THE KING NEVER SMILES: A BIOGRAPHY OF THAILAND’S BHUMIBOL ADULYADEJ
by Paul M. Handley
Yale University Press, 512 pages, $38

Reviewed by Grant Evans

Paul Handley, an American journalist, thinks public figures should go around glad-handing people with smiles plastered on their faces in the manner of U.S. politicians. If they don’t, then they must have sinister or untrustworthy intentions. Mr. Handley spends 450 pages documenting what he sees as the underhanded attempts by the reigning “unsleeping” Thai king to establish himself as a modern absolute monarch, a devaraja. Thus the supercilious title of this book.

Despite Mr. Handley’s own intentions, his biography of King Bhumibol Adulyadej succeeds in engaging the reader with the complex personality of the Thai king and his long and eventful life. He emerges as a deeply conservative figure culturally, socially and politically. This is hardly surprising. But it is the king’s uniquely Thai spin on that conservatism which makes his life so fascinating.

The king recently celebrated his 60th year on the throne with a gala that enthralled Thais, but probably galled Mr. Handley. The hyperbole that permeated this event and often surrounds the monarchy in Thailand offends Mr. Handley’s egalitarian values and his “Western rationality.” Indeed, the book pivots on an old-fashioned polarity between the “rational” West and the “mystical” East with its ritualistic mumbo-jumbo.

In the opening chapters we are asked to reflect on how a boy born in the U.S. in 1927 and brought up as a child in “rational and egalitarian” Switzerland could possibly end up presiding over arcane rituals such as a plowing ceremony to encourage fertility in the land. Mr. Handley’s presentation of this is confusing, to say the least.

He seems to want his readers to believe that the future king is somehow not really Thai because of his love for things European and his knowledge of several European languages, rather than applauding his cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, what to make of Mr. Handley’s claim concerning the influence of Swiss rationality? In the 1930s, Switzerland was ruled by religiously and linguistically distinct cantons, and only gave the vote to women decades after they were enfranchised in Thailand. This state of affairs seems to have made no impression on the young prince at all. In fact, the future Thai king was not all that different from many other important Asian leaders who studied in the West and enjoyed their sojourns there, but refused on their return home to take Europe or the U.S. as their model for the future.

The Thai absolute monarchy was ready to jump when it was given a firm push into constitutional rule in 1932 by an elite group of civilians and soldiers frustrated by the Crown’s inability to cope with the Great Depression. Wrangling over power and prerogatives continued until 1935 when King Prajadhipok, the seventh Chakkri

Mr. Evans is a professor of anthropology at the University of Hong Kong and the École française d’Extrême-Orient. His next book is entitled The Last Century of Lao Royalty.
king since the establishment of the dynasty in the late 18th century, stepped down. The pre-eminent figure in Thai politics then was the army strongman Phibun Songkhram, whose predilection for Mussolini-style nationalism would (arguably) shape the fundamental contours of Thai politics for decades to come. Bhumibol’s older brother Prince Ananda, aged 10, was named the new king, but was not crowned until 1938. Eight years later, King Ananda died under mysterious circumstances, and King Bhumibol unexpectedly found himself on the throne.

Mr. Handley’s hostility to the Thai monarchy is plain throughout the book, and his discussion of this sad affair is typically jaundiced. All attest that the two brothers were very close, and there is no evidence that the 18-year-old Prince Bhumibol coveted the throne—quite the opposite, in fact. Without advancing the investigation at all, Mr. Handley leaves insinuations dangling in the air, as he does on many other occasions. The palace initially recorded the death as an accident, but this was quickly swamped by self-serving allegations, made by the likes of Phibun, that leftists murdered the king. In no time the case was irretrievably muddled, rendering it insoluble and leaving suspicion to fester on all sides.

In 1946, the 18-year-old king inherited a throne enfeebled by the antimonarchist rule of Phibun, who had made the military into a powerful political institution. King Bhumibol returned to Switzerland to finish his studies, and when he came back to rule in December 1951 with his new Queen Sirikit he was immediately confronted with a Phibun-led coup. The general and his cronies made it very clear to the young king where power lay. At this time the power of the military was being bolstered by the Cold War and massive U.S. support, which would continue for the next two decades.

Surrounded by a group of old princes who provided the king with advice, the palace set out to rebuild its power and prestige, and in particular to build solid links with the army. In 1957 these efforts paid off when royalist Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat carried out a coup against Phibun and sent him into exile. Since then the palace has done everything it can to bind the military to the king.

The king’s round of “archaic royal rituals,” as Mr. Handley likes to call them, was of course his primary responsibility as a constitutional monarch. Through these acts, royalty symbolized the political and cultural unity of the nation. That legitimacy is created by deliberate acts seems to puzzle Mr. Handley, who finds it hard not to see ritual as “irrational” and therefore its practice cynical. Dragging out another old cliché, Mr. Handley claims that only the “superstitious” peasants really fell for this. One wonders then what he makes of the hordes of urbanites who flooded the streets of Bangkok for the king’s 60th anniversary in June. That these rituals strike a deep chord across Thai society is clearly beyond Mr. Handley’s imagination, despite his years as a journalist there.

In its opening pages the book introduces traditional ideas of kingship to the reader, that of the righteous Buddhist king, a dhammaraja, and the Hindu idea of an absolute king, the devaraja. These ideas are found in various contexts in Thai culture and are often alluded to in the king’s ritu-
als. It is hardly surprising that the country’s cultural storehouse is drawn on to project an idea of the good society. It is another thing altogether to suggest that the aim of King Bhumibol is to re-establish such a kingship. Mr. Handley repeats these terms *ad nauseam*, never missing an opportunity to remind his reader of the allegedly devaraja or dhammaraja aims of King Bhumibol.

Naturally, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the palace was primarily interested in strengthening and consolidating its position in Thai society and not very concerned with democracy. The escalating Vietnam War nearby and the “communist challenge” made the military seem the best way of ensuring social stability. At no time was the palace in a position to challenge the successive military regimes by itself. The king's dissatisfaction with the results of military rule, its corruption and bureaucracy, finally came from his ever-deepening understanding of Buddhism and his search for some “Asian way” of development.

He was not alone in this quest. The king had become intensely involved in rural development projects and was seeking new directions. What was needed, he said, was “wisdom and intelligence coupled with honesty without any thought for financial gains. Anyone who wants to make money had better resign and go into business.” His attacks on capitalism and greed seemed to echo the leftists, but were informed by Buddhism.

On reflection, it is no surprise to find a king advancing a premodern-inspired critique of capitalist modernity. Yet, the king’s appeals to social and natural harmony, simplicity, and morality were paradoxically radical and conservative at the same time. Reflexively, such views aligned him with the forces of order rather than disorder, and in the early 1970s accounted for the king’s zigzagging between support for the military and support for reform. This contradictory trajectory of the king’s thinking and actions, which would become even more marked over time, should have been the focus of Mr. Handley’s analysis. Unfortunately, he strains to compress each maneuver by the king into a simplistic model of the devaraja.

The chapters on political turbulence in Thailand between 1974-76, and on the impact of the 1997 financial crisis, find Mr. Handley at his analytic best. The palace’s cautious support for the toppling of the military dictatorship in 1973 won it wide acclaim. But the ensuing social and political turmoil, combined with the communist revolution in Indochina during 1975, would soon thrust the palace back into the arms of the military with its support for a rightist coup in October 1976. Mr. Handley writes:

> *It was the synchronicity of all these things, the insurgency, his health, his son and the succession, frustration with capitalism and rural development, abandonment by allies, and the communist takeover of neighboring states—which propelled King Bhumibol’s and Queen Sirikit’s panicky descent into an unapologetic, violent conservatism, leading ultimately to the Thammasat [University] massacre. The fall of the Laotian monarchy in December 1975 was the final straw.*

The 1997 financial crisis brought old and new money to its knees, and threatened many of the palace’s investments. While the king inveighed against greed and called for self-sufficiency, his economic managers were scrambling to save the foundations of the king’s largesse. But the contradictions in palace discourse and practice were mirrored across Thai society, with the crash dramatizing just how much the country had changed as it was swept into a globalized world.
Mr. Handley holds the king responsible for the sorry state of Thai democracy.

Mr. Handley also has some important remarks on the uses and abuses of the lèse majesté laws in Thailand, dramatized most recently when supporters and opponents of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra threatened each other with lawsuits. The bickering made a mockery of the law's intent and highlighted once again that its clarification is long overdue.

Typically Mr. Handley overestimates the political power of the monarchy. But as in all constitutional monarchies, the Thai king is strictly constrained. Stepping onto the political front stage is always precarious. When he does so, as in the famous scene in May 1992 when the world witnessed two opposing generals on their knees before the king during his intervention to stop an escalating crisis, for Mr. Handley it is too little too late and its ulterior motive is the strengthening of the king's hand. He claims the king “consistently undermined the development of other permanent institutions,” such as political parties, and holds him responsible for the sorry state of Thai democracy. In a strange mirror image of royalist discourses, where the king is credited with all that is good in the land, here he is responsible mainly for what is wrong.

Mr. Handley seems to realize that his prejudices have got the better of him when, after criticizing the quality of the king's paintings and jazz music, he says that the point is not to be “uncharitable” but to criticize palace hype. It is not clear what Mr. Handley's artistic qualifications are, but surely in a biography these rather atypical pursuits of the king would normally draw more sympathetic treatment. There is no evidence that the king considers himself especially talented, but being a king and a jazz musician has ensured him a place in jazz encyclopedias regardless of the palace publicity machine. The king's active enjoyment of art and his public and private performances of jazz add yet another intriguing layer to his life.

The book has its inevitable chapters on the various members of the royal family and their trials—much of which is gossipy—and the number of claims prefaced by “it is said” crowd out the known facts in the manner of the tabloid press, rather than the Yale University Press. There is little attempt to evaluate such claims, or even the nature of gossip. It is surely a paradox of royalty that some of the most ardent gossips are royalists themselves. Indeed, one might argue that royalty should only start worrying when the gossip stops, because that will signify that nobody is interested.

But it does pertain to the crucial issue of succession. Even with his elegant, charming third wife whom he married in 2001 and who bore him a son in 2005, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn remains unpopular. He is overshadowed by his enormously popular, unmarried younger sister, Princess Maha Chakkri Sirindhorn, and the king has made it possible for her to succeed him. The issue hangs like a dark cloud over the Thai monarchy.

If, as Mr. Handley claims, King Bhumibol's aim has been to establish himself as some kind of revamped absolute monarch, then the king has surely failed. In the last five years Thai politics has been dominated by billionaire Thaksin, who is the king's opposite in every respect. Mr. Handley is right to argue that the King's vision is a state ruled by Buddhist principles. But when the king lectures his people on self-sufficiency—"If one is moderate in one's desires, one will have less craving. If one has less craving, one will take less ad-
vantage of others. If all nations hold this concept... without being extreme or insatiable in one’s desires, the world will be a happier place”—he sounds more like a forest monk than a devaraja.

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Reviewed by Peter Wonacott

At the turn of the 21st century, China was making its mark on the global economy, leaving behind the deep poverty of the past. Glitzy Shanghai and the sprawling factory towns of Guangdong province were obvious signs of this transformation. But it also occurred in more obscure places, such as industrial parks that only a few years before had been fishing villages or pig farms.

The village of Doumen, for example, whose economic mainstay was growing sugarcane and bananas, became host to the Xin Qing Science & Technology Industrial Park. Located just outside the Special Economic Zone of Zhuhai, today Doumen produces mobile phones and computer games on the thinnest of margins. Among the multinationals that have set up shop there is Flextronics, the world’s largest contract manufacturer and an expert at finding the cheapest and most efficient ways to get its products to the global market.

What lures Flextronics and other MNCs to China is a grand three-way bargain. Companies get affordable employees—en-

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Mr. Wonacott is a reporter based in New Delhi for The Wall Street Journal. He reported from China from 1994-2005.