dynastic decline. See Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States. An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. 1977.

<sup>ii</sup> *Suphaphurut* was the collective enterprise of Kulap Saipradit, Malai Chuphinit, Op Chayawat, Choti Phraephan, Sanit Charoenrat, and Charan Wuthathit. Published from 1929 to 1931, it was an immediate commercial success. Some 1,900 copies of an initial 2,000 copy print-run were sold. By its third issue, the print run was doubled to 4,000 copies. This was raised to 5,000 a few months later.

<sup>iii</sup> The quote comes from Tooze (1998; 213-14).

<sup>iv</sup> The work in question was *Sapphasat* [The Science of Wealth]. Its author, *Phraya Suriyanuwat* (Koet Bunnak), served in the administration of King Chulalongkorn for thirty years, eighteen of which were spent in a diplomatic capacity in Europe. Among other things, he argued that Siamese farmers were locked into a cycle of poverty and proposed that a credit institution be established to provide them with low-interest loans, that agricultural cooperatives be formed and that vocational training programs be developed. Five hundred copies of his two-volume study were printed in 1911. A second printing followed in 1915 after the literary journal *Si krung* undertook to republish the work in serialised form. This was sufficiently well-received that the paper's editor solicited subscriptions for a reprint.

<sup>v</sup> The policy arose at a time when the extraterritorial clauses of Siam's commercial treaties with the West impeded the regulation of foreign publishing concerns. The government began subsidizing T. Lloyd-Williams's English-language daily *Bangkok Times* in 1892. At the behest of the court, W. A. G. Tilleke and G. W. Ward began publishing the *Siam Free Press* the following year and were henceforth provided with an annual subsidy. When the owner of the *Siam Free Press* was expelled from Siam in 1895, Ward was asked to manage the paper on the government's behalf and provided with funding as well. Government-backed publications received annual subsidies of eight thousand baht and were provided with news of the government's activities.

<sup>vi</sup> Ironically, the publisher Sieow Hood Seng (Hsiao Fo-Cheng) was a close associate of Sun Yat-Sen and a founding member of the radical *Tung Meng Hui* organization in Bangkok. In addition to his publishing activity, Sieow was also an attorney for several of Siam's largest Chinese firms including the Tui Guan Company - the kingdom's principal importer and retailer of spirits (Wright 1908: 293-297).

<sup>vii</sup> In documentation accompanying the draft press act, it was noted that the king had requested the Ministry of the Interior to draft a press law 'not once but many times.'

<sup>viii</sup> Vajiravudh began publishing the paper in 1918 for the 'residents' of Dusit Thani, a doll-house city that was built within the confines of Dusit Palace. A limited number of subscriptions were accepted but the paper could only be purchased in the palace and its circulation never exceeded three hundred copies.

<sup>ix</sup> *Itsara* was owned by To Bunthian and published from mid-1930 to early 1933. The essay discussed here was serialized on 16, 17, 19 21, 22, 23, 25, and 26 September 1931.

<sup>x</sup> The first instalment of the essay featured in the premier issue of *Rak sayam* [The Siamese Guardian], a daily owned by *nang* Noen Chunsawan and edited by Kulap Nopharat. Subsequent instalments were published in the paper's issues of 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 January 1932.