

Several colleagues have encouraged me to blog the comments I made during the Handley panel at the International Conference on Thai Studies this past January 2008. One of three panels on the monarchy organised by Thongchai Winichakul, the panel, chaired by Michael Herzfeld, was called Critical Comments on Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles* (Yale University Press 2006). Unlike most other panels at the conference, this one was billed as a roundtable discussion. The conference organisers did not require papers in advance for this panel. Each of the four panelists was to speak briefly, and a free-flowing discussion was to follow. Indeed, the four speakers (Nidhi Eoseewong, Annette Hamilton, Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, and me) did not coordinate their remarks beforehand. To my knowledge, none of us knew what the others would say.

The remarks that follow are necessarily edited, in the sense that at the time of the conference I had no intention of making my comments available for a wider audience. I spoke from notes, sentence fragments as well as complete sentences, and marginal notes I made as others were speaking. In the order above, I spoke after Nidhi and Annette Hamilton, and before Ajarn Kobkua . During my own presentation I edited out some material in order to keep within the time allotted to each speaker. For the purposes of this blog, I have filled out the incomplete sentences, polished the translations, and included citations to the works I referred to. I have also included, as best I can recall, a few things I threw in while speaking that were not in my original notes. I have resisted the temptation to add new material. My objective was not to provide a tidy argument but to provoke questions and discussion. - CJR

## **Talk on Handley book, Thai Studies, Jan. 2008, Thammasat University**

### **Craig Reynolds**

For my own contribution to building a context in which we might discuss *The King Never Smiles*, I'd like to make just a few points. A colleague of mine in another country in another field once gave me some advice. He said, why do academics think they should save their best stuff until last? They should write like journalists. They should put their big points at the beginning, not the end. I don't think this advice is always the best advice, but in the circumstances of today's panel, where time is limited, I'll be following this advice. Also, we are dealing with a book written by a journalist, and he has taught the academics this very lesson: don't save your best stuff until last. So here are my headlines, what journalists call "the angle" of the story.

#### **First headline. What's all the fuss about? *The King Never Smiles* is a very good book.**

Criticisms can certainly be made of the book, and Annette Hamilton has mentioned several. The book also has many merits. It is well-researched. To a large extent it is accountable with footnotes, a full bibliography, interviews (some interviews are confidential, with no source given). The book is written in plain language, and is mercifully free of academic jargon. It lays out in a straightforward manner the rise of the monarchy since the end of World War II by telling the story of the king's life. It deals with difficult and awkward subjects, such as the death of King Ananda, and tackles them as best Handley can, given the limitations, including his own, which I'll come to in a minute.

Handley's book is different from anything previously published in English, because it talks about the people around the king, the palace as an office that is a vital part of the monarchy as an institution. And it talks about the palace's use of the media to promote the institution. In this respect Handley's book complements and augments recent studies by Duncan McCargo on "network monarchy" and James Ockey on the privy council.<sup>1</sup>

I don't really want to debate the merits and shortcomings of the book here. One thing is for sure. No academic could – or, perhaps I should say would – have written *The King Never Smiles*.

**Second headline. What's all the fuss about? Handley is a farang journalist. That's what the fuss is about.**

Is *The King Never Smiles* an academic book? You could certainly assign it in class without embarrassment or excessive explanation, unlike Rayne Kruger's *The Devil's Discus* (London 1964), which until this point was the only really interesting book on the personal life of the king. But *The Devil's Discus* is quirky, something of an oddity. Its sources are obscure, and the book had the specific objective of exonerating Pridi Phanomyong, who was prime minister at the time, of King Ananda's death.

On 5 December 2007 a virulent, fear-mongering editorial appeared in *Manager Online*. The editorial denounced an invitation to "the foreign, free-lance columnist," who "has already had a big role in trying to destroy (*bawn thamlai*) the monarchy," so he can present "a paper seeking to attack and destroy the Privy Council" at the international Thai studies conference. This person presumably is Paul Handley. The Thai government tends to worry more about foreign journalists than about academics in sensitive cultural matters, and Handley is a farang journalist – an outsider. Who is he to comment on this sacred institution, on our beloved king, who has held the country together through crisis after crisis since the 1970s? This has been the reaction of many Thai people to Handley's book.

**Third headline. What's all the fuss about? Thais have been writing in Thai about the monarchy, the ninth king of the dynasty, and its political and economic power for some time now.**

Although I don't want to debate the merits of the book here, I think one feature of the book deserves comment. Almost all the sources are in English, apart from two books by the late Princess Galyani Vadhana, the king's sister, cited in the first chapter, including *Mae lao hai fang (Things My Mother Told Me)* (Chiangmai 1995). How different would the book have been if Handley had read more Thai? What would Handley have said if he had read the Thai newspapers, magazines, books, and academic studies on the monarchy produced over the past thirty years or so? If you read some of the reactions to the Handley book, by Thais as well as foreigners, you have the feeling that the *lése majesty* law so stifles comment on the monarchy that nothing of any substance can be said. Suddenly Handley's book appeared, and there are all these revelations. I believe this is a misconception of what has been said about the monarchy in Thailand, in Thai.

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *The Pacific Review*, 18.4 (Dec. 2005), 499-519; James Ockey, "Monarch, Monarchy, Succession and Stability in Thailand," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46.2 (Aug. 2005), 115-127.

The Thai public sphere is not for the faint hearted. Debates are vigorous, waged across generations and classes as we saw in the huge political struggle throughout 2006 that resulted in the coup of September that year and the ouster of the prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. There is a lot of passion in the Thai public sphere, as well as some very tough criticism, much of it directed at specific individuals. People settle old scores, accuse others of hypocrisy, of lacking backbone, of shaving the truth, of switching sides, and so forth. It's a very rough and very noisy world out there. You might need a bullet-proof vest.

Since the September 2006 coup there has been a lot of very pointed criticism of what happened, and of the circumstances behind the coup. I'm thinking particularly of the preface to a book on the coup published by Fah Diawkan Press in January 2007, and the series of questions that motivated production of the volume. One of these questions was, "And why has the monarchy, which is supposed to be 'above' politics, become a key instrument (*khruang mue*) of the coup group?"<sup>2</sup>

There has been a lot of playing around with the language that describes the king's relationship to the formal political system. The coup group claimed to have carried out "a coup for the democratic system with the king at its head," as stated in the subtitle of the Fah Diawkan book. Yet elsewhere, the king is described as subordinate to the constitution: "the king is under the constitution" (*tai ratthathammanun*). So the Thai terms for what the English language calls "constitutional monarchy" is up for grabs. It is obvious that "a coup for the democratic system with the king at its head" does not mention the constitution, so it can hardly be a translation of "constitutional monarchy."

Struggles to change the way the monarchy is talked about in Thai, a war of position, as Gramsci might call it, began long before the coup. Many hands have been at work researching one of the "accessories" of the monarchy, the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), including Porphant Ouyyanont, a speaker in one of the other monarchy panels. In late 2006 Porphant published a lengthy paper in Thai spelling out the financial dealings of the CPB in great detail and making the point that the CPB has "the appearance of political neutrality." He said also that "the monarchy is above political scrutiny and criticism." He shows in great detail how and why the investments of the CPB have increased the economic power of the monarchy.<sup>3</sup>

I haven't made a serious study of how public discussion of the monarchy in Thai has changed over recent decades, although in preparing these comments I had the idea that this would be a very worthwhile research project. In any case, I have three more examples, all of them quite recent. The first is a heated debate that took place in 2001 and 2004 in the pages of *Sinlapawatthanatham [Art and Culture] (SW)* between Thongchai Winichakul (University of Wisconsin) and Saichol Satyanurak (Chiangmai University) about what Thongchai called

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<sup>2</sup> Thanaphon Iawsakun, ed. *Rathaprahan 19 kanya rathaprahan phua rabop prachathipathai an mi phramahakasat song pen pramuk [The 19 September Coup: A Coup for the Democratic System with the King as its Head]* (Bangkok: Fah Diawkan Press, 2007), p. (10).

<sup>3</sup> Porphant Ouyyanont, "Samnakngan sapsin suan phramahakasast kap botbat kanlongthun thang thurakit [The Crown Property Bureau and its Role in Business Investment]" in Pasuk Phongpaichit, ed., *Kantosu khong thun thai kanmuang watthanatham phua khwam yu rot [The Struggle of Thai Capital: Politics, Culture, and Survival]* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2006), p. 60. A later version of this paper appeared in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, eds., *Thai Capital after the 1997 Crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), chapter 6.

“royal-nationalist history” (*baep rachachatniyom*). This debate began with a speech by Thongchai in 2001 published in November in (*SW*), which was answered by Saichol in *SW*, August 2004. Thongchai responded to her with a riposte in *SW* in September 2004. The argument was, among other things, about when the new royal-nationalist history began. Should it be taken back to the heyday of the leftists in the 1950s, the work of Udom Sisuwan and Jit Poumisak and their histories of 1950 and 1957 respectively in terms of social formations, which pushed to one side the significance of the monarchy as a key Thai institution? Or was the new royal nationalist history a more recent product of the tumultuous political change in the mid-1970s? In *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* (Bangkok 1957) Jit had refused to refer to the name of the king or the institution of the monarchy with proper language, but had insisted simply on calling the king *kasat* (Skt. *kśatriya*). For his part, Thongchai tried out another term for the king, *jao krungthep*, the Bangkok king, or the king in Bangkok. In her discussion, Ajarn Saichol takes us back to the period just after World War II when criticism of the Thai ruling class was particularly sharp and colorful. If I were teaching modern Thai history in Thailand, I would be assigning this animated debate between two prominent historians as required reading for my students.

The other day I was discussing the Thongchai-Saichol debate with a friend, who said the debate could not serve as one of my examples of the changing role of the monarch. It was not about the role of the monarchy at all, but about the writing of history. I disagreed, pointing out that the royal intervention in October 1973 had changed the way the history of the institution would now be written. In the “old,” pre-1970s royal nationalist history, the king was merely responsible for preserving national sovereignty. In the eyes of the “new” royal nationalist history, the king had become a democrat as a consequence of the royal intervention in October 1973. This point about the change in the role of the monarch over the past thirty years or so was just made by Ajarn Nidhi in his remarks a few minutes ago.

My second example comes from a recent book by Pichit Likhitkitsombun, an economist at Thammasat University, *Notes on 19.9.49 Democracy: The Return of the Bureaucratic Polity*, the first part of which is comprised of columns he wrote for the online *Pracha Thai* web board after the September 2006 coup. As Ajarn Pichit himself says, no one escaped criticism in his columns: the extreme rightist intellectuals; the two-faced intellectuals; and the October 1973 intellectuals. He analysed the problems of the urban and rural subaltern classes, as well as the discourse about “the Thaksin system.”<sup>4</sup>

Ajarn Pichit is the kind of writer who wakes you up if you are dozing off while reading his book. Here is a sample of his discussion, in answer to the question, where are the October intellectuals?

The “October intellectuals” refers to the group of intellectuals who participated in, and were shaken by, the 14 October 1973 event, which had its origins in ideas across the political spectrum. It brought together intellectuals including the royalist rightwing, the liberals, and even the socialists to drive out the military dictators at that time. Ultimately, the leftwing was able to seize control of the leadership of the student movement, and the 6 October 1976 massacre ensued. Nowadays the intellectuals of that generation have

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<sup>4</sup> Pichit Likhitkitsombun, *Maihet prachathipatai 19:9:49 kanklapma khong ammatayathipatak [Notes on 19.9.49 Democracy: The Return of the Bureaucratic Polity]* (Bangkok: Prachathat Press, 2007), p. 7.

dispersed into various occupations as teachers, university lecturers and administrators, high-ranking civil servants, politicians, and [people working in] mass communications. But from their diverse origins thirty years ago, those groups have succeeded in unifying their political ideology in an unprecedented way to the point that could be termed the “moment of consensus” of Thai intellectuals.

To term this phenomenon a “consensus” gives the impression that these various groups of intellectuals gradually came to agree on certain points. But what actually happened is that the royalist rightists did not really have to change their position in any important respect. It was the liberals, and particularly the leftwing, who had to swing around to the right. From [the incident of] May 1992 and up to the present day, their thinking and their self-interest has been intimately linked to the rightwing, namely, that of a traditionalist and authoritarian ideology.

Somsak Jeamthirasakun has offered an astute analysis in his article on “The Triumph of the 14 October Intellectuals” by referring to that consensus of contemporary intellectuals as “the spirit of the age” This can be summarized in three aspects.

The first and most important point is “reconciliation with the monarchy” both overtly and surreptitiously. The corollary of this is “reconciliation with the military,” because [the October intellectuals] see that that neither the monarchy nor the military is any longer “the main issue” in Thai society and politics.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis spells out the complex constituencies, strategic alliances, and unlikely alliances that have puzzled many foreign and domestic observers since the September 2006 coup. To my mind, the discussion of the role of the monarchy in this book, and in the Fah Diawkan book on the coup I quoted earlier, would have been unthinkable a decade ago. A lot has changed.

My third and final example comes from the work of a young social scientist, Chanida Chitbanthit, the author of *The Royally-Initiated Projects: The Making of King Bhumibol's Royal Hegemony*, published in Thai in June 2007. A phrase in the title of the Thai MA thesis, on which this book is based, was even more catchy: *Royal NGOs*. It's difficult to pick the best quotation from this excellent book – you can find something on almost every page. Here are some samples from the beginning of chapter six, “‘Network Monarchy’: The Making of the Historical Bloc and Intellectuals Engaged in the Royally-Initiated Projects:”

This study is suggesting that the making of the king's royal hegemony proceeded by means of a “historical bloc” (*klum thang prawattisat*), a process that connected intellectuals with the population at large...This historical bloc was comprised of diverse groups and classes who combined to pursue the activity of disseminating the ideas that came from royal initiatives.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-45. In other words, for the October intellectuals, the main struggle is not with the monarchy or the military, but with “the Thaksin system.” - CJR

Intellectuals were key drivers of the process I am referring to, and in this chapter I will suggest which intellectual groups had the most important roles in the projects that stemmed from royal initiatives at different periods.

The royally initiated projects in the period of development for purposes of security offered an opportunity and made it possible for the king to build relationships among a wide range of citizen groups, which, in turn, allowed him to implant (*plukfang*) development ideology according to his own lights. Constructing the historical bloc for the royally initiated projects at this time involved building various relationships through students by means of royal activities such as concerts, speeches, and handing university students their degrees. Building relationships with the middle and aristocratic classes involved sponsoring weddings. In addition, we find the building of relationships with technocrats, civil servants, villagers, and highland peoples through a wide range of activities connected with the royally initiated projects.<sup>6</sup>

There is further discussion about the network monarchy that resulted from these efforts, and Ajarn Chanida credits the monarchy's use of mass psychology (*jit witthaya muanchon*) to build the historical bloc and promote support for the royally initiated projects. The reader of this book is left in no doubt as to how the incumbent monarch has made use of the royal projects to promote his own popularity and loyalty to the institution.

To sum up, then, Thai authors have analysed how the legitimacy of the present monarch has evolved. They have identified supporters of the monarchy and organisations in civil society that have helped to make the monarchy what it is today. As we speak, many students are doing research on MA theses that will carry this work further. The king's "political neutrality" has been exposed time and again for what it is, namely, the mere appearance of political neutrality. In reality, the king is not neutral. He is not a mere head-of-state. Over the past fifty-sixty years the language used to talk about the monarch and the monarchy, and the functioning of the monarchy as a cultural, political, and economic institution, has changed dramatically.

I am now wondering what Handley's book would look like if it were translated into Thai, and this brings me to my final headline, one that I can imagine being written in my lifetime:

### **Handley Book Translated into Thai and Published in Thailand. No Big deal.**

I can hear my Thai friends saying, "Nothing new here, this is ordinary stuff."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chanida Chitbanthit, *Khronkan an nuang ma jak phraratchadamri kansathapana phraratcha-amnatnam nai phrabat somdet phrajaoyuhua [The Royally-Initiated Projects: The Making of King Bhumibol's Royal Hegemony]* (Bangkok: The Foundation for the Promotion for the Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2007), pp. 371, 379.

<sup>7</sup> In the discussion period, a participant in the audience pointed out that Rayne Kruger's book, *The Devil's Discus* (1964), which was supposed to have caused such offence to the royal family, had been translated into Thai about 1977 and had remained in print for some thirty years until it was banned a few years ago.