

The Emerald Buddha: Legend, Myth, and the Bedazzlement of History and Nation-Creation

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Abstract

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This research utilizes the Emerald Buddha statue as a material object that is believed to have cosmic power, through which to view the interconnected institutions of the monarchy, Buddhism, and the military in Thailand, from past to present. Reviewing the historical manipulations surrounding this Buddha image provides a better understanding of how these institutions are intertwined and continue reinforcing one another's power. A pattern of historical bedazzlement is exposed, used to create identity, belonging, and nationalism, as much as it is used to create divisions. The effects that this living history has upon current relationships both within Thailand and with their neighbors become clear.



Figure 1 Emerald Buddha replica dedicated in 1991 at Wat Phra Kaew, Chiang Rai, Thailand

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Glossary

Ayutthaya – A kingdom that existed from 1351-1767, now a city in present day central Thailand.

Chakri – The current dynasty of the Thai monarchy founded in 1782.

Dhamma – The teachings of Buddha

Luang Prabang – The previous capital of the Lan Xang kingdom, now a city in present-day northern Laos.

Lan Na Kingdom – A kingdom that existed from 1296-1899 that spanned most of the entirety of present-day northern Thailand, including the cities of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lampang. The kingdom was under Burmese rule from 1558-1774, and then a tributary to Siam until 1899.

Lan Xang/Lan Cang/Lan Chang Kingdom – Was a kingdom from 1353-1707 in present-day Laos. It broke into three kingdoms in 1707, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak, but became Vassals of Siam and Vientiane was a tributary to Vietnam in the late 18th century and was colonized as a French protectorate in 1893.

Nirvana – When reincarnation ends, meaning an individual has extinguished earthly desires, ignorance, and can be at peace living in the divine world.

Pali – An ancient language from India that had much influence in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

Palladium – An item of major political/religious symbolism thought to contain supernatural powers of protection.

Relic – Something of significant importance in Buddhism, sometimes even a strand of Buddha's hair, or ashes from his body.

Sangha – Refers to the Buddhist community, mostly the hierarchy of senior monks.

Sanskrit – Another ancient language from India that is much earlier than but closely related to Pali.

Samsara – The cycle of reincarnation which is life, death, and rebirth.

Sukhothai – A kingdom that existed 1238-1438 which was centered in the north-central present-day Thailand and remains as a city there.

Tai – A broad term for the people who migrated and descended from Southwest China into mainland Southeast Asia over hundreds of years based on the proto-Tai-Kadai language, a category that Lao, Thai, Shan, and many others fall into.

Thai – The people living in Thailand since the name of Siam was changed in 1939.

Theravada Buddhism – The most popular Buddhist sect in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka.

Vientiane or Viang Chan – The capital city of the late Lan Xang kingdom and remains the capitol of present-day Laos. The French spelling has continued, but it is still pronounced as “Viang Jahn”.

Wat – A temple.

Timeline of Events – Questioning the Cosmic Power of the Emerald Buddha

1434 – The Emerald Buddha is discovered in Chiang Rai, in the Lan Na kingdom, after a lightning strike peels away stucco revealing the Emerald Buddha beneath.

1436-1438 – King Tilokarat, of the Lan Na kingdom, attempts to move the Emerald Buddha to Chiang Mai but the elephant carrying the statue refuses and takes it to Lampang instead, which is another Lan Na city.

1468 – King Tilokarat finally succeeds in moving the Emerald Buddha to Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai, Lan Na kingdom.

1545 – Wat Chedi Luang collapsed in an earthquake, 7 years before the Emerald Buddha was moved Luang Prabang.

1552 – King Setthathirath, of the Lan Xang kingdom, briefly rules both Lan Xang and the Lan Na kingdoms after their king died because his mother was the Lan Na queen, moved the Emerald Buddha to Luang Prabang, the capital of Lan Xang kingdom.

1578 – The Lan Na kingdom is taken over by Burmese rulers.

1564 – King Setthathirath moves the Lan Xang capital city along with the Emerald Buddha to Vientiane.

1707 – Lan Xang (1353-1707) breaks into three separate kingdoms, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. The Emerald Buddha remains in Vientiane.

1779 – Vientiane is sacked by Ayutthaya. General Chao Phraya Chakri, who takes the Emerald Buddha to king “Taksin the Great” of the Thonburi kingdom (Wat Arun in present-day Bangkok).

1782 – The Thonburi Kingdom lasted only 14 years. General Chao Phraya Chakri formed a coup, assassinated king Taksin and crowned himself as king Rama I, and the Chakri Dynasty began. King Rama I creates a new capital across the Chao Phraya River, Bangkok, and brings the Emerald Buddha to the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in the new palace complex.

Present – While the Emerald Buddha remains in Bangkok, there have been many coups, the first, in 1932, would downgrade the king from absolute monarch to constitutional monarch, while others have given more power to the military, who have occasionally massacred civilians, and given back more power to the monarchy. Disease, natural disasters, political and economic instability have also taken their tolls upon the country.

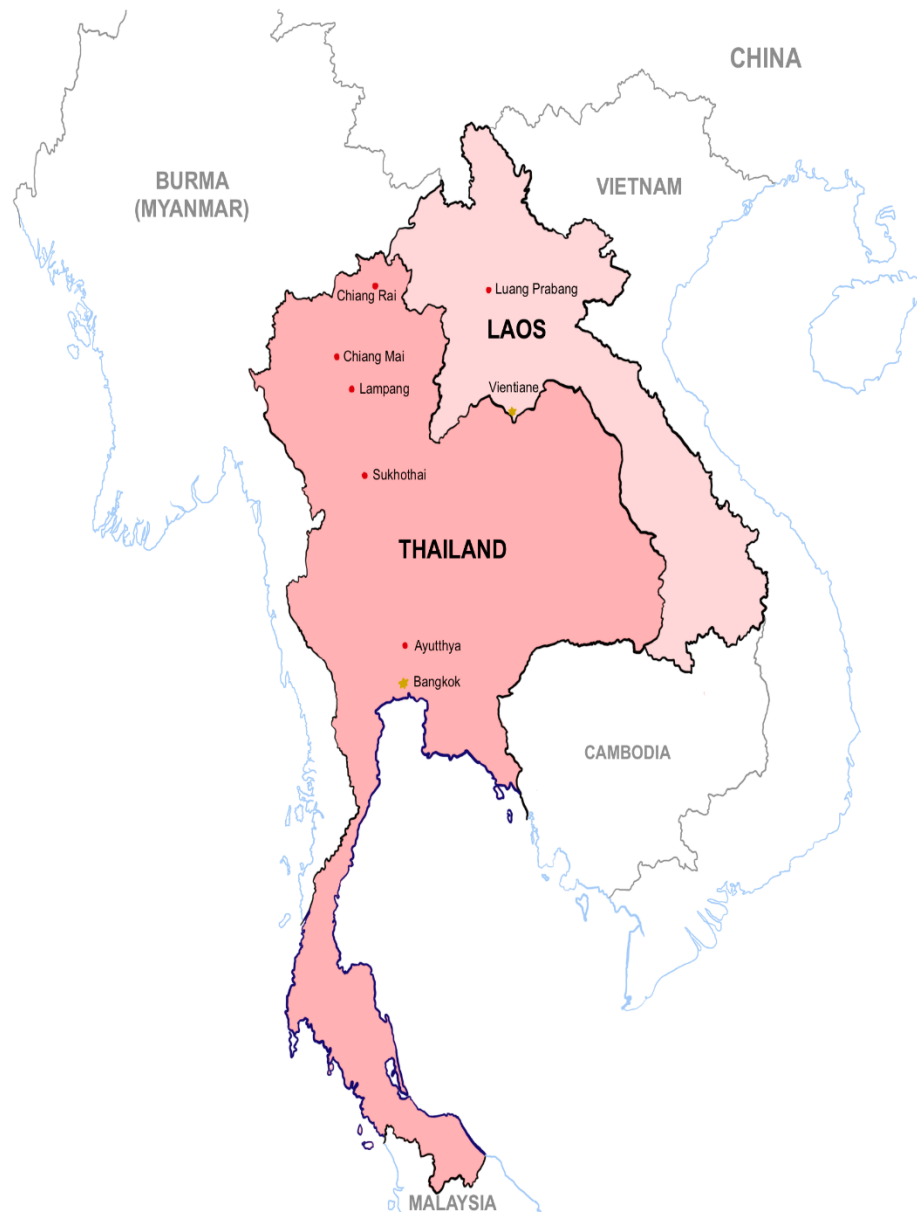


Figure 2 Courtesy of Ellie Cleasby

Map Highlighting Locations Discussed in Laos and Thailand

Introduction

The Emerald Buddha is a small Buddha statue that is as steeped in history, legend, and myth as it is in jeweled accoutrements. The statue now resides at Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in the grand palace complex in Bangkok, Thailand, but made its way through several cities in present-day Thailand and Laos over the last 600 years. The Emerald Buddha is an object said to have supernatural powers of protection that provide the monarchy with legitimacy, it is considered the most important Buddha image in Thailand, the “Kingdom’s palladium” which “symbolizes not only Buddhism but Thailand itself”.¹ At this point in time there are hundreds, if not thousands, of duplicates adorning temples throughout Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Combining this fact with the area specific folklore and contradictions with nationalist Thai historiography, it would be impossible to validate the “truth” in any of the various historical accounts. Instead, this thesis questions how the Emerald Buddha and the discourse about the Emerald Buddha, are used to condense and concretize the Buddhist, monarchical, and military powers, which include examination of the Thai Nationalist-Royalist historiography and the military’s “National Humiliation” to understand possible reasoning for some Thai cultural claims and rejections.

While there may be far more important things to study than a statue, much of my inspiration for this research comes from Thongchai Winichakul, the activist, historian, and professor whose work I heartily admire and who is heavily relied upon in this thesis. Winichakul builds upon Benedict Anderson’s, *Imagined Communities*, to conceptualize identity creation and nationalism through the map-making process. In the acknowledgment of *Siam Mapped*, Winichakul says that his hopes for the book are that “someday all the irrational rationality will be exposed so that people

¹ Chiu, Angela S. *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017.

may become more tolerant and considerate”, making the point of this thesis to further his agenda in some small way.²

Every modern human struggle is rooted in the past, so the past must be faced and disentangled for a different future to progress. We are told to “learn from the mistakes of history”, but we cannot learn from history when what we are taught as “history” is so often based on exaggerations or outright lies. At a time when nationalism has again been ramping up around the world, it necessitates reinvestigating historical claims that have become normalized into national fact, regardless of their validity, and having frank discussions about them everywhere.

The “irrational rationality” that Winichakul speaks of, occurs in both tangible and intangible goods, of which the Emerald Buddha provides an example of both. The Emerald Buddha is a beloved statue, an image of Buddha, a tangible item representing the people’s adherence to this faith. The Emerald Buddha is also a symbol of the monarchy, which is believed to provide the king legitimacy with its supernatural powers. The Emerald Buddha’s cosmic power is said to give it the agency to move itself to the “righteous Buddhist king”, but the last two movements of the Emerald Buddha came by way of military force and violence. This requires us to question the purported “agency” of the Emerald Buddha and the ownership of this prized relic.

Through the history of the Emerald Buddha’s last two movements, we see the general’s imaginations of their future possibilities at work in the present, as they may be dreaming of beginning a new dynasty for themselves. For which a precedent has already been set and which

² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), xvi.

justifies the military reinforcing the monarchy's power now, to protect their dreams of occupying this position in the future.

The multiple dimensions of the Emerald Buddha allow the focus to be on a material object, but through which, the entanglements of power in Thailand are further exposed. Exposure allows us to view the subtle ways that the military reifies their own power by reifying the power of the monarchy and the monastery. If the statue does indeed have cosmic power, I argue that the Emerald Buddha is currently a prisoner of war, looted in the sacking of Vientiane, and held with modern-day security forces, which cosmic power alone may not be able to escape. Since cosmic power is conveniently difficult to prove or disprove, I argue that regardless of its purported powers, the Emerald Buddha has been used as a tool for state making purposes.

Anderson's work conceptualizes the many ways in which nationalism is created and internalized, often through use of intangible imaginings of the past which are reimagined into the present. In a sort of antiquing, modern regimes incorporate symbols and perceptions of power past, to form a seamless transition to the power present, granted, the requirement of "forgetting" is met.³ That is, collectively forgetting that which was erased even though it (or they) may still be present. Heroes can be made while their victims can be forgotten. Human beliefs, or the antiquing of society, are taught and those beliefs can be easily manipulated by those in power who decide *what* is taught. Teachings that rely on creating a long cohesive history with nationalist ideologies are used to form community and belonging, but they do so by defining and excluding the "others" who may also exist within. For the people of north, northeast, and southern Thailand, this can

³ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 201-206.

require abandonment of their language, culture, history, and assimilation into “Thainess”, an identity created as much through the manipulation of history as through border creation.⁴

Adding to the evidence are the examples of Preah Vihear, the 11th century Khmer temple, and the Ramkhamhaeng inscription from the Sukhothai era, as they establish that a pattern of historical manipulation exists and demonstrate how they are used as a tool to concentrate power within the monarchical, Buddhist, and military institutions. These examples call attention to the historical claims which are made long after the fact, but serve to create a “Thai” identity, and to claim ownership of landmass and bygone eras. This evidence shows the lengths the power holders will go to, to encompass or even coopt some aspects of history and culture to solidify their power, while refusing other aspects that might overly broaden the scope of “Thai” identity, which would reduce the numbers of the most exploitable workforce of people at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

This exploitable workforce incorporates migrant and refugee workers, mostly from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, who work in Special Economic Zones and other low-wage industries in Thailand.⁵ Thailand has a long history of hosting refugee camps intended to provide care and safety to those fleeing war and violence, and which are used as a buffer between Thailand and war zones. Refugee camps provide the government with an appearance of neighborly goodwill even when their objectives of care are miserably failed.⁶ Special Economic Zones (SEZ) are portions of land, often located along the borders, that provide international corporations with specific areas to operate within, where the laws regarding taxation, environmental standards, and worker

⁴ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

⁵ Khathaleeya Liamdee, *On the Move Across Phnom Dangrek: Mobilities and Silences in the Thai-Cambodian Borderland* (University of Washington Libraries, 2020).

⁶ Khathaleeya Liamdee, *On the Move Across Phnom Dangrek*.

protections are diminished. Zones which could be more aptly named Maximum Exploitation Zones, but which ultimately bring forth the importance of assimilating or adhering to a Thai identity to improve personal economic possibilities, even if the culture and history do not align with one's own.

Creating a Thai identity creates the population that "rightfully" lives in Thailand and will benefit from the state powers, while also creating the identities of those who will not. This logic and reasoning fuels the robust claims of historical adoptions and rejections that are considered here, as are the harm they cause, which continues to linger in various ways. Thailand's neighbors, who may also live inside Thailand's borders, face the choices of assimilation, discrimination, and erasure, that continue to cause friction and even violence as each area and people seek their own historical validation. The power struggles that stem from control of historical narratives can be easily triggered, even as they could be easily avoided through truth, recognition, and respect.

Adding another inspiration and layer to this research is the work of Christoph Giebel, Professor of International Studies and History at the University of Washington, *Imagined Ancestries*, in which he researches the remaking of an individual's history for the purpose of state-making power. A historical manipulation that occurred and was maintained regardless of the contradictory evidence. Giebel focuses in on the story of one man, Ton Duc Thang, but in doing so, he tells the much larger story of national creation in early Communist Vietnam.⁷ Conceptualizing the Emerald Buddha in this same way, we see the larger picture of the Thai political landscape, both past and present.

⁷ Christoph Giebel, *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

The Emerald Buddha statue, with its temple and surrounding palace, creates an atmosphere that combines pomp and ceremony with dazzling displays of wealth, religious fervor, and artistic beauty, certain to awe the masses whether they are Buddhist, or Thai, or neither. The small statue is greatly expanded not only by the pedestal it rises on, but by the folklore and history that makes its presence both weighty and immense. Buddhism itself is not under question here and the teachings of Buddha and his followers are paid the upmost respect. But the sangha, the Buddhist hierarchy of monks, and aspects of “Thai Buddhism” are scrutinized just as every major institution that holds power and collects public funding must be. Buddhist temples in Thailand receive “an estimated \$3.5 billion a year in donations”, to which the Thai government adds another “\$137 million” to support the temples and the monks.⁸ Money that the public has worked hard to earn and to whom these institutions should be accountable.

The military junta is campaigning on a platform to eradicate corruption within the temples while concurrently failing to address their own corruption. Corruption can take many forms and be either against some moral or traditional social value or a violation of a law, but who makes the laws and who is prosecuted under the laws, are always dictated by those who wield power. In a sense, Thailand could be viewed as having three branches of government: the monarchy, the military junta, and the sangha, following the path and the discourse on the Emerald Buddha is one way to understand this power structure. These three forces work both in tandem and in opposition, to create a friction that ultimately empowers and reifies them all; concretizing their power to continue to rule even as many Thai people continue the struggle for democracy. The people are

⁸ Panarat Thepgumpanat and Patpicha Tanakasempipat, *Thai junta seeks to force temples to open their finances* (Reuters, June 16, 2017).

provided with an illusion of democracy, they hold elections and vote for candidates, even for progressive parties, but the military junta can prevent these candidates from holding higher offices.

Thailand was previously known as Siam, and before Siam it was Ayutthaya. These dynasties have long sought to make themselves the most powerful kingdom, now modern nation-state, in the region. The ways that Thailand has gone about state creation have changed over the years and are not always unique to Thailand, while other aspects of its creation could only exist here. Researching the history of each place, before, during, and after the Emerald Buddha's residence there, illuminates the legend of the Emerald Buddha as a cosmic power and compares it with the possibility that it is merely a myth created to condense the monarchy and Buddhist governing powers.

For this research, I traveled tracing the steps of the Emerald Buddha (by plane instead of elephant), to immerse myself in the present and the history of each location. Walking the temples where the Emerald Buddha has stayed in Bangkok, Thonburi, Chiang Mai, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang to observe what is and is not taught at each temple, and which brought some interesting aspects into view. Adding to this were unstructured interviews with a variety of people I came across both at home and abroad. People that included drivers, shop keepers, hoteliers, museum and temple staff, and new acquaintances.

The literature review for this research includes over 600 years of Southeast Asian history, through authors focusing on individual areas and authors focusing on the region - as a whole. As an American with no family ties to Southeast Asia, my positionality cannot be dismissed, as I am continuing in the problematic field of area studies; research that studies people and places “over

there” from the safety and privilege of here.⁹ In light of this, I have attempted to utilize and promote Southeast Asian scholars’ works as much as possible, and particularly the work of women scholars.

The Emerald Buddha, as a tool of the state-making process, is an example of the mythmaking and truth bending designed to spread feelings of nationalism. The effective combination of monastic, military, and monarchy forces in controlling populations while funneling wealth into these institutions is well known. Viewing the tightly woven web of monarchy, Buddhism, and the military together, can expose the empty space where light might shine in. Perhaps the glow of the Emerald Buddha’s cosmic power will radiate through, but if not, at least the institutional entanglements might unravel just a bit, so that the “irrational rationality” can be more clearly seen, a view that can be empowering on its own. While reality is always manufactured, breaking down some of the myths of history and identity might help to manufacture a more tolerant and inclusive reality for the present and future.

⁹ Gavin Walker and Naoki Sakai, *The End of Area* (Duke University Press: 2019).

Chapter One –Understanding Thai Buddhism

Buddhism is sometimes described as being a philosophy rather than a religion because it does not contain proscriptive rules. Instead, Buddhism teaches to think logically and make decisions that will cause the least harm, understanding that humans are in various situations where harm is unavoidable. However, dedicated Theravada Buddhist monks in Thailand take a vow to follow 227 rules. Regardless of this disagreement about whether Buddhism is a “religion” or not, the vast majority of mainland Southeast Asia holds it dear.

Buddhist texts contain the beautifully rich teachings of Buddha and his life, that are intended to direct individuals to lead lives that are good by helping others, and to encourage lives of austerity by avoiding the unhappiness that material greed and desire bring. In the simplest terms, Buddhism is the belief in reincarnation and that good deeds done in this life will earn a person merit, if enough merit builds up, it can bring a better next life to them, their children, or those who preceded them in death. While doing bad deeds will leave them stagnating in multiple miserable human existences or bring misfortune into the current one. These teachings are often told through stories which are adjusted to fit the local populations and are sometimes adjusted by the elites and monarchy of society, much as the Bible has been.¹⁰

Buddhism began in India and spread throughout much of Asia. There are two main branches of Buddhism: Mahayana and Theravada. In mainland Southeast Asia, Theravada replaced or blended with the Hindu and Brahmanism, that had earlier spread from India, and the animist beliefs which already existed here.¹¹ In China and Korea, Mahayana Buddhism blended

¹⁰ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy: a Critical Look through the Lens of Sulak Sivaraksa, the Siamese Intellectual* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 2015), 42, 51-52.

¹¹ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 31.

with Confucianism and animism, and in Japan, with the animist Shinto religion of the emperor. Vietnam is predominately Mahayana, especially in the north, but has a large population of Theravada in the south. As each area created their own blend of Buddhism to fit with their other beliefs, it has created local uniqueness in Buddhist practices, while also maintaining some unity in beliefs throughout the Buddhist world. While Theravada and Mahayana have many similarities, they also have a few important distinctions.

Mahayana Buddhists believe that anyone, including laity, can reach nirvana, but many choose not to because they have compassion for humans and want to be reincarnated into Bodhisattvas to continue helping them. Theravada Buddhists believe that only monks (and the king) can reach nirvana and that is their ultimate goal, they also believe in Bodhisattvas, but that it is very rare and difficult to become one. Buddhists generally do not believe in “gods”, nor “god-kings” and Buddhism has even been referred to as an “atheistic religion”, intended to bring logic and faith together to reduce suffering on earth.¹² Buddha is a person and a teacher who has reached nirvana and is now a transcendent being, divine but not a god. In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism heavily incorporated Brahman traditions which created the “Thai Buddhism” that allows for a “god-king” and blurred the lines between Buddhism and Brahmanism.

Like all religions, people who follow Buddhism often do so passionately, with absolute trust in their institutions and clergy. But this research is not about Buddhism itself, nor of its followers, and does not question their beliefs per se, it does however, question some of the institutional integrity from past and present times. Corruption within Buddhist institutions can lead to abuse of power, which is not something limited to Southeast Asia or Buddhism but is a recurring

¹² Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy: A Critical Look through the Lens of Sulak Sivaraksa, the Siamese Intellectual* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 2015), 25-26.

theme throughout the history of organized religion, and which has been utilized in various ways across the globe. Similarly, global monarchies, militaries, and religions have been closely intertwined, but the Thai monarchy continues into the present day, which is much less common. What makes the Thai monarchy's relationship with Buddhism unique is that they believe that the king is below only Buddha himself. A belief that was not shared with the neighboring kingdoms, who believed that the king was not above the monks and that he should seek council from them.¹³

Theravada Buddhists believe that the more wealth a person is born with, the closer they are to reaching nirvana. Nirvana is when a person has stopped having worldly desires and they are allowed to stay in the divine realm rather than reincarnate back into the earthly realm. A person must have great wealth to have the ability to reject that wealth, so someone born into the life of a royal must have accumulated a lot of merit in past lives.¹⁴ For the poor, life is suffering, and the best they can hope for is a better life next time, assured by the merit they make in this life. Making merit can be done in many ways, from feeding the monks in the morning as they walk collecting alms, to releasing live animals on New Year, by having a son become a monk, or by donating money and labor at temples.

Suraphot Thawisak, a Thai scholar of Buddhism, lecturer, and writer, explains the monarchy and monastery entanglements of "Thai Buddhism" in his work, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy: A Critical Look through the Lens of Sulak Sivaraksa*, which dialogs with Sivaraksa's lectures and writings. Sulak Sivaraksa is another Thai scholar, social activist, and Thai critic whose personal story will come up again later. Together, these scholars provide detailed

¹³ Saratsawadī 'Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 83.

¹⁴ Suraphot Thawisak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy: A Critical Look through the Lens of Sulak Sivaraksa, the Siamese Intellectual* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 2015), 38.

history and analysis of the relationship between the monarchy, clergy, and military, over a long period of time, to make sense of that relationship in the current day.

Suraphot details how the state religion changed from Brahmanism to Buddhism, because Buddhism was “on the side of the oppressed” which removed the rigid caste system and the requirement for the ruling class to be born from the upper caste, paving the way for military generals to become kings.¹⁵ In Brahman’s stead, the “Three Worlds of King Ruang” was instituted, which applied a social hierarchy “corresponding with the high or low amount of accumulated merit” that elevated the king to “a divine avatar” who is “destined for Buddhahood”.¹⁶ Theoretically, removing the caste system would allow for social mobility if a person accumulated wealth and merit.

The “Three Worlds of king Ruang” was written by the crown prince, Phya Lithai, around 1345 and created this hierarchy and interpretation of Buddhism.¹⁷ King Ruang successfully spread this teaching to the masses, “which became a part of the Siamese culture even more than any of the Buddhist scriptures”.¹⁸ The “Three Worlds” provided the setup for the monarchy, military, and Buddhism to be fully intertwined. The people were taught that the “person born as a monarch must be the most perfect human being”, while the fear of failing to earn merit that would lead to their future lives of suffering was concurrently instilled.¹⁹ Lessons that would prove most profitable to all three of these institutions in terms of loyal support and monetary donations. Creating “Thai Buddhism” by reinventing Brahman ideas into a new Buddhist-ness particular to Thailand.

¹⁵ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 31.

¹⁶ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 31, 38-39.

¹⁷ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 39.

¹⁸ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 39.

¹⁹ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 39.

Merit exists in the ethereal world as a sort of “pay it forward” towards your next life, but with no accounting methods to measure the accumulation of merit in the human world, a person’s wealth becomes the tangible representation. This is contrary to Buddha’s teachings on being content with little and would create an idolization of wealth, not simply for comforts in this life, but as the means to reach nirvana. In a sense, this makes nirvana a good that can be purchased. It also places wealthy individuals upon a pedestal of inherent “goodness” as they are perceived to be the best, most honorable people. That infers that the opposite is also true, that someone living in abject poverty must be a truly horrible person without enough merit to even sustain themselves in this life. However, the king was also expected to follow the rules of a meritorious Buddhist king and if he did not, he risked being deposed.²⁰ The ten kingly virtues that he is to uphold are: “charity, morality, self-sacrifice, justice, kindness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, patience and adherence to righteousness”, but in the Buddhist world without proscriptive rules, these virtues become negotiable.²¹

All monks in Thailand are males who survive on the generous donations from their followers and from the government. There are over 40,000 Wats (temples) across Thailand, some 20,000 of which have received royal designations that are categorized as first class, second class, or third class, with one single temple being awarded with a “special” class designation. That “special” temple is the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot at the Grand Palace in Bangkok, current home of the Emerald Buddha. Every Buddhist temple has a portion of it devoted to the monk’s living quarters, all except for the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot. This royal temple was designed after the royal temple

²⁰ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 41.

²¹ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 31.

in Ayutthaya, another Buddhist temple to omit living quarters for monks, making it essentially the monarchy's private temple.²² Each Chakri king has made modifications, additions, or repairs to this temple and grounds. Interestingly, the lower portion of the outside of the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot is decorated with



Figure 4 Wat Phra Kaew Morakot, Bangkok, Thailand. The monarchy's private temple on the palace grounds.

tiles from China, chosen by Rama III,



Figure 3 Figure 4 Chinese tile surrounding the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok, Thailand.

the calm simplicity and subdued coloring of which stand out quite dramatically against the Ayutthaya Thai style, because they do not blend with the surroundings, nor do they uphold "Thainess".²³

²² Piriya Krairiksh, *The Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha: A Handbook for Guides* (Bangkok: Bureau of the Royal Household, 1988).

²³ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit: An Art Historical Study of the Emerald Buddha and Wat Phra Kaew* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010), 105.

There are many religions in southeast Asia and multiple sects of Theravada Buddhism. The Thammayut sect (also spelled Dhammayuttika Nikaya) was founded by king Rama IV. The Thammayut sect is the minority sect but is the most powerful, being the choice branch of the monarchy, and the monarchy appoints the most powerful positions in the sangha from this sect.²⁴ Since 1902, there have been several “Sangha Acts” instituted by the monarchy and governments, which have further increased the hold that the monarchy has over the Buddhist clergy, highlighting the political-religious landscape in Thailand today, which is legitimized by the Emerald Buddha.²⁵

²⁴ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 49.

²⁵ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 63.

Chapter Two – The Emerald Buddha’s Long and Short Histories and Discrepancies

The Emerald Buddha is a surprisingly small statue, particularly when compared to the grandiose Buddha statuary often seen in Southeast Asia, as it stands at only 66 centimeters tall and 48.3 centimeters wide (about 26 inches tall and 19 inches wide), including the base that the Buddha sits upon.²⁶ While it is called the “Emerald Buddha” it is not made of emerald but more likely of jasper, quartz, jade – or perhaps as the name in Thai suggests, *Kaew Morakot* – emerald colored glass. Even with the wide availability and improvements in scientific dating methods and spectrometry that might answer the questions of when this image was made and of what material, the Thai Kings have taken no interest in having the Emerald Buddha studied in this manner, believing that it would damage the image.²⁷ With so many glorious Buddha statues in southeast Asia, why this small, mysterious statue has such an oversized history is certainly worth questioning.

The Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok is bustling with tourists, who pay a mandatory entrance fee, and school groups on field trips who come to learn “history” and “Thainess”. The throngs of people are possibly outnumbered by the many structures that surround the temple, from small open-air pagodas, to varying sizes of stupas and statuary, but everyone is trying to catch a glimpse of the Emerald Buddha. The large temple hall where the Emerald Buddha sits, is one-third to half full of Buddhist and monarchy works of art and paraphernalia that leave a limited amount of room for the visitors, who sit on the floor with their bare feet always directed behind them and away from the Buddha. It is extremely hot and crowded inside with more people waiting outside for room to enter. Sometimes they are waiting with their feet burning on the hot ground as they

²⁶ Piriya Krairiksh, *The Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha*, 36.

²⁷ Anything depicting Buddha is often called an “image” rather than the item that it is, such as a statue or painting.

have already removed their shoes to be able to enter. This creates more of a rushed feeling to quickly view and leave, than a religious feeling of taking time to pray or meditate below the precious image. No photos are allowed inside the temple. The small Emerald Buddha sits upon pedestals reaching at least 10 feet high (my best guess) and is partially obscured by the structures surrounding it. There is not much light inside the temple either, so unless a person has extremely good vision and a seat directly in front, you are unlikely to see any real detail of this statue in-person. For me, what I saw was a dark green, Buddha shape, with some undeterminable glimmery bits, which was wholly overwhelmed by the other objects and décor of the room, which was a bit disappointing.

Thailand's temples can be extremely loud – visually – and overwhelm one's senses with their sheer amount of detail and goods kept within. Every inch of some temples is covered in intricate paintings, sculptures, metalworks, carvings, tiles, and inlay, even the ceilings. I found that focusing my vision in, to see just a small detail here and there, helped to offset the shock of abundance, which became a blur when I tried to take it in altogether. Similar to how this research is focusing on the Emerald Buddha to see the surrounding religious, political, and military confluence more clearly.

Most of the temples that the Emerald Buddha has lived at, have changed their names to reflect this treasure's stay. The Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok is the only temple which sometimes includes the word "Morakot", but this name is for visitors as it is locally called the *Wat Phra Sri Rattana Satsadaram*, which translates to "temple of famed or honored jewels". Whether temples changed their name to reflect their connection to the Emerald Buddha by their own accord or by government mandate is questionable in some locations, particularly if their best interests were to obey the Thai government's desires.

The Emerald Buddha is considered one of the most sacred and important objects in Southeast Asia, as it is believed to have cosmic power that watches over the nation, providing legitimacy, strength, and safety. Therefore, the Emerald Buddha is considered the “palladium” of Thai society, which is a religious and political symbol of power. Palladiums however, come with conditions such as that “any disobeying of the rules will cause



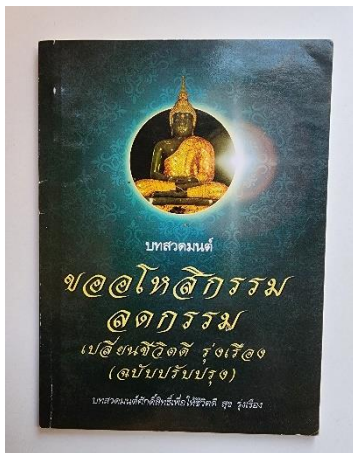
Figure 5 Inthakhin Pillar sign banning women from entry, Chiang Mai, Thailand

social instability”.²⁸ One of these rules bars women from entering the sites where some palladiums are kept, a patriarchal version of Theravada Buddhism which remains extreme in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar as some of the few countries who still do not allow women to become monks. But women *are* allowed to visit the Emerald Buddha. Contradictory rules that were not written by Buddha, but in collaboration between monks and monarchies, who shared an interest in controlling the population’s social structure, beliefs, and actions.²⁹

²⁸ From a sign at Inthakhin Pillar Vihara in Chiang Mai.

²⁹ Suraphot Thawisak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 48-49.

According to the shorter legend, the Emerald Buddha has lived an approximately 600-year life which begins with the statue being found at Wat Pa Yia in Chiang Rai in 1434, now known as Wat Phra Kaew. This version states that the statue was discovered after the temple was struck by lightning and broke off a stucco encasement, exposing the Emerald Buddha hidden underneath. Visiting this temple, which now includes a museum, gave me high hopes of learning more about the Emerald Buddha directly from the temple where it was found.



The woman working at the temple was so surprised that I could speak Thai, and even more that I could read it, when I was inquiring about books on the history of the Emerald Buddha that she gave me a small book with the image right on the cover. I was so excited to read it that I hurried back to my room, where I quickly realized that she had given me a book of Buddhist teachings and not a book on the Emerald Buddha. This was when I realized that my Thai was not as good as I had hoped, but her kind gesture was much appreciated.

From Chiang Rai, the statue was supposed to move to Chiang Mai, but the elephant carrying the image refused to travel that way and took it to Lampang instead. The Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao Suchadaram in Lampang is not a stop on any of the temple tours, and since it is a bit outside of the city, it is a little difficult to get to, which is surprising for a famed Emerald Buddha temple, especially one as stunning as this. Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao Suchadaram is a very large temple with Burmese architectural style, having been built by the first king who was Mon.

The Burmese style is best described as being “heavy” which is reflected in the very dark, sometimes blackened wood and the subdued designs painted in gold for the interior décor, with many spaces left bare for visual relief. The outside of the temple has many intricate wood and metal sculptures adorning it.

Lampang is the only location that tells the story about the stone the



Emerald Buddha was carved from *Figure 6 Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao Suchadaram, Lampang, Thailand.*

being found in a watermelon. I heard two versions of this story, one is that the stone was found in the watermelon by a woman named Chao Mae Suchada, who then gave it to a monk, and he carved the Emerald Buddha from it. The other is that the monk gave the watermelon to Suchada and when she opened it and found the stone, the god Indra turned it into the Emerald Buddha. In both stories, the king became suspicious and ordered the execution of Suchada and the monk. The monk escaped but Suchada did not. Suchada put a curse on the kingdom because she was innocent and this temple was built to appease her which is why it incorporates both her and the Emerald Buddha’s names. The Emerald Buddha stayed in Lampang for over thirty years before finally moving on to Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai in 1468, which did not change its name to reflect the Emerald Buddha’s stay.

Wat Chedi Luang is one of the most awe-inspiring temples that I have encountered, even though the chedi is half collapsed and most of the elephant head sculptures that surrounded it have since fallen to ruin. This unfortunate damage is attributed to an earthquake in 1545 and to the regular heavy rains it must bear. One cannot help but imagine what it must have looked like at its peak, and the effect that it would have had upon the peasants who came upon it, at a time when forests were still lush, the world was candle lit, and most people spent their days farming in small villages. Imaginings that can make us feel present in history and provide a deeper understanding of how immense and powerful Buddhism and the monarchy must have felt because of how they were presented.



Figure 7 Wat Chedi Luang, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

There was a short period of time in which king Setthathirath of Lan Xang ruled both the Lan Xang and Lan Na kingdoms. The Lan Na king died without a male heir, but his daughter had married the king of Lan Xang, and gave birth to Setthathirath's. Because of this friendly relationship, Setthathirath was sent to rule Lan Na, but when his own father, king Photisarath I, died, he attempted to rule both kingdoms. He returned to Luang Prabang from Chiang Mai in 1552, bringing the Emerald Buddha with him. Just six years later, the Burmese succeeded in taking Chiang Mai and the Lan Na kingdom spent the next 200 years under Burmese rule.³⁰

Searching for the Emerald Buddha's temple in Luang Prabang, Laos, was not fruitful but it was interesting because of this. Every other temple where the Emerald Buddha has stayed is easy to find because they are well documented and easily searched for. I asked my hotelier, who just knew that it was in Bangkok. I went to the larger temples and museums but found no evidence of it having been at any of them. It is not reflected in any of the temple's names. Then I asked two different local shopkeepers, one of whom even searched online in Lao, called a friend to ask, and found no results either, by which point my time in Luang Prabang ran out.

It was not until I returned to Seattle and met a Lao woman, whom I had met in Vientiane on my trip, for coffee. She brought another friend along who was from Luang Prabang. She told me the story of the Emerald Buddha as it has been passed down in her family. She explained that the temple was destroyed, and only some remnants remained on the hillside next to the road, which I had unknowingly walked past numerous times. According to her family story, the Emerald Buddha was a gift from the Khmer king to Fa Ngum, the first king of Lan Xang, when he married the Khmer princess. The statue was one of a set that had come from Sri Lanka, and the other image

³⁰ Saratsawadi 'Ongsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 112.

adorns the palace in Phnom Penh. While I did not have time to add Phnom Penh to my trip, their palace does contain Wat Preah Keo Morakot, a temple of the Emerald Buddha. She also said that the Emerald Buddha on display in Bangkok is a “fake” and that it is far too valuable to be on display where it could be stolen, an interesting point since viewing any distinctions between real and fake would be most difficult from such a distance.

The Emerald Buddha was moved to Vientiane in 1564, when it was made the capital of Lan Xang. The Emerald Buddha temple, now called the Ho Phrakeo or Haw Phra Kaew museum, has been rebuilt several times since it was attacked by Siam in 1779 and again in 1828. The temple has been a museum since the communist party won the civil war in the 1970’s. Laos is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, and this fact is reflected in the museums and temples, which are in constant need of repair. Yet, even in their dilapidated state they are still beautiful. The exterior of the Ho Phrakeo Museum is in nice condition and there were a couple of wedding parties having their photos taken here, which speaks to the beauty of the building and landscape.

It was an otherwise quiet day at the Ho Phrakeo museum, but swelteringly hot. Dodging the photo shoots allowed me plenty of time to wander the back side of the temple museum, but made it difficult to absorb the contents inside, which did not have air-conditioning. Being thoroughly overheated while striking up conversation with the friendly curator removed any of my inhibition at taking the seat he motioned to - on the floor near the fan – where I was in no rush to leave. With both of us now comfortable, we continued our conversation in broken English and Thai the best we could, but the whole time I was wishing that my language skills were more fluent, as I knew he had a lot of history to share, much of which I was missing.

My overall impression is that there are just too many antiquities for this small museum to handle, especially for what may be a task left to a single individual. It appears that the government

accepts Buddhism as a part of Lao identity, but without any need to force it. Walking around the museum grounds there were beautiful antiquities literally just laying around everywhere. Pieces that are likely quite valuable, but none of which were the Emerald Buddha because that treasure had been looted by Siam.



Figure 8 Ho Phrakeo Museum, Vientiane, Laos.

The Emerald Buddha stayed at the Ho Phrakeo Temple for over two hundred years, until 1779 when General Chao Phraya Chakri (who would soon become Rama I, the first king of the Chakri dynasty) sacked Vientiane and took the statue to king “Taksin the Great” at Wat Arun in Thonburi (now Bangkok). This is the first time that the Emerald Buddha would become associated with war and violence. The most commonly heard narrative in Vientiane is an emotion filled statement that the Emerald Buddha was stolen or looted by Thailand. Representing a national wound that has yet to heal.



Figure 9 Wat Arun, Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand.

King Taksin was a general in the Ayutthaya military when that kingdom fell to the Burmese. King Taksin is credited with reclaiming previous territory and beginning the Thonburi kingdom of Siam, which is what made him “the great”. King Taksin built Wat Arun where the Emerald Buddha was kept, and which is a prime example of the “visually loud” temples previously discussed. As mentioned, focusing in on some of the smaller details can help bring quiet while bringing forward some of the temple’s charms that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as this sculpture of colorful creatures above a doorway.



Figure 10 Sculpture above a doorway at Wat Arun, Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand.

Just a few years after receiving the Emerald Buddha, in 1784, General Chao Phraya Chakri formed a coup against king Taksin and started the new Chakri dynasty, becoming king Rama I. King Rama I built his palace just across the Chao Phraya River, making Bangkok the capital city, and relocating the Emerald Buddha along with the throne, where they remain, and which clearly shows the connections between the military, monarchy and Buddhism.

The longer history of the Emerald Buddha was written about in three different books, which my analysis of relies heavily on the PhD thesis of Melody Rod-ari, who is now an art history professor at Loyola Marymount University. These three works are: *Ratanabimbavamsa* (Ratanabim), *Jinakālimālipakaranam* (Jinakalamali), and the *Amarakatabuddharupindāna* (Amarakata). All three of these texts date the creation of the Emerald Buddha to the famed monk, Nagasena, whose time was about 500 years after Buddha’s death, so sometime around 50 CE.³¹ The Buddha image was said to be created in Pataliputra, India, and after it was “self-consecrated”, Nagasena predicted “that the image would spread the dhamma to five lands” which the Amarakata says would be “Lankadvipa, Ramalakka, Dvāravati, Chiang Mai and Lan Chang”, the Ratanabim names some different places, “Cambodia, Ayutthaya, Yonaka, Suwannabhumi, and Pamahala,” but the “Jinakālimālipakaranam only mentions three places, Cambodia, Pagan and Thailand”.³²

What is interesting about these texts and Nagasena’s prediction, is that most of these places did not exist during Nagasena’s time, at least not with these names, which may be understandable since we are talking about a supernatural Buddha image and a very special monk. Yet the translation of the Jinakalamali to Cambodia, Pagan, and Thailand would be quite a stretch for a text written in the 15th century. This is likely a simple but interesting error on Melody Rod-ari’s part, who uses the Amarakata example in the text but adds the other two in the footnote.³³ Pagan would at least need to be called Myanmar to maintain the theme of present-day countries.

All three of these texts were originally written in Pali, an ancient language of India related to Sanskrit, and the language of Theravada Buddhism. The Ratanabim is “self-dated as written in

³¹ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit: An Art Historical Study of the Emerald Buddha and Wat Phra Kaew* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010), 20.

³² Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 22.

³³ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), 22.

1429”, the Jinakalamali was written in 1516, and the Amarakata was written in the second half of the 16th century. The earliest of these works, the Ratanabim, does not make mention of the Emerald Buddha ever being in Ayutthaya while the later works do.

Both later works tell the same story of the Khmer King, who had kept the Emerald Buddha at Angkor Thom. The Khmer king lost the statue to the Ayutthaya king because he had killed his son’s playmate for a petty reason, which was not upholding Buddhism.³⁴ As the story goes, the king’s son had a pet fly, and his playmate had a pet spider that would play together. Until one day the spider ate the fly, so the king had the playmate killed by drowning, which angered the Naga, a magical water serpent, and led to massive flooding.³⁵ This story was clearly intended to highlight (or reinforce) the decline of the Khmer empire while uplifting the Ayutthaya king as a better Buddhist. After this, the king of Chiang Rai was said to have stolen the Emerald Buddha from Ayutthaya because he was jealous, and this is exactly where it was re-discovered. Thus, the long and short narratives become a cohesive unit.³⁶

The earliest text, the Ratanabim, is “self-dated” in 1429, a mere five years before the image was found in Chiang Rai, which is frankly a bit suspicious. I think it is safe to surmise that they were all written *after* the Emerald Buddha was found in Chiang Rai.³⁷ I agree with many scholars who believe that the Emerald Buddha was created in the Chiang Rai/Chiang Saen region, probably by a monk travelling from Sri Lanka.³⁸ The narratives were added later to create the myths which serve to concretize the power of the monarchy through the population’s love of the Buddha.

³⁴ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 24.

³⁵ Eric Roeder, *The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1999), 7.

³⁶ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 22-23.

³⁷ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 20.

³⁸ Eric Roeder, *The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha*, 21.

The long narrative from the Jinakalamali explains how the Emerald Buddha came into existence and became the powerful object that it is viewed as. The jewel was given to a devoted monk from divine beings, who live on a sacred mountain that borders the human and divine worlds, the Cakkavatti world, because the monk wanted to create the first image of Buddha in hopes of helping to spread the Buddha's teachings. The monk, as a mere human, feels unqualified to carve a Buddha image, so a divine being disguises himself as a carver to do the job. It takes seven days and nights of carving but when he is finished, seven relics (which could be anything from a strand of Buddha's hair to an ash of his body) fly into the image at the same time, consecrating it with cosmic power for eternity. This self-consecration is "expressing independence" which will allow the image to move to the rightful righteous king.³⁹ Movement that we have witnessed through history already.

The word "Cakkavatti" often comes up in relation to the Emerald Buddha and requires some explaining. Cakkavatti refers to the divine "wheel-turning emperor" of Indian myth who lives on Mount Vipulla. The stone from which the Emerald Buddha is carved is said to come from the "Cakkavatti's Immortal Unmade Jewel", and was given to the monk, Nagasena, for the purpose of carving the Emerald Buddha image. Because the Emerald Buddha was carved from the Cakkavatti jewel it has the power of Buddha and the agency to put itself at the side of the righteous Buddhist king.⁴⁰

Vanessa R. Sasson, a professor of religious studies, focuses her work on the connection between spiritual and physical worlds. Sasson describes this as an area that jewels seem to bridge in that "material jewels help one see spiritual jewels with greater clarity" to which I would add a

³⁹ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 14.

⁴⁰ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 6.

feeling of bonding between these worlds.⁴¹ Just as couples in this world use jewels to unite themselves in life until death, the jewels are a material way to unite or to prove one's love for a divine being in another world.⁴² In this way, followers of Buddha want to lavish him with jewels to unite themselves with him in this world, in the divine world, and in the next life.

Jewels are special by their very nature of existence, they are rare, come in a beautiful array of colors, and are inherently strong, lasting in an immortal sort of way. Unlike metals, gems cannot be melted down and combined with more material to be endlessly recreated. Gems exist as they are, they can be carved and carved again, but would eventually become worthless dust if this continued. Perhaps, it is this representation of reincarnation that adds value to jewels. The jewel will have fewer incarnations of their existence making them naturally closer to reaching nirvana. While metals will never stop being reincarnated, even if that stretches our current human ideas about the passing of time and lifespans.

When jewels are carved into a Buddha image, they take on additional special qualities, perhaps even magical ones. Because Buddhists believe that Buddha himself is the "ultimate jewel, the most rare and precious being in the universe, and all material jewels necessarily pale by comparison" it creates more understanding of why so much material goods and luxurious extravagance would be given in his honor.⁴³ The massive temples filled with precious jewels, artworks, gold, and silver must have brought pure astonishment at a time when the world was candle lit and most people spent their days farming. Learning that donating one's own riches would bring merit to the giver and provide them with a better next life outweighed selling them and providing themselves with a better current life. While the sentiment to Buddha is beautiful, it might

⁴¹ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 8.

⁴² Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 8.

⁴³ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 8.

also show the hopelessness people feel about their current situations when their best hope is to give what little they have in hopes of a better life next time.

In Sasson's compendium, Maria Heim, who is also a professor of religious studies, brings more clarification to the jewel gifting to Buddha in her essay, "Taking Refuge in Jewels". Heim describes the "Three Jewels" as the "Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha", or the Buddha, the teachings of Buddha, and the Buddhist order of believers.⁴⁴ It is important to note the difference between the "Three Jewels" as Buddhist scripture in which there is no mention of a king or monarchy in the hierarchy, as it was the kings of Thailand who place themselves within the order in the "Three Worlds of king Ruang".⁴⁵ The "real" jewels are Buddha's divine being, his teachings, and his human followers, which make earthly gems lose their value in comparison. Jewels and other items treasured by humans therefore become more valuable when given to the Buddha.⁴⁶ Studying history, it is difficult to find any time when the laypeople, or peasants, have been treated as the jewels that Buddha viewed them to be, yet it is easy to see the jewels of their labor accumulate behind monarchical and temple walls.

Three times a year, the Emerald Buddha is ceremoniously bathed and has its seasonal attire changed, an intimacy reserved for the king and attended to with only the highest-ranking monks. When Rama IX was ill, other members of the royal family were permitted to perform this ceremony. These extravagant outfits are made of gold, precious gems, and the winter costume is a diamond encrusted wrap, which further increase the material value of the statue.⁴⁷ The Wat Phra Kaew Morakot website says that each cost 3.8 million USD. The first two costumes were

⁴⁴ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 44.

⁴⁵ Suraphot Thawisak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 38-39.

⁴⁶ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 52.

⁴⁷ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 19, 56, 165.

commissioned by Rama I, and the third commissioned by Rama III.⁴⁸ It is unclear if the image was ever costumed before the Chakri dynasty. Rod-ari describes how these “Brahmanic ceremonies and rituals adopted by Thai kings vest them with the powers of regulating the seasons, and with agricultural fertility and productivity. The Chakri king's changing of the Emerald Buddha's seasonal costumes represents the syncretism of this particular Brahmanical ritual and Buddhism in Thailand” further highlighting the continuance of Brahman tradition in Thai Buddhism.⁴⁹



Figure 11 Seasonal outfits from left to right: Summer, Rainy, Winter. Photo from the official Wat Phra Kaew Website: <https://www.emerald-buddha.com/costume-change-emerald-buddha>

This ceremony and the associated costumes raise further questions about the country's poverty rate and the ownership of Buddhist temples and relics within Thailand. Buddhist beliefs

⁴⁸ The official Wat Phra Kaew Morakot and Palace website <https://www.emerald-buddha.com/costume-change-emerald-buddha>

⁴⁹ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 165.

inspire followers to generously give to Buddha, but whether the people are bestowing their treasures upon Buddha or onto the monarchy may be one and the same.

Heim explains how using jewels as a metaphor for Buddha would allow those living in poverty to access the great wealth of the jewels which would supply them “refuge”, but she does not elaborate on what is causing them to seek refuge.⁵⁰ Maybe it is refuge from their material desire, or relief from the heavy weight of packing jewels around. Or perhaps Heim is referring to the temples where jewels are kept, the doors are open, and anyone can come inside when they seek solace from the problems outside the temple walls. For peasant populations, who were often looted during wars or forced to relocate afterwards, giving their most prized possessions to Buddha would keep the jewels safe and they would still be allowed to visit, if not their own previous treasures at their local wat, at least the treasures of others in their new local wat. Meanwhile, all wats become increasingly beautified with these donations, making the site of refuge ever more delineated from the world they receive refuge from.

There is much controversy over the Jinakalamali text which Michael Aung-Thwin, a professor and historian offers a compelling critique. According to Aung-Thwin, the “earliest extant version is the “Ayudhayä” [Ayutthaya] copy, an eighteenth-century palm-leaf manuscript written in a later Cambodian script during the Ayudhayä period prior to 1788.⁵¹ That is, it was written after at least two conquests of Ayudhayä by the Burmese in the mid-sixteenth century and perhaps after the last conquest in the mid-eighteenth century”.⁵² A tumultuous time for the region, when

⁵⁰ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 55.

⁵¹ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 125.

⁵² Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna*, 125.

the regular vying for territory amongst the many kingdoms were now competing for land against the Europeans as well.

Aung-Thwin goes on to say that the Jinakalamali has gone “through at least a dozen versions”, that “no original has been found”, and that it was “revised at least four times during the Chakri Dynasty alone” the last being from king Mongkut, in what may have been “early Thai nationalism” as “a component in the final Pali version of 1962”.⁵³ Aung-Thwin’s observations are interesting for a few reasons, the first and obvious one is the late date of its creation compared to when the Emerald Buddha was found in Chiang Rai, which he says are dated to 1527 by modern scholars while the text says 1516/1517, not a large discrepancy, but does aid us in placing the Ratanabim text to a slightly later date than was stated.⁵⁴

Second are the revisions, particularly during the Chakri dynasty as King Mongkut who made the last revisions reigned from 1851-1868. But most interesting is that only extant version is the Ayutthaya copy written “in a later Cambodian script”, sometime between the mid-16th and 18th centuries.⁵⁵ This shows that Ayutthaya was still using a Khmer script long after the famed Sukhothai writing, purportedly invented by king Ramkhamhaeng (which fosters Thai claims that Sukhothai was the first “Thai kingdom”), was supposedly inscribed in the late 13th century. As the Sukhothai script is also said to have spread to the Lan Na and Lan Xang kingdoms, it further exposes Thailand’s historical claims that appear to pick and choose what is or is not Thai, sometimes centuries after the fact.

⁵³ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, 125.

⁵⁴ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, 125.

⁵⁵ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, 125.

Many Thai claims of ownership seem to correlate more to desires for empire and nationalism than to upholding and spreading Buddhism and the precepts of Theravada Buddhist kings. Including “ownership” of the independent, cosmically powered, Emerald Buddha. Aung-Thwin notes this point in the *Jinakalamali*, which was talking about “quintessential models of righteous Buddhist kings, and *not national monarchs*”, kings who were “intimately involved in keeping the religion pure (because it inevitably decays according to the Law of Impermanence)”.⁵⁶ The emphasis here is Aung-Thwin’s own, and the Law of Impermanence may be Buddhist, but history shows that it comes for every dynasty at some point, with or without ownership of the Emerald Buddha.

The Emerald Buddha is carved in the seated (half-lotus) meditative position, which continues to fuel controversy over the time and place of its creation, as it was not considered to be a typical position for a Buddha image in the Lan Na kingdom during the 15th century where it was most likely created.⁵⁷ This controversy seems rather insignificant, because if an entire religion can make its way from Sri Lanka, through India and to Lan Na, it seems plausible that carving styles of Buddha images could easily accompany that doctrine. Just as architectural styles had already done for hundreds of years prior. Furthermore, monks were travelling heavily to proselytize Buddhism, and Lan Na was the emerging center of Theravada Buddhism in the area.⁵⁸ Just because it was created in Lan Na in the 15th century, does not necessitate that it was created by a local.

Additionally, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Emerald Buddha replicas in temples across Southeast Asia now, so it is a possibility that these narratives could be talking about completely different statues that are nearly identical. However, if the stories about the watermelon

⁵⁶ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, 151.

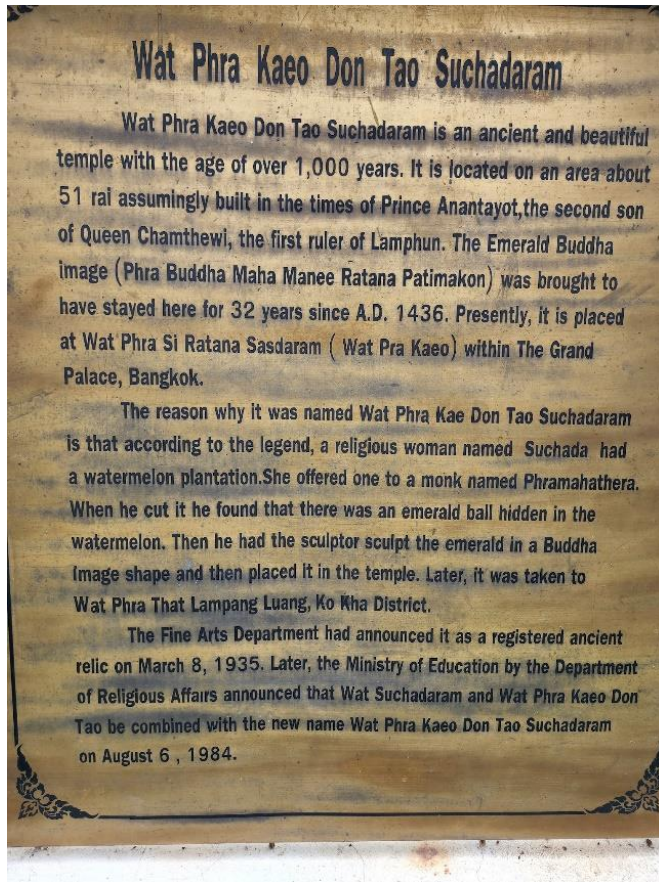
⁵⁷ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 18.

⁵⁸ Saratsawadi ‘Ongsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 35.

in Lampang, the Khmer king's gift to the Lao king, and the text of the Jinakalamali are all true, that would mean that there exists three Emerald Buddhas. Each of these statues would be worthy of special treatment, but one of them would be unaccounted for. While plausible, researching all three stories is outside the bounds of this paper and the focus will stay on the Emerald Buddha currently in Bangkok, while great considerations are taken for the people affected outside of Bangkok, whose folklore does not match the Thai nationalist version.

In the shorter legend beginning in Chiang Rai, there is still much folklore and potential claims of ownership of the Emerald Buddha. The history from each location and differences in their narratives provide more insight as to how this Buddha image has caused or continues to fuel animosity between regions. All the cities outside of Bangkok, where the Emerald Buddha was previously hosted, were in the Lan Na and Lan Xang kingdoms, but much of the territory that was in the Lan Na kingdom is now located in northern "Thailand", while other portions are now in China, Myanmar, and Laos.

This required the Thai government to make the people of Lan Na "Thai", which enabled the monarchy to make the Emerald Buddha a "Thai" creation and to justify their claims of ownership. There are still attempts of the Lan Na people to maintain their own identity, history, and degree of separation from Thailand. Which further highlights the importance of researching these histories both separately and together, as the nationalist Thai history tends to, or perhaps aims to, overwhelm and obscure the others in its attempt to create a unified country and people.



A good example of Thai history creation is told in one very unassuming sign at Wat Kaew Don Tao Suchadaram, in Lampang, a city which belonged to the Lan Na kingdom, as did Chiang Rai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Mai. The single sign includes two stories that do not coincide. The sign says that the stone was found in a watermelon and given to a monk who carved it into the Emerald Buddha. A story which seems to have been pushed to the wayside by the louder national versions, but which this temple signage attempts to maintain. The

second story on the sign, says that the Emerald Buddha “arrived here” with no date or indication from where it arrived from. Perhaps more importantly, this sign tells yet a third and even fourth story; the dates at which the Emerald Buddha was registered as an ancient relic (1935), and the date which this temple was ordered to change its name (1984). How this story manages to persist against the national Thai narrative is of interest as it certainly seems to show the submission to Thai authorities while also attempting to maintain the local legend. It brings to question whether the adherence to this story is overlooked by the Thai government or whether it is a subtle rebellion against it.

Anusorn Unno, Dean and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Thammasat University, tells a similar assimilation story of the Muslims in the south of Thailand. This population of people

share more culturally with Malaysia than with Thailand, yet navigate their identities to exist in, or to appease both worlds. Navigation that requires individuals to factor in the lèse-majesté laws if they do not show enough respect to the king, but also a religious faith that prohibits idolizing him as a god.⁵⁹ Unno describes what is perhaps a simple or unintentional misspelling of “We love the king” to “We love Mr. King” on a ceremonial offering of decorated rice, as a more likely use of agency to bridge the Muslim and Thai worlds.

All kings in the current Chakri dynasty are called “Rama” which is from the Hindu god Rama, who was an avatar of Vishnu, and which shows the maintenance of the Brahman “god-king” in the current era. Paying allegiance to such a king is forbidden in Islam, and the misspelling removed this Brahman aspect from an event that had “generated discontent among religious leaders as well as local administrators”, because it “was not in line with Islam” but which was unavoidable to attend “lest they fall under suspicion of being against the state or on the side of the insurgents”.⁶⁰

The south of Thailand which borders Malaysia, has a Muslim majority population that has for decades sought independence, equality, or even basic acceptance without the conformity demands of complete assimilation. But “Muslim” does not fit into the nationalist “Thainess” that the government promotes. This southern area of Thailand is currently under martial law and experiencing waves of violence from insurgents and the Thai government alike. The situation has been compared to the Philippines for the similarities in populations, demands, and the

⁵⁹ Anusorn Unno, *“We Love Mr King”: Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand in the Wake of the Unrest* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute 2018).

⁶⁰ Anusorn Unno, *“We Love Mr King”*, 238.

government's use of extrajudicial killings to subdue the uprisings.⁶¹ Violence which affects the Muslim population at large, regardless of their insurgent activity or loyalty to the king.

Unno explains the precarious dichotomy of Thai Muslims who are attempting an “Allah-mediated agency” with the “sovereign monarch.”⁶² Both allegiances are basically mandatory, but they are contradictory because “the subjectivity is crafted by stripping the king of his god-like features, whereas agency is enacted by treating the king as the sovereign” which is a difficult balancing act during a tumultuous and violent time. This requires Muslims to diminish “the central feature of the king's sovereign power, his ability to suspend the application of law and to exist outside the law, [which] implies privilege and inequality, whereas what Malay Muslims of southern Thailand have been demanding is equality and justice” and that diminishes their own struggles.⁶³

The Thai government has increased its assimilation tactics in the region “to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people as royal subjects”, primarily through education, military conscription, and “help and care” programs.⁶⁴ The military and other government agencies have used schools, making them a “part of security force operations through special activities such as Children's Day fairs and through the building of temporary military camps in school compounds”.⁶⁵ Placing the military in schools is intended to “discourage people from supporting the insurgents” by using the threat and fear of military violence.⁶⁶

⁶¹ William Frangia, *Establishing peace in southern Thailand* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Feb. 10, 2023).

⁶² Anusorn Unno, “*We Love Mr King*”, 239.

⁶³ Anusorn Unno, “*We Love Mr King*”, 239.

⁶⁴ Anusorn Unno, “*We Love Mr King*”, 237.

⁶⁵ Anusorn Unno, “*We Love Mr King*”, 237.

⁶⁶ Anusorn Unno, “*We Love Mr King*”, 237.

Unno states that the “monarchy provided special assistance to the residents, especially those suffering from the unrest, to ensure their loyalty” which further blurs actions of the monarchy and the government, as we do not know if the money is coming from the monarch’s personal finances or from the government’s funds. A blur that is particularly useful when paying for social good, as it can be used to increase the population’s feelings of gratitude and loyalty towards the king.⁶⁷ Give and take is always central to maintaining power by keeping the population content, even when the accumulation of the take far outweighs the give.

In Chiang Rai, I spent a day with a local driver who shared a wealth of local knowledge as we drove to Chiang Saen, stopping at several farms, temples, and museums throughout the day. This tour guide said that only the monarchy was allowed to eat watermelons; an interesting piece of information on the deprivation of the peasant classes but also one that might show the depths of the take in the past. While I have not found any citations that can back this claim, which is not surprising since such little history documents the lives of peasants. If true, the story of the Emerald Buddha in Lampang makes more sense, as the stone found in the watermelon would have become a treasure of the monarchy when all watermelons were already being directed towards them, conveniently by way of the monasteries. It might add missing detail to the Lampang king’s suspicion of Suchada and the monk and the reasoning behind their death sentences, particularly for the version in which the monk gave the watermelon to Suchada, which would make the watermelon a theft from the monarchy.

Until 1820, the monarchies tried to spread the power of the Emerald Buddha over the population by parading the statue down the streets during difficult times. The last time this

⁶⁷ Anusorn Unno, *“We Love Mr King”*, 237.

occurred was to ward off illness during a cholera outbreak.⁶⁸ As the monarchy turned to western science, the Emerald Buddha was retired behind the temple doors, never to emerge since, not even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bringing the question of whether the monarchy still believes in the Emerald Buddha's cosmic power, or if the image's power is best utilized by attracting people that are willing to pay a fee to come and see it.

While “no king had lived on the grounds of the Grand Palace since the beginning of the Fifth Reign”, 1868, the palace and Emerald Buddha temple did not open to the public until the late 1950s.⁶⁹ For nearly 100 years, the Emerald Buddha was withheld from the public gaze. Rod-ari says that it was not “the passing of the ‘Un-Thai Activities Act of 1952’” that inspired opening the palace and temple to the public, an act which “equated any abuses against the "nation, religion, king" with communism”.⁷⁰ But to create laws forbidding “Un-Thai” activity requires creating options to define and perform “Thai” activity, so it was convenient in boosting loyalty to the Thai monarchy and Buddhism to prove oneself as loyal and not a communist. The Un-Thai Act coincided nicely with the monarchy's need of “rebuilding the royal finances” for which they “began charging for attendance to royal balls, charity events, selling court titles, and creating outlets for direct donations to the King and his charitable foundations”.⁷¹ A rebuilding of wealth that has been so successful that the current king is thought to be the wealthiest monarch in the world. Some Thai people still hold fierce allegiance to their god-king, so they may be giving in hopes for connection with both Buddha and the king. However, the king's relationship with his supporters may become more tenuous from his usual home in Germany.

⁶⁸ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, 8.

⁶⁹ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 139.

⁷⁰ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 138-9.

⁷¹ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 139.

Given the conversation I had with the woman from Luang Prabang in Seattle, who believes that the Emerald Buddha on view at Wat Phra Kaew Morakot is a fake, and that it is far too precious to have on display where it could be stolen, it is understandable why the Emerald Buddha is no longer paraded through the streets. Given modern day security obsessions, it would be difficult to make an argument against her assumption. But it does bring to question if the Emerald Buddha is still independent and able to move upon its own will, or if it is being held hostage by kings who will not easily give up its representation of power, nor its generation of profits.

Future outcomes on the Thai political landscape are impossible to predict. Monarchies being “appointed by gods” or being themselves “divine”, has been a common theme across the globe regardless of the religion or region. This tactic has often been used to control people through their religious beliefs and to concentrate wealth within palaces, churches, and temple walls, but which a vast portion of the world no longer believes in or unquestionably accepts. In Thailand, the king is considered a head of state and a head of Buddhism, one of the few nations that continues such political-religious integration. Melody Rod-Ari, states that the symbols within Wat Phra Kaew Morakot “demonstrate the Chakri kings' status as Universal World Rulers (Cakkavatti) and the rightful heirs to the Emerald Buddha icon” an argument that could be made simply by the fact that the Emerald Buddha currently resides here, but which some people might dispute.⁷²

Since the Theravada Buddhist world has been harshly divided by national borders, some of these new countries have eliminated their own monarchies and attempted some separation of church and state. The people who follow Theravada Buddhism in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar are unlikely to recognize the Thai monarchy as their Buddhist rulers, whether through temple,

⁷² Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 16.

state, or military action. Likewise, the task of separating the monarchy from Buddhism in Thailand would be daunting, much like separating a human's heart and lungs while expecting them both to remain functional, they are completely intertwined and reliant on each other to maintain their individual power, and the military are the veins that run between them.

When Thailand demoted the absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in their 1933 coup, the entanglements between the monarchy and Buddhist institutions remained inseparable but added the military more directly into the weave. These forces work in concert more effectively than individually, as these power centers are reinforced by capitalizing on the population's dedication to Theravada Buddhism. The military maintains a level of control over the population through fear of violence while *lèse-majesté* laws keep the monarchy safely above reproach. The appropriation of artifacts and manipulations of history deepen the national importance of the monarchy and Buddhism and the military protects these tools.

Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is extremely patriarchal and political, even though the ordained monks and novices in Thailand lose their voting rights and their eligibility to run for elected offices; contrasted with the king, who is the highest ranked Buddhist, and remains politically powerful both in the secular and monastic sectors. Democratic activists, who might want a separation of church and state, or accountability from either institution may face serious repercussions, when asking for either can be viewed as anti-monarchy sentiment, leaving them vulnerable to prosecution under the harsh *lèse-majesté* laws, even if they are monks.

The tenth king of the Chakri dynasty was recently crowned in Thailand after his father, Rama IX, died in 2016. Rama IX reigned from 1946-2016, making him one of the world's longest reigning monarchs in history. Rama IX had his own controversies but was well respected by the Thai people and on the international stage. His son, now king Rama X, has been marked by

repeated controversy for many years already and since his father had such a long life, Rama X is already 70 years old, which will not have much time to build a legacy and win the hearts and minds of the Thai people as his father did. The cosmic power of the Emerald Buddha may be needed more than ever.



Figure 12 Ho Phra Keo Vientiane, Laos. The beautifully landscaped grounds and impressive structure make it easy to see why people would flock to this location for photo shoots. It is difficult to tell from this photo, but the columns are very tall, making it feel immense when standing under the roof. The golden rails which line the stairways are in the form of “Nagas”, a divine sea creature that is a guardian spirit of waterways in Southeast Asian folklore.

Chapter Three – Thai Historiography: Land Grabs, Cultural Appropriations and Rejections

Southeast Asian kingdoms in what are now Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand are often referred to as having been mandala states, which have a city-state at its center from where power radiates out and gradually fades. Meaning they had no official borders to demarcate their territory. These kingdoms have often been reduced to having been insignificant or “petty” kingdoms. At the same time “tributaries” are often conflated with being “vassal states” that are “ruled by” or administrated by another kingdom.⁷³ Some kingdoms had multiple kings of city-states, which were ruled by different individuals within the same monastic family, such as the cities of Chiang Mai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Rai, all in the Lan Na kingdom. Sometimes those family connections stretched even further, often through marriage. The definition of these kingdoms seems to be negotiable according to whomever is telling the story and to whom they are attributing as the main power player.

Many great kingdoms paid tribute to Chinese dynasties, while far fewer were ruled by or administered by China. Paying tribute to a larger kingdom would have allowed smaller kingdoms to prove their mightiness by gifting goods and people to the larger kingdom. In return, the smaller kingdoms would have “saved face” by averting attack and submission to a larger kingdom, while also gaining the possibility of support if the smaller kingdom was attacked from another direction. Smaller kingdoms wedged between two large kingdoms would often pay tribute to both.

While some of these kingdoms were undoubtedly small and weak, the bonds and friendships with other kingdoms would increase their sustainability as evidenced through the many

⁷³ David P. Chandler, William R. Roff, John R. W. Smail, David Joel Steinberg, Robert H. Taylor, Alexander Woodside, and David K. Wyatt, *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

times Lan Na and Lan Xang successfully fought off Burmese and Ayutthaya intrusions.⁷⁴ However, the material goods in the form of cities, temples, and arts would also suggest that these kingdoms had remarkable strength, as these creations would require significant amounts of manpower and money.

While the early western religious missionaries would bring questionable documentation of the region, one map is quite interesting as it documents the people and borders based on their perception of the region in 1884.⁷⁵ Factors that contributed to this perception are language, culture, cuisine, economic ties, and family relations. The shrunken size of Cambodia shows the waning influence of the Khmer kingdom and its culture being usurped by Siam before similar assimilation



could have been accomplished in the north. This map projects the historical bonds which included language and family interchange through various monarchies between the Lan Na and Lan Xang kingdoms, even though it is likely to be contested by all competing factions for their modern stakes in these territories. The Shan states, now in Myanmar, were considered part of the Lan Na kingdom, which now makes up north and

⁷⁴ Saratsawadi 'Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*.

⁷⁵ Marion A. Cheek, M.D. Map of Siam, Laos, Cambodia, and Shan States, *Siam and Laos as Seen by Our American Missionaries* (Presbyterian Board of Education: 1884, 2015).

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Siam,_Laos,_Cambodia,_and_Shan_States_\(1884\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Siam,_Laos,_Cambodia,_and_Shan_States_(1884).jpg)

northeastern Thailand, and Lan Xang, which is present-day Laos, were all considered to be “Lao States”, due to the broad cohesiveness they showed regardless of their differences.^{76 77}

Around 40 years before the missionary map was created, the borders were being set for Siam, British Burma (Myanmar), French Laos and Cambodia. Winichakul describes the hesitancy of local governments because “it was hard to imagine why the question of boundary should be so important” when the border between Siam and Burma already consisted of “a tract of Mountains and forest, which is several miles wide” and which both sides partook of the same forest’s goods.⁷⁸ To figure out where borders should be located, Bangkok suggested that the British should “enquire from the old inhabitants residing on the frontiers”, which is fairly shocking considering the centuries of wars between them.⁷⁹ At the same time, it shows a humanistic appeal that respects the cultural diversity and trade that had taken place in the “in-between” zones as part of a harmonious, normal place of human existence.

The Emerald Buddha appears to have spent nearly 350 years traveling peacefully around the area marked as “Laos” on the missionary map and it was not until 1779 that the Emerald Buddha becomes associated with war and looting, when general Chao Phraya Chakri, under the rule of the Siamese king Taksin, razed Vientiane. In the booklet intended to train tour guides who will work at the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok, which is published by the Bureau of the Royal Household, states that “Chao Phraya Chakri, the future King Rama I, carried it off to Thon Buri”.⁸⁰ What is most notable about this narrative is that it erases King Taksin

⁷⁶ Saratsawadi ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*.

⁷⁷ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Yale University Press, 2003).

⁷⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 64.

⁷⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 64.

⁸⁰ Piriya Krairiksh, *The Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha: A Handbook for Guides*. (Bangkok: Bureau of the Royal Household, 1988), 36.

completely. After Ayutthaya fell to the Burmese, then general Taksin, was credited with retaking the territories and creating the Siamese empire, making himself king, and moving the capital to Thonburi, which is now part of Bangkok, just across the river from the current Royal palace.⁸¹

General Taksin became king “Taksin the Great” for this contribution, but soon after a coup was formed by general Chao Phraya Chakri, which began the Chakri dynasty (also called Ratanakosin) that remains in power today.⁸² The fact that Rama I had also been a general is not mentioned in the handbook, nor is any of the brutality of the war that the Emerald Buddha was “carried off” from. In the handbooks preface, it says “It is also hoped that this booklet will enable tourist guides to give *correct and factual information* to foreign visitors in order that they may learn and appreciate the Thai art and culture of Ratanakosin”.⁸³ This erasure of history comes directly from the monarchy and this version, with such important details omitted, will be taught to all who visit the Emerald Buddha. The tool of history lies in both what is taught and what is to be omitted and therefore forgotten.

Recall that the earliest text on the Emerald Buddha did not mention it ever existing in Ayutthaya, nor is there a temple bearing its name there. It is only the two later texts that mention the story of taking the image from the Khmer king and bringing the Emerald Buddha to Ayutthaya.⁸⁴ After this, the king of Chiang Rai was said to have “stolen” the Emerald Buddha from Ayutthaya because he was jealous, and this is where it was later re-discovered. To my knowledge, these two stories were not relayed at any of the temples when I visited. Yet, the purpose of these two stories is clear, they demonize the Khmer and Chiang Rai (Lan Na) monarchies by

⁸¹ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 122-124.

⁸² Thongchai Winichakul, *The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand Since 1973* (Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 99–120.

⁸³ Piriya Krairiksh, *The Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha*. My emphasis.

⁸⁴ Melody Nina Rod-ari, *Visualizing Merit*, 24.

proving their unworthiness of having the Emerald Buddha because they did not maintain the proper duties of a Buddhist king. Conveniently aiding the claims of ownership for Ayutthaya/ Siam/ Thailand as the rightful owner.

Unlike Ayutthaya and Khmer kingdoms, the Lan Na and Lan Xang kings were not considered “God-kings” but instead patriarchs entitled by bloodline, which would have been a likely contributor to their refusals to give allegiance to such kings.⁸⁵ In the 13th century, La Na, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya kingdoms were all competing for the smaller kingdoms that could provide military and economic strength to the larger kingdom, while the smaller ones were granted protection in return.⁸⁶ Religious and monarch ideologies would certainly have been a factor in attracting or repelling potential bonds between kingdoms. But ideological differences are easy concessions to make in the face of repeated violent attacks and plundering, as ideology is only negotiable when one is alive to form such thoughts.

David K. Wyatt, professor of history at Cornell, addresses the question of pledging allegiances during the early empires. Wyatt describes this as a time when many kingdoms were trying to get out from under the Khmer empire’s hold and which he says that little is written about in the Tai chronicles, but what left “simply an impression of warfare, conflict unwillingly entered into to preserve their independence”.⁸⁷ Wyatt confirms Suraphot and Sulak’s reasoning for the rejection of Khmer rule and Brahman influence, which includes Khmer society being too rigid with its caste system, heavy taxation, as well as “the impersonality and arbitrariness of Angkorian law”.⁸⁸ ⁸⁹ Wyatt continues to say that the Tai were so disturbed by Angkor that they “seemed

⁸⁵ Saratsawadī ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 83.

⁸⁶ Saratsawadī ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 47-52.

⁸⁷ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 25.

⁸⁸ Suraphot Thawīsak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 31.

⁸⁹ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 25.

almost perversely to devise public institutions that contrasted sharply”.⁹⁰ By Wyatt’s words, we would assume that the Tai would behave in different ways from the Khmer going forward, but warfare continued, often from Ayutthaya attacks, long after the Khmer empire was in decline.

Instead of the king being an avatar of Vishnu in the Brahman tradition, the Tai king set himself up to be a divine Buddhist king, in a similar way to the Brahman tradition, in that the king is still a “god-king”. The Tai maintained the interconnected relations between religion and state, and the hierarchy of monarchy over monastery. The Tai kings continued raids on neighboring kingdoms and villages, plundering goods and people, and maintained slavery for centuries to come. Instead of the Khmer caste system, which is a potent hierarchy with little to no room for social mobility, the Thai system maintains a hierarchy and class system based on merit that offered little improvement.⁹¹ The separation and differentiation from all that is Khmer continues to define Thai history and modern identity, with the Brahman influence being attributed to India to erase the Khmer.

The Sukhothai kingdom began as a Khmer “main provincial center” that existed before and during Ayutthaya’s time and was located on the cusp of the Lan Na realm.⁹² Wyatt tells an intriguing story of the friendship forged through bloodlines and cooperative needs between the northern kingdoms. In this story, King Mangrai, the founder of the Lan Na kingdom, negotiated a settlement between Sukhothai’s king Ramkhamhaeng and king Ngam Muang of Phayao following a dispute over a wife.⁹³ Lan Na and Ayutthaya were both vying to gain Sukhothai’s loyalty, which

⁹⁰ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 25.

⁹¹ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 29.

⁹² David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 22.

⁹³ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 33-35.

highlights the amiable times of friendly relations between these kingdoms as well as the Sukhothai opinion that it did *not* belong to either.

Thongchai Winichakul, a historian, professor, writer, and Thai activist, debunks many Thai nationalist claims of territory. Winichakul recognizes that Wyatt's book is "becoming a standard text on Thai history in English" but he strongly disagrees with Wyatt's telling particularly of the colonial period. Winichakul rebuffs Wyatt's claims that "Siam was forced to agree to outrageous demands" from France, as Siam had merely "defended its own territories against foreign invasion", which is "a fiction in Anglo-American history" that conveniently ignores Siam's imperial desires.⁹⁴ Wyatt's coverage often follows the historical model set by Bangkok. A narrative that shows Thailand as the weak party who is losing "their territory" to the harsh colonial powers of both France and Britain. A narrative that allows Siam to maintain innocence and credibility while simultaneously upholding European white supremacist narratives in a most subtle fashion. Making the European colonizers out to be the most powerful and ruthless, which may be true, but still places Europeans upon a pedestal that allows other colonizers to pale from view.

Wyatt refuses to even question the authenticity of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription which is a large stone bearing an inscription that is credited to the Sukhothai king of the same name in the late 13th century. The inscription describes the Sukhothai kingdom as a thriving and peaceful kingdom with a wonderfully kind and just king. This inscription is purported to be the creation of the modern Thai alphabet and is the reason that the Sukhothai kingdom is claimed as the "first Thai Kingdom" and Ayutthaya was made the second. The authenticity of this inscription has been up for debate and many local and international scholars have weighed in, as some believe that it

⁹⁴ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 144.

was created by Rama III when it was found during his reign in 1833, which is when it was taken to Bangkok.⁹⁵ Wyatt is quoted in its entirety.

“Ramkhamhaeng’s inscription has been attacked by nonexperts as a nineteenth-century forgery. To forge it would have required the skills of the greatest linguist the world has ever known. For all its problems, then, it is better to regard it as genuine.”^{96 97}

Wyatt’s argument that it would have “required the skills of the greatest linguist the world has ever known” sounds hyperbolic and dismissive, particularly since he is also telling us to ignore “all its problems”. It is implying that amazing linguists existed in the 13th century who could create such a masterpiece but would not have been able to in the 19th century. Wyatt seems to be suggesting that we, as scholars, should submit to the Thai government’s narrative and stop questioning, which is a most unscholarly notion. While Winichakul has not written extensively about the Ramkhamhaeng inscription’s authenticity, he does agree that “doubts have not been completely put to rest”.⁹⁸

Mukhom Wongthes in her published PhD thesis which she calls a “forensic investigation” of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription debate, reinforces the critique of Wyatt. Wongthes describes the controversy alone as “an excellent demonstration of the power relations of “knowledge” “truth” and “social institutions” of Thailand” as proof that “ideology-free enterprises” do not exist.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Anthony Diller, *Early Thai Orthography: Innovative Tone-Marking or Recent Hoax?* (Written Language and Literacy 20, no. 2, 2017), 227–251.

⁹⁶ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 43.

⁹⁷ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 43

⁹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand Since 1973* (Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 99–120.

⁹⁹ Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth: a Forensic Investigation of the Ram Khamhaeng Controversy in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Matichon Public Co., 2003), 93.

Wongthes importantly points out that “when a national icon is more challenged by a group of native intellectuals and more defended by a community of foreign academics”, “there is certainly more to be learned.¹⁰⁰ When Thai people are under authoritarian rule and their research is being dismissed or undermined by both their own government and foreign academics, something is terribly wrong. Discrediting Thai academics is precisely what Wyatt has done here by calling them “nonexperts” who “attack” the presumably innocent history makers of Thailand.

Anthony Diller, another non-Thai scholar, agrees with Wyatt and cannot fathom why the King would want or need to create such a history, asking “why would a faker have bothered with such epigraphic minutiae, especially if the inscription were produced for the consumption of European officials?”¹⁰¹ But there are several good reasons why the king may have done so. In his seminal work, *Siam Mapped*, Winichakul explains in detail the land and power grab that Siam was attempting when the colonists arrived, finding inventive ways to prove their territorial claims became increasingly important.¹⁰² Creating a longer history and a larger, more powerful empire, would aid Siam’s claims to land distribution in colonial treaties, and increase European perceptions of Siamese power in the region. Wongthes makes similar points although her work is focused on the inscription. The inscription would not have been produced for “European consumption” as a tourist attraction, but for Thailand to increase the weight on their side of the scale of power.

Saratsawadi Ongsakul, a history and humanities professor at Chiang Mai University, further complicates the Thai language claims from the Ramkhamhaeng inscription as she explains how closely it resembles the Fak Kham script.¹⁰³ Ongsakul says that the “Sukhothai script spread

¹⁰⁰ Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth*, 92.

¹⁰¹ Anthony Diller, *Early Thai Orthography*, 245-246.

¹⁰² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*.

¹⁰³ Saratsawadi Ongsakul and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 5-6.

to Lan Na with the Raman sect of Buddhism and underwent some variations influenced by Lan Na Tham, or Tai Tham, script before becoming known as the Fak Kham script”, further questioning Thailand’s embrace of Sukhothai but rejection of Lan Na as “Thai kingdoms”.¹⁰⁴

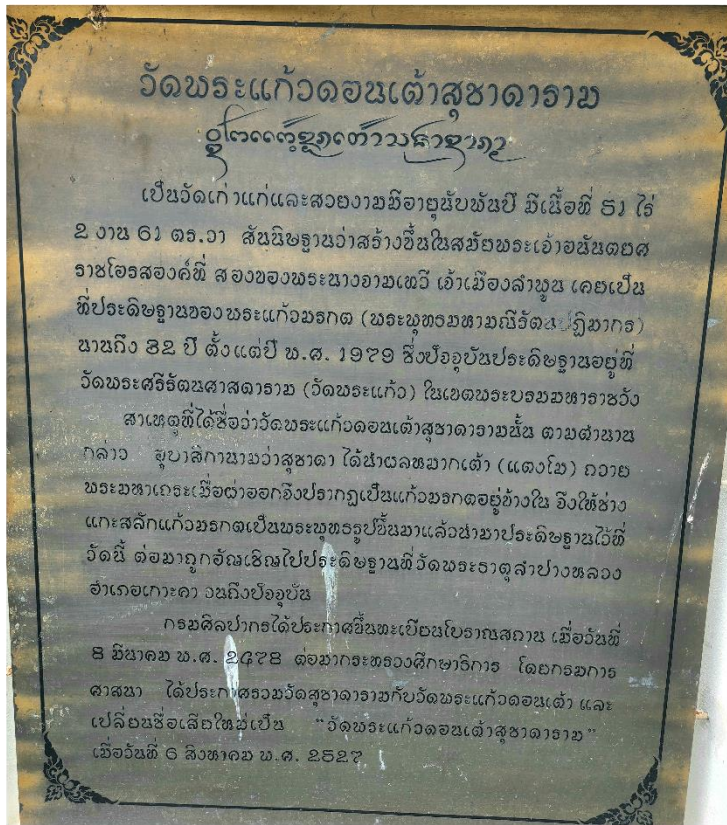
As efforts have been made to bring the Lan Na language and script back, a “Lan Na font” was created. This font was made to write Thai in what appears more similar to the appearance of the Lan Na language, while still being readable by Thai speakers. The Lan Na language is more closely related to Lao and Burmese, as all three likely originated from the same Mon script.¹⁰⁵ This seemingly harmless font has been developed to give the appearance of preservation (or perseverance) of the Lan Na language, while also maintaining “Thainess” as it blurs the lines of distinction between the languages. This ultimately serves Thailand’s claims of ownership by placing themselves in the history of the north to increase feelings of a united history, even as kingdoms of the north are rejected as “Thai”. Similar to the embrace of Pali and Sanskrit in the Thai language, while downplaying the Khmer use and cultural influence, even though as stated earlier, Khmer script was still in use in Ayutthaya, possibly as late as the 18th century.¹⁰⁶

The picture below is from a sign at the Emerald Buddha temple, Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao, in Lampang, which is an example of the Thai language in the “Lan Na font”. The first line on the sign is Thai in the “Lan Na font” and the second line is the Lan Na language, the rest of the sign is Thai in the “Lan Na font”.

¹⁰⁴ Saratsawadi ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Saratsawadi ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, 125.



For comparison, a sample of Thai and Burmese scripts are also provided. The similarities in appearance between the second line and the Burmese script are apparent.¹⁰⁷

Thai วัดพระแก้วดอนเต้า

Burmese မွန်မြန်မာအက္ခရာ

As Ongsakul pointed out, Lan Na had already been interacting and blending scripts with the Sukhothai script which probably shows that those kingdoms held closer bonds than those held between Sukhothai and Ayutthaya.

To reinforce the idea of Sukhothai as the first Thai kingdom – an idea instituted by king Rama IV, and continued by Rama V and his brother, prince Damrong.¹⁰⁸ In 1929, Prince Damrong claimed that Sukhothai should be considered the first Thai kingdom because it had spanned all of the landmass that was currently Siam, and more.¹⁰⁹ Damrong considered Sukhothai as such without

¹⁰⁷ My apologies for not washing the sign before I took the photo, please disregard the bird script.
¹⁰⁸ Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth*, 22.
¹⁰⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 163.

regard to the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, which supports the Thai territorial land claims while allowing room for cultural or human rejection of those who occupied that land.

The Grand Palace and the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok were designed in honor of and copied from Ayutthaya, which removes any remaining doubt that Sukhothai was added to “Thai” history much later.¹¹⁰ So regardless of the authenticity of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, we can see that it was never relevant to Thai history. Thailand claims ownership of Sukhothai through the landmass they held and which Thailand desires to reoccupy. But Thailand does not embrace the Lan Na kingdom as a “Thai kingdom”, even though it spanned much of the current Thai territory and existed at the same time as the Sukhothai kingdom, reinforcing the pattern of picking and choosing what will and will not be considered “Thai”.

Adding further evidence to this pattern of arbitrary claims are the influences which are elevated, and which are downplayed or even omitted from Thai history. Burmese influence is all but erased in Thai society, as the Burmese are mostly depicted as war-mongering aggressors. But this ignores the fact that the earliest Hindu and Brahman influences travelled through Burma first, as did Buddhism when it came from Sri Lanka and India. Furthermore, there are many examples of Burmese temples and architecture to be found in Thailand. When Winichakul discusses the Atlas maps found in Thailand schools, used to teach history, the map on which “Siam would appear in the same color as Burma on the same map, with Ayutthaya integrated into the Burmese kingdom” does not exist.¹¹¹ The portrayal of the Burmese as aggressors may have some truth behind it, but it also distracts from Ayutthaya’s, Siam’s, and Thailand’s own aggressions upon others, similar to the portrayal of European colonists discussed earlier.

¹¹⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 163.

¹¹¹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 155-6.

Winichakul quotes king Rama V from a 1907 speech, when the king declared that history in the region should not be studied as kingdoms, but as a “unified *prathetsayam*” (unified country of Siam), announcing a clear vision of empire that obviously began much earlier.¹¹² A vision that now attempted to incorporate *all* of the kingdoms, as far north as Luang Prabang, and going back “a thousand years” not as a portion of the southeast Asian continent, but as all of it belonging to Siam.¹¹³ That vision of unity was more about the land mass than the people who lived there, who had their own identities, cultures, and histories, that do not align with, nor are they claimed as “Thai”.

In the early 1900s, king Rama V was creating an education system in which the Thai script was to be taught throughout Siam, sending the Lan Na script into decline, while increasing the “Thainess” of the people in hopes of creating a cohesive nation.¹¹⁴ In 1905, Rama V clearly pointed out the fact that the Chakri dynasty still considered northern Siam to be a different country made up of Lao people, as he emphasized the need to create unity with the Thai by way of education. Rama V said that “They [Thai] must be intelligent in finding a way to teach and make Lao people feel that the government officials and the ordinary people are one with the Thai. If the Lao are good, they will be rewarded like the Thai”, providing an education that is “not only for knowledge” but for “teaching about the government and for understanding the benefits of being united with the Thai”.¹¹⁵ This speech not only shows the monarchy’s view of their northern neighbors, but is also a subtly worded threat that avoiding assimilation will prove that the northern population is made up of “bad” people, who will earn the opposite of rewards, further subjugation.

¹¹² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 163.

¹¹³ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 162.

¹¹⁴ Saratsawadi ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 210.

¹¹⁵ Saratsawadi ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 210.

For the people of Lan Na, the benefits of submission to Siam would likely have included limiting the kinds of violence that the Shan and Karen states have suffered in Myanmar both under Burmese and British rule, or as the Malay/Muslim populations have suffered in the South of Thailand, as they continue to refuse complete assimilation. But for the Northerners, the costs of assimilation would still be heavy, including a separation from Lao identity, the downplay of their kingdom's significance, the loss of their language and script, and their creations, such as the Emerald Buddha becoming "Thai" creations.

Another example of Thailand utilizing material goods to make historical stretch is that the Khmer kingdom is not claimed or considered a Thai precursor even as many Khmer creations are claimed as Thai. Preah Vihear, an 11th century Khmer temple that predates any possible Siamese claims, but which has at certain points in time been within Siamese borders, is a prime example. Shane Strate, a Kent State history professor, describes the significance of Preah Vihear becoming a Cambodian UNESCO site as a "national humiliation" to Thailand. The humility Strate describes has "less to do with its architectural or religious significance than its connection to the 'lost territories' and the legacy of Western imperialism in Thailand", territorial claims by a government which assumes the history of the area as their own.¹¹⁶ Territorial claims which promote ownership and fuel nationalist ideology in the population.

Strate highlights that most of Thailand's political parties were against accepting Cambodia as the legal owner of Preah Vihear, so much so that "the Democrat Party [Phak Prachathipat] called for a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and his entire cabinet".¹¹⁷ The party believed that his acceptance of this territorial boundary "threatened the country's

¹¹⁶ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones? Preah Vihear as a Thai Symbol of National Humiliation* (South East Asia Research 21, no. 1, 2013), 42-43.

¹¹⁷ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones?*, 42-43.

sovereignty”.¹¹⁸ Although it is clear that what was at stake was Thailand’s nationalist narrative, particularly since they had signed treaties designating that land and temple as Cambodian.¹¹⁹

These treaties were signed in 1893 with undoubted coercion from France, but Thongchai Winichakul describes in detail the Thai monarchy’s push to increase their territorial claims. Winichakul explains that the Siamese monarchy had sent people out to quickly plant flags before the Europeans could map it, in hopes that France and Britain would then legitimize their claims.¹²⁰ Much of which they did. Winichakul also emphasizes that Lan Na was negotiating territory on their own behalf without regard to Siam further emphasizing the independence that the Lan Na kingdom maintained.¹²¹ Most interestingly, in the early 19th century, neither Lan Na nor Siam saw any need for borders or guards between any nations, even with Burma, who they had been fighting with for centuries, something that is currently almost unimaginable.¹²²

Further exasperating current border issues, are Thailand’s recent UNESCO applications for things like “Muay Thai” and “Songkran” as “Thai” culture, when these are cultural things shared by neighboring countries. Songkran is the celebration of the Buddhist New Year, while Muay Thai is a martial art. Thailand appears to be using UNESCO to back their claims of ownership and to increase their soft power as the cultural epicenter of mainland southeast Asia. Thailand even managed to get the Ramkhamhaeng inscription listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2003, even as its authenticity continues to be questioned and debated. Part of this ongoing debate is due to the conservative Royalist university that engaged in the questionable scientific testing, and the Thai government’s refusal to allow the inscription to

¹¹⁸ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones?*, 42-43.

¹¹⁹ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones?*, 42-43.

¹²⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 115-127.

¹²¹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 68.

¹²² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 62-66.

undergo more testing elsewhere.¹²³ This has led more to questioning of the UNESCO process than it has answered the question of the inscription's authenticity, but which allows the Thai government to continue its unabashed claims.¹²⁴

Thailand continues to promote the narrative that they were never colonized to show that they were the strongest kingdom in Southeast Asia, able to withstand and compete against the Europeans. But the costs they paid to achieve that are often missing from this narrative, especially when it comes to their alliance with Japan during WWII. Shane Strate refers to this as the "Royalist-Nationalist Historiography", a term which Winichakul coined to show the level at which the nation would be stretched to legitimize the Siamese kingdom. Strate describes the "National Humiliation" as a narrative of the military, in which the nation has been and continues to be the victim.¹²⁵ The "National Humiliation" narrative utilizes Thailand's claims of stolen terrain, to ramp up nationalism and leaves open the possibility of militarily conquering the entirety of Laos and Cambodia on the grounds that these were previous vassal or tributary states, and as such, the political irridentists believe, rightfully belong to Thailand.¹²⁶ The military needs these victim narratives to make themselves necessary, reinforcing their own power and support.

Imagine for a moment, what Thailand's reaction would be if Myanmar made such claims on the territories that it had previously occupied, or were vassal states, or tributaries such as Chiang Mai, Chiang rai, Chiang Saen, or even Ayutthaya. I can assure you; Thailand would see such claims as audacious at best. Since a portion of Lan Na is now in China, similar land claims could also be made by the Chinese.

¹²³ Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth*, 89-90.

¹²⁴ Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth*, 102-103.

¹²⁵ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones?*, 43.

¹²⁶ Shane Strate, *A Pile of Stones?*, 43.

King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, is considered the person who “modernized” Thailand, but Wasana Wongsurawat, a modern Chinese historian and professor at Chulalongkorn University, casts him in a different light. Wongsurawat considers Rama V as a colonist, “governing his own realm as if it were a colony and modernizing Siam as the British did in Malaya and the Dutch in the East Indies”, or as “colonial masters of their own self-colonized kingdom”.¹²⁷ Just as the people colonized by Europeans were not empowered by their colonizers, “modernization” empowered only the monarchy and other elites in Siam.

At that time, Thailand did not have a strong military to “enforce loyalty” or subservience from their neighbors, so they relied on capitalism and unequal treaties.¹²⁸ These were used to entice the Chinese to continue their business practices in Thailand, even granting extraterritorial rights to the Chinese entrepreneurs in Siam just as they had granted these rights to the western colonists.¹²⁹ These actions created a privileged class of foreigners that left Thai citizens as “second-class”, or even third-class if the monarchy is included. But most importantly, these actions might show a disregard for the Thai population.¹³⁰

Wongsurawat builds upon Benedict Anderson’s work by questioning the so-called modernization of Thailand. Wongsurawat describes Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn’s “civilizing missions” as “aimed at the backward masses in their own country”, concluding that Thailand “may be a colonial state after all, considering the history of its interactions with neighboring states and with ethnic minorities within the realm”.¹³¹ Wongsurawat balances this

¹²⁷ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: the Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 3-4.

¹²⁸ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 5-6.

¹²⁹ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 5-6.

¹³⁰ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 7.

¹³¹ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 156.

argument by emphasizing the overabundance of credit for modernization given to western powers, pointing out that siding up with foreign powers has been happening over many centuries because it has always been beneficial, whether from Ayutthaya paying tribute to Qing, or signing treaties with France and Britain.¹³² As China is both a close neighbor and one of the world's superpowers, the continued "tributary" of peaceful negotiations, mutually beneficial projects, and trade continues the long legacy of non-colonial power structures in Asia.¹³³

The Chinese diaspora is the focus of Wongsurawat's work, which brings another aspect of Thai identity to the forefront. Thai people consider themselves to be descendants of China who migrated south in waves, often due to violence from Chinese dynasties, and are referred to as "Tai" people. This Chinese history is highlighted while it is also subdued, so that the Chinese diaspora can be revered or demonized at different points in time, even when Chinese diaspora has been amongst the monarchy itself, as King Taksin who ruled from 1767-1782 was.¹³⁴ ¹³⁵ Identity is often a construction based solely on the needs for power in social hierarchy, so that it will lift some up as it tears others down. Thailand incorporates what will add to its conceptions of power, while diminishing those they see as weakening it.

The people of Lan Na, Lan Xang, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya (Siam) kingdoms were all Tai people but whose location, language, and culture developed differently. In 1939, the Siamese became "Thai" to represent the modern-day country of "Thailand", which was a political as much as an identity change. When king Rama V (r 1868-1910), viewed the northern people as foreigners who were Lao, not as Tai or Thai, at the turn of the 20th century, he instituted education initiatives

¹³² Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 157.

¹³³ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 160.

¹³⁴ Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 163.

¹³⁵ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 123.

that enforced the Thai language on the Lan Na people.¹³⁶ The ultimate purpose of this education was to create a “Thai” nation from a diverse population by eradicating the “other” from individuals, and it was a great success. No longer are people living in Isan and Northern Thailand considered Lao, they were now defined by the Thai geo-body as “Northwesterners” and “Isan” people, making them “Thai” but still different, yet most certainly not Lao.¹³⁷ When the question of identity resurfaces, they can be referred to as Tai, which is correct, but which conveniently erases several hundred years of their Lao identity.

The Isan region is still considered to be heavily Lao, although the few people who I have talked to from this region, all claim a Thai identity when I ask if they are “Lao”, or sometimes, more specifically they will say “I am from Isan”. One Thai instructor from Isan became visibly uncomfortable at my asking if they were Lao, and quickly responded with a resounding “no”. Seeing this shaken response firsthand made me realize the weight of this question and how offensively it could be taken, as the Thai/Lao divide became apparent. Perhaps the “Isan” identity is adopted to avoid committing to either country’s identity narrative or because to claim a Lao identity would be a rebellion against the national narrative that might bring oppressive forces or discrimination upon oneself.

While the populations of mainland Southeast Asia have genetically high heterogeneity likely from centuries of trade, slave raids, and freedom of movement between kingdoms, the ideas of race and ethnicity were decided more from language and cultural factors, while now one’s identity is validated (or invalidated) by their passport. Since the common practice during warfare was to force the relocation of the people from sacked cities and villages and it seems that these

¹³⁶ Saratsawadī ‘Ōngsakun and Chitraporn Tanratanakul, *History of Lan Na*, 210.

¹³⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 165.

people were often assimilated into their new kingdom, which further blurs the concept of “Laotian” “Khmer” and “Thai” as merely modern state borders rather than being a different people in which racist, discriminatory ideology most often exists.

However, the Isan and northern Thailand areas hold more Lao speakers and Lao populations than the country called “Laos” itself does. While these populations have been forced to use the Thai script, the language spoken is more similar to the Lao language than to the Thai. My Thai tutor from Isan said that Thai and Lao are the same language, but Lao is just spoken more slowly, which is simply not the case. If it were, Thai speakers would have an easier time understanding Lao speakers since it is “spoken more slowly”, but it is the other way around due to the prevalence of Thai media.¹³⁸ Yet it provides great insight into the personal negotiations of identity creation, that seek belonging and separation from “others” who may diminish one’s personal power. Discrimination against “Un-Thai” continues to apply pressure to assimilate to Thai-ness as neighbors are still portrayed as “backwards”.

Discrimination towards Laotians and Cambodians is visible and present in film, online, in person, and in previous and current research. The 2010 film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall Past Lives*, by director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, portrays some of the more subtle forms of Thai discrimination against Lao people. The film portrays a Laotian man whose job is to care for an elderly family member, but he is not trusted simply because he is Lao. This film highlights the importance of the family hierarchy in Thai society, while also showing their desire for cheap labor even at the expense of placing their most valued family member’s care in people they do not trust. This discrimination is not limited to caregivers, who provide some of the most important labor in

¹³⁸ Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos: the Politics of Culture, History, and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 53.

Thailand, but includes taxi drivers, construction workers, and other low-paying workforces.¹³⁹ Similarly, or retaliatory, Laos tried to ban Thai influences when the communist party came to power, viewing Thai media, music, etc. as a foreign influence that is corrupting Lao culture.¹⁴⁰

The internet is a renowned location for posting hateful comments and the ASEAN community is not exempt. One innocuous page, ASEAN Skyline, hosts a disheartening commentary for nationalist propaganda. Comments are most often directed at Cambodians who try to exert any cultural claims over Khmer creations, often being called “Claimbodians” or “Scambodians” by Thai people who accuse them of “copying” Thai culture. These ignorant nationalist attitudes are exasperated by the “ownership” of historical aspects of identity that are wrapped into material goods and now exist on the wrong side of the border. Which is especially troublesome when the nation with the most economic power controls the material and the dominant narrative.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun is a former Thai diplomat, PhD fellow, and political researcher at ASEAN Studies Center, and is now a professor at Kyoto University in Japan, where he was granted political asylum. Chachavalpongpun describes Cambodia and Thailand as being the most similar countries, culture-wise, in Southeast Asia. Chachavalpongpun quotes Wyatt to state that “Ayutthaya is the successor of Angkor”, agreeing that Khmer culture is the backbone on which Thailand was built.¹⁴¹ Thailand fights against recognition of Khmer influence “to champion the Thai nation and to reify a hollow Thai identity” aiding Thailand to “see itself superior to its Cambodian [Lao, Burmese, and Malaysian] neighbor”.¹⁴² This sort of rhetoric only serves to rile

¹³⁹ Khathaleeya Liamdee, *On the Move Across Phnom Dangrek*.

¹⁴⁰ Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos*, 52-55.

¹⁴¹ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Silkworm Press, 2010), 169.

¹⁴² Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand*.

up nationalism. Thailand stakes claims on cultural material goods while rejecting the people and culture that created them.

Tai people who migrated from China mixed with other populations on the way south, and DNA research confirms this mixture, regardless of language spoken.¹⁴³ Thailand could embrace this and use it to create unity that uplifts the variety of people, languages, and cultures that have existed in the area. To view the cultural exchanges as signs of friendship and respect, rather than as military dominance and ownership, which could alleviate much tension between Thailand and their neighbors. But this lofty dream would require history to be taught in ways that are less focused on war and dominance and more on the exchanges that took place.

The lingering animosity between Bangkok and Vientiane can be palpable. If we considered these cities as the mandala's "centers", just as they were at the time of the Emerald Buddha's relocation, it is then quite noticeable how those feelings seem to dissipate the further from these cities one travels, just as a mandala kingdom's sphere of power would fade. In Vientiane, it is common to hear that Thailand stole the Emerald Buddha, while in Bangkok it is presented as being a "Thai creation", not a "Lan Na" creation. Which downplays the long history of the Emerald Buddha's creation in India when convenient, while uplifting the long narrative when demonstrating the statues, and therefore the monarchy's, power. History does not simply fade out from a power center as a mandala kingdom does, history continues to form the present and the future.

¹⁴³ W. Kutanan, J. Kampaunsai, M. Srikummool, *et al*, *Complete mitochondrial genomes of Thai and Lao populations indicate an ancient origin of Austroasiatic groups and demic diffusion in the spread of Tai-Kadai languages* (*Hum Genet*, 2017).

Conclusion – The Monarchy, Sangha, and Military

Thailand is known as the “land of smiles” adding performative “Thainess” to the many tourist attractions, but what is radiated outward is not always reflective of what is going on inside. In 1932, a coup d'état changed the absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, but there have been up to seventeen coups altogether since, a most shocking number.^{144 145} The last one occurred in 2014, which removed Yingluck Shinawatra’s democratically elected party from office. Yingluck and her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was the prime minister from 2001-2006, are both living in exile, even as their popular party, Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai) persists. The government is currently set up so that the military chooses the Prime Minister, no matter who wins the election. Thailand is under an authoritarian military junta rule, monarchy rule, and a form of “democracy” that allows entire parties to be dissolved or banned.

This dissolution occurred most recently when Rama X’s sister, Ubolratana Rajakanya, ran for Prime Minister with Shinawatra’s party, the same party the coup dismantled. The king quickly denounced her campaign, saying that "Involvement of a high-ranking member of the royal family in politics, in whatever way, is considered an act that defies the nation's traditions, customs and culture, and therefore is considered extremely inappropriate"¹⁴⁶ While this is in line with the constitution that reads “the monarchy should maintain political neutrality”, after the king’s announcement, the constitutional court dissolved the party.¹⁴⁷ The king’s announcement did not

¹⁴⁴ Suraphot Thawisak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Different sources state different numbers of coups, it seems that 10 have been successful, while 7 more have been attempted.

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Head, *Thailand’s king condemns bid by sister to become PM* (Bangkok: BBC News, 2019).

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Head, *Thailand’s king condemns bid by sister to become PM* (Bangkok: BBC News, 2019).

simply stop his sister's election bid and allow the party to secure a different candidate, it caused the courts to dissolve the entire party, which shows the king's political power.

Long before king Rama X was sworn in, his actions made news headlines. The BBC News Profile of Rama X includes many of these events.¹⁴⁸ While too numerous to list in detail here, they could easily fill several novels, but not many authors would be brave enough to write them, when simply sharing the BBC profile on Facebook landed a person in prison.¹⁴⁹ ¹⁵⁰ Thailand has some of the harshest lèse-majesté laws in the world, referred to as Article 112, which severely limits public discourse seen as disparaging of the monarchy.

The power of the monarchy in Thailand may be fading, but it is still strong for many as evidenced by the throngs of people who camped out at Rama IV's hospital when he fell ill in 2016.¹⁵¹ When Rama IV died, the nation mourned for a year, some more willingly than others.¹⁵² Since then, youth protests demanding democracy and reforms to the monarchy have been on the rise, until Covid-19 temporarily silenced what the military could not.¹⁵³ The Royalist "Yellow Shirts", a group known as the "People's Alliance for Democracy" or PAD, which are confusingly contrary to their party's name, as they are a "promonarchy *and* an antidemocratic movement" who fight for the monarchy to remain in power by utilizing Article 112 to report any activity and people they view as hostile to the king.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Michael Ruffles, *Why are their protests against Thailand's king?* (The Sydney Morning Herald. Sept. 8, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ BBC News. Profile: Thailand's King Vajiralongkorn. May 3, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Links to some of these stories are available in the News and Media section after the bibliography

¹⁵¹ Stevens, Andrew. *Thai People gather to pray for the sick king*, CNN News. Oct. 11, 2016.

¹⁵² My Thai language tutor is still sad that she had to wear a black dress on her wedding day.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch – Thailand <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/thailand>

¹⁵⁴ Aim Sinpeng, *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 50.

The 2017 lèse-majesté case of student activist, Jatuphat Boonpataraksa or “Pai”, for sharing the BBC news profile on Facebook, is a good example of what democracy activists are facing.¹⁵⁵ The Human Rights Report details that Pai was the only person charged even though the profile was shared about 3,000 times.¹⁵⁶ Adding more interest is that this case was tried in Khon Kaen, which is located in the Isan region, and may reflect harsher punishments for those in this territory. Pai was sentenced to five years in prison, but had his sentence halved due to his admission of guilt.¹⁵⁷ A political case that was likely intended to sway other student activists from political activity of any kind, whether it be demonstrations or sharing information online.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun was forced to seek asylum in Japan due to his criticism of the Thai monarchy, when warrants for his arrest were issued and his passport cancelled. Chachavalpongpun continues to write on the politics and Human Rights abuses in Thailand at his own peril, from what should be the safety of distance, but is proving that a safe distance might not exist. Chachavalpongpun is urging the west to see Thailand’s government the same as it views China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, as a “despotic regime that harasses, threatens, and kills its critics” both within Thailand and abroad.¹⁵⁸ Chachavalpongpun provides some horrific examples of dissidents and critics being disappeared, imprisoned, murdered, including the attack that he suffered in his Kyoto home.

There is another lèse-majesté charge in 2017 of particular interest to this paper. The charge against Thai scholar and critic, Sulak Sivaraksa, who has been nominated twice for the Nobel

¹⁵⁵ BBC News. Profile: *Thailand’s King Vajiralongkorn* (BBC News: May 3, 2019).

¹⁵⁶ International Federation for Human Rights Briefing paper Thailand: *New monarch, old abuses - Lèse-majesté prosecutions under King Rama X* (FIDH Nov. 11, 2017).

¹⁵⁷ International Federation for Human Rights Briefing paper Thailand: *New monarch, old abuses - Lèse-majesté prosecutions under King Rama X* (FIDH Nov. 11, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Like China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, Thailand’s regime hunts down its opponents around the world* (Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia, 2021).

Peace Prize, is a founding member of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, and who was previously brought up in Chapter One. In Sivaraksa's ninety years of life, he had already faced several arrest warrants for his critiques of the Thai monarchy. The latest, in October of 2014, stemmed from a conference at Thammasat University that he spoke at. Sivaraksa "criticized the personality of King Naresuan" who ruled the Ayutthaya Kingdom from 1590-1605, as he questioned "whether the King's heroic elephant battle had actually taken place".¹⁵⁹ For these comments regarding a king who has been dead for more than 400 years, "two retired military officers" filed a *lèse-majesté* complaint against Sivaraksa. While the case against the, then 81-year-old, man was dismissed, the seriousness of publicly questioning Thai nationalist historiography was made clear.

A 2017 report from the International Federation for Human Rights on the *lèse-majesté* cases in Thailand reinforces these claims and confirms Chachavalpongpun's significant concerns over safety, no matter where a dissident lives.¹⁶⁰ This report also provides a glimpse into the current state of the entanglements between the monarchy and the military as it says that the Prime Minister, General Chan-ocha, claimed that Rama X "did not want to see people being punished for *lèse-majesté*", while the military "have continued to carry out arrests and detentions that consistently failed to follow due process for suspected *lèse-majesté* offenders". Whether the Prime Minister is working on behalf of the king or using the laws that support the king to his own benefit is unknown, but either way, they reinforce one another's power.

¹⁵⁹ International Federation for Human Rights Briefing paper Thailand: *New monarch, old abuses - Lèse-majesté prosecutions under King Rama X* (FIDH Nov. 11, 2017).

¹⁶⁰ International Federation for Human Rights Briefing paper Thailand: *New monarch, old abuses - Lèse-majesté prosecutions under King Rama X* (FIDH: Nov. 11, 2017).

It is worth recalling for a moment, that the current Chakri dynasty and the previous Thonburi dynasty both began by military generals. This brings into question whether the junta leader, General Chan-ocha, held higher aspirations for himself than being the Prime Minister, a position he has held since the 2014 coup. General Chan-ocha is not the only general who may have set his eyes on the Emerald Buddha for legitimacy. General Phibun Songkram, who became the prime minister after a coup, and allied Thailand with Japan during World War II, “came very close to moving the Emerald Buddha away from the present capital to a new capital at Saraburi, his birthplace”.¹⁶¹ Phibun Songkram left little mystery about his intentions as he “ordered the removal of all royal and national treasures to Petchaboon and the building of a grandiose new temple to house the Emerald Buddha”.¹⁶² At the time, this area was so rural that it required building roads and infrastructure to get these goods there. Before General Songkram could finish, the bills for this endeavor were denied, and his plans were shuttered. Rather miraculously, Phibun Songkran was not thrown out along with his plans, but remained in power until another coup ousted him in 1957.¹⁶³

Napisa Waitoolkiat, PhD and Director of the College of ASEAN Studies at Naresuan University, along with Paul Chambers, PhD Professor and Researcher at Naresuan have worked in a collective to create, *Khaki Capital*, a phenomenal book which digs into the depths of military power and financing across southeast Asia. Chambers and Waitoolkiat describes the Thai military that has been in power since the 2014 coup as a “military oligarchy” in which “military power is at its greatest and civilian control is non-existent”.¹⁶⁴ In this set up, the military “directly rules the

¹⁶¹ Eric Roeder, *The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha*, 21.

¹⁶² Eric Roeder, *The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha*, 20.

¹⁶³ Eric Roeder, *The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha*, 20.

¹⁶⁴ Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, *Khaki Capital: the Political Economy of the Military in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2017), 30.

country and controls all aspects of the economy” and in Thailand, the military is “really only answerable to the monarch” which provides “full insulation from elected civilian control”.¹⁶⁵

Since the 1932 coup which ended the absolute monarchy, each successive coup and Sangha Act has worked to bring monarchy power back, and to create a symbiotic relationship with the sangha and military junta. The juntas began by funding themselves with money earned in the opium and heroin trades.¹⁶⁶ Trades which continue to bring funding, especially for the lower-level military, while the military as a larger institution has stakes in almost every aspect of the economy, including banking, radio, television, hotels, and pharmaceuticals, with military officials occupying many seats on corporate boards.¹⁶⁷ With every coup, the bonds that hold the monarchy, sangha, and military together become stronger, while other’s dreams of democracy dims.¹⁶⁸

The authoritarianism of the military junta should not be underestimated as they have shown time and again that they will not hesitate to use violence on Thai citizens. The memories of past violence committed on student protestors are not easily forgotten, even as the government “has actively tried to control the narrative of tragedies like the October 6, 1976 massacre through information suppression, censorship, and marginalization of critical voices”.¹⁶⁹ The Thai government, working “under the cloak of reconciliation and national unity”, has enabled the country’s autocratic elites to commit further atrocities, as exemplified by the 1992 Black May, the

¹⁶⁵ Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, *Khaki Capital*, 20, 30.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, *Khaki Capital*, 47.

¹⁶⁷ Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, *Khaki Capital*, 64-65.

¹⁶⁸ Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, *Khaki Capital*, 82-84.

¹⁶⁹ Aim Sinpeng, Thongchai Winichakul, *MOMENTS OF SILENCE: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Pacific Affairs, University of British: 2021), 633.

2010 Bloody May, and 2020 state brutalities against youth-led pro-democracy protesters”.¹⁷⁰
Instilling fear into the population to maintain the power of the monarchy as well as their own.

Buddhism also maintains its role in upholding the social structure. Most Thai men and boys spend some small portion of their life as a monk, a contract which can be easily entered and left, sometimes for as little as three days or three months, or until a man decides to commit to permanent vows of monkhood. The monks survive on the donations of civilians, which comes mostly in the form of food and cash, the monks are required to do little but meditate, study, and perform ceremonies in the community, as much of the chores are provided by the nuns or laity women in the community.

Buddhist temples were the first educational centers of Thailand, and they remain so in some villages, serving as “free secondary schools for families who cannot afford to send their children to government schools”.¹⁷¹ The monks teach the Buddhist doctrine as well as math, science, and sometimes even languages, but there are several problems with this model. The education offered to the villagers can be quite basic and shows the government’s failure to provide a quality education to all. Monks are not required to meet the same training standards as teachers are, so the difference in education between temples could be quite large. Boys can “ordain for free, the camp supports their studying for free, they live in the temple for free, and they go to school for free” which “can improve one’s socioeconomic position through education”.¹⁷² But female students do not have these options, which denies them the opportunity for social mobility.

¹⁷⁰ Aim Sinpeng, Thongchai Winichakul, *MOMENTS OF SILENCE: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Pacific Affairs, University of British: 2021), 634.

¹⁷¹ Michael R. Chladek, *Constructing ‘The Middle’: The Socialization of Monastic Youth in Buddhist Northern Thailand* (Berkeley: 2018), 193

¹⁷² Michael R. Chladek, *Constructing ‘The Middle’*, 181.

A girl's education, particularly if she is poor and from a rural area will be extremely limited and will prevent women from reaching their full potential. Girls and women cannot become ordained as monks or novice monks in Thailand, not even temporarily.¹⁷³ They can become nuns, but will need their family's support because they are not entitled to material support from the temple. Nuns are mostly relegated to performing the temple's chores and are not eligible for the post-secondary temple education that the boys can receive, which reinforces the patriarchy on both sides of the temple walls. Spending time as a monk earns the boys a lot of merit which is believed will help them and their families in this life and their next. This gender-based accessibility to education and merit-making diminishes women's opportunities in this life *and* their next.

Michael Chladek, PhD in comparative human development research, and instructor at the University of Chicago, writes on the life of temple boys in Thailand. Chladek points out that many of the boys who stay longer than the 3-week summer camp are from poor families and also "from ethnic minority groups" and that the temple is a "site for instilling in these youth notions of Thainess and how they can become more Thai".¹⁷⁴ Chladek casts this production of Thai nationalism through the inculcation of "Thai-ness" in a positive light, as a way to help poor, ethnic minorities receive an education and assimilate into Thai culture. While helping poor ethnic minorities reach their full potential is a worthy cause, it also highlights that a person living in Thailand must assimilate to "Thainess" to be successful. Chladek describes the efforts to find differences that set "Thai Buddhism" apart, so that the "state could distinguish its Buddhist population as distinct from neighboring Buddhist countries" which is creating an appreciation for the unique Thai form, but for which an appreciation of similarities could instead be utilized to

¹⁷³ Michael R. Chladek, *Constructing 'The Middle'*, 202.

¹⁷⁴ Michael R. Chladek, *Constructing 'The Middle'*, 193.

create friendship and understanding across these same borders.¹⁷⁵ What is abundantly clear in Chladek's research is that the temples perform the government's mission of assimilating the "others" and help the state spread nationalism.

As we have seen throughout this paper, becoming more "Thai" is a never-ending project for the government, the monastery, the military, and the people, one which is always being redefined to either include more or to exclude more, depending upon what is necessary at the given time. Or as Winichakul says, "once the un-Thainess can be identified, its opposite, Thainess, is apparent", which makes the un-Thainess easier to weed out.¹⁷⁶ But weeds are pesky and require ongoing diligence to be rid of.

The Sangha Act of 1902 was passed during the absolutist reign of Rama V, which dictated a central governing body of the sangha, with the leader appointed by the king. This stopped monasteries from ruling themselves and instead put them under state law, and it was followed up with additional acts in 1941 and 1962, which combined, gave more power to the Thammayut (royal) sect and prohibited monks from politics. This prohibition includes holding office, voting, or engaging in protests. Phra Panya Seesun, is a monk living in exile after criticizing the fact that monks were "rising through the ranks because they were affiliated and personally selected by the monarchy" and criticized the "links between the military-backed government and the monarchy".¹⁷⁷ A combination that makes it impossible to voice concern without inadvertently criticizing the monarchy. Since the 2014 coup, the military junta has sought to regulate the sangha more closely to address problems of corruption, but here too, we are left questioning whether this

¹⁷⁵ Michael R. Chladek, *Constructing 'The Middle'*, 192.

¹⁷⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Caleb Quinley, *A Buddhist Monk Was Accused of Criticizing the Thai King. He Fled the Country* (Vice: Nov. 13, 2020).

is a move for the people or another area where the military junta can create a need for themselves and condense military control.

In an interesting twist from the colonial days, much of the monarchy's wealth is being transferred to Europe by choice, as King Rama X has been living in Germany for many years where he owns a large villa and shares in a large hotel, where he quarantined during Covid-19. Rama X changed the laws in Thailand to make himself the sole owner of the Crown Property Management Bureau, and he is estimated to be worth 30-40 billion USD, making him the world's wealthiest monarch.¹⁷⁸ It is said that "the king has sent many of his most prized and valuable possessions to Germany for safekeeping, leaving us to wonder what these possessions are being kept safe *from* and if the Emerald Buddha was one of them."¹⁷⁹

This brings us back to the Wat Phra Kaew Morakot and Royal Palace in Bangkok, which belong to the king, but is also a Buddhist temple. This temple is the only temple with a "special" designation, the rest are categorized as first, second, or third class, but what the criteria are for these designations are unclear. When we compare this temple to the Emerald Buddha Temple in Chiang Rai, which was designated with only a third-class royal status, and not until 1978, we may also be seeing the monarchy-Buddhist hierarchy in play. Of the approximately 40,000 temples in Thailand, only about half have a royal designation and it appears that the majority of these are in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, and central Thailand, which further highlights the monarchy's control of the sangha and their partiality to the royal Thammayut sect as well as to the area of central Thailand where Ayutthaya existed, and which is clearly the prized jewel of eras in Thai history.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ BBC News, *Thai king takes control of some \$30 billion crown assets* (June 16, 2018).

¹⁷⁹ David Hut, *Thai king under scrutiny in Germany* (Deutsche Welle. Feb. 14, 2022).

¹⁸⁰ Suraphot Thawisak and Zia Collinsfree, *Buddhism, Monarchy, and Democracy*, 62.

In attempting to untangle the Thai monarchy, Buddhism, and the military from each other, what has been found is that the Emerald Buddha is not only a representation of Buddha, but a rock helping to ground and hold these power structures together as they continue to feed and empower one another. The Emerald Buddha, the Preah Vihear temple, and the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, have all been tools used to create the Thai identity and create nationalist fervor, and they are tools which are continuing to perform this job. Through the many historical narratives that have been manipulated to increase the monarchy's power, the Emerald Buddha has been but one, albeit a most enduring one.

Unlike the mandala spheres of power which fade from the point they radiate; folklore is undiminished by time and space. Stories lurk in the background, collecting dust on a shelf until something comes along to stir them up, reinvigorating what has somehow become more magical with each telling. Stories such as the Emerald Buddha are passed down through generations, with each area providing its own twist to the narrative. Whatever of these stories are fact or fiction ceases to matter, like the classic children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, once they are loved, they become real.¹⁸¹ Such is the power of human belief, and such is the love for the Emerald Buddha.

¹⁸¹ Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Illustrated by William Nicholson (George H. Doran Company. 1922).

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