

วัดเบญจมบพิตร : การแสดงออกซึ่งความเป็นไทยและ การเขียนประวัติศาสตร์ของรัฐชาติ

Wat Benchama Bophit : A Material Manifestation of the Thai Identity and National Historiography

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รองศาสตราจารย์ สาขาวิชาครุศาสตร์สถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบ คณะครุศาสตร์อุตสาหกรรม
สถาบันเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าคุณทหารลาดกระบัง

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คำสำคัญ :

การศึกษาเชิงวิพากษ์
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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้ทำการศึกษาวัดเบญจมบพิตรโดยคำนึงถึงบทบาทด้าน 1) การเป็นสื่อแสดงอำนาจรัฐ 2) การแสดงออกถึงอัตลักษณ์อันพึงประดานาของชนชั้นปักรองที่ได้ถูกนำไปใช้ในการสร้างเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมแห่งชาติซึ่งรัฐจัดกันในนามของ “ความเป็นไทย” และ 3) การทำหน้าที่สื่อท่อนอุดมการณ์ความเป็นรัฐชาติจากชนชั้นนำของประเทศ

อนึ่ง สาระของงานวิจัย ซึ่งตั้งอยู่บนทฤษฎีการศึกษาวัฒนธรรมยุคหลังอาณา尼คม ได้ใช้ให้เห็นถึงกรรมวิธีด้านการสื่อสัญลักษณ์ทางสถาปัตยกรรมโดยวัดเบญจมบพิตร ในการสร้างภาพแห่งความเป็นอารยะสำหรับรัฐชาติ สมัยใหม่ ตลอดจนการแสดงออกถึงเอกลักษณ์ “ความเป็นไทย” เพื่อใช้ต่อสู้กับการแพร่ขยายอิทธิพลจากมหาอำนาจตะวันตกผ่านลัทธิการล่าอาณา尼คม โดยที่การศึกษาดังกล่าวยังได้เปิดเผยและโต้แย้งต่อไปว่า การล่าอาณา尼คมในอุษาอาคนย์นั้นไม่ได้ถือกำเนิดมาจากการแข่งขันระหว่างมหาอำนาจตะวันตกแต่เพียงอย่างเดียว ทว่ายังเป็นผลมาจากการแย่งชิงผลประโยชน์ระหว่างรัฐต่าง ๆ ในภูมิภาคอีกด้วย ดังนั้น สยามจึงไม่ได้ตกเป็นเหยื่อหรือผู้ถูกกระทำแต่เพียงฝ่ายเดียวดังที่ปราภูมิตามคำอธิบายทางประวัติศาสตร์ซึ่งเป็นที่ยอมรับและได้รับการเผยแพร่กันอย่างกว้างขวาง แต่ในความเป็นจริงแล้ว สยามกลับเป็นหนึ่งในผู้ล่าอาณา尼คมเช่นกัน



The Ubosot of Wat Benchama Bophit.

Source : Koompong Noobanjong

นอกจากนี้ โดยอาศัยการเสวนาเชิงวิพากษ์เกี่ยวกับวิวัฒน์
“ความเป็นไทย” เนื้อหาทั้งหมดในข้างต้น ยังได้นำเสนอประเด็นสำคัญต่าง ๆ
ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ “ความเป็นชาติ” ผ่านปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง 1) วัดเบญจมบพิตร
ในฐานะของสัญลักษณ์แห่ง “สยามอิริยาบ” หรือสยามสมัยใหม่ และ 2) การ
เปลี่ยนแปลงความหมายด้านสัญลักษณ์ของวัดเบญจมบพิตรอันเป็นผล
สืบเนื่องจากบริบททางสังคมและการเมืองที่แปรเปลี่ยนไป

Abstract

This research presents a critical inquiry on Wat Benchama Bophit in Bangkok with respect to its roles in : 1) functioning as a means of power meditation for the state and ruling authority; 2) signifying the national and cultural identities known as “Thainess” or *khwampenthai*; and 3) expressing the ideological views of the ruling elites on Thai nationhood.

Informed by the post-colonial theories, the study examines this so-called “Marble Temple” through its politics of representation in creating Siam’s self-image and the Thai identity for a “modernized” nation-state to counter Western expansions. The investigations on the symbolism and iconography of the temple further reveal that the practice of colonization in Southeast Asia did not exclusively come from the West, but took place among states within the region as well. Siam in the 19th century was a regional colonial power, not a victim of Western aggressions as widely publicized by the conventional historiography.

By utilizing *khwampenthai* as a mode of problematization, the upcoming discussions address several important issues related to the subject of Thai nationhood, and evolve around the themes of : 1) Wat Benchama Bophit as a material embodiment of the “civilized” Siam; and 2) the transformation of the temple’s meanings as a result of the country’s changing socio-political contexts.

1. Introduction

The histories of Southeast Asian nations are variably framed by their encounters with colonialism, as exhibited by architecture of the state symbolizing struggles for national independence from colonial rules throughout the region. These built forms encompass several building types, including religious structures sponsored by the state and/or ruling authority.

Unlike its neighbors, Siam--which later became Thailand--did not experience a direct colonization by any Western power. However, a number of recent scholarly publications have disclosed that the creation of Thai nationhood during the mid-19th century was in fact driven by the ruling elites’ desire to counter Western influence in order to preserve their authority by formulating a modern nation-state via the processes of Westernization and modernization.¹

Although theological dominance in the socio-cultural and intellectual spheres of the 19th century Siam was in decline,² religious buildings continued to serve as a grand symbolic device in the politics of representations in architecture and urban space. During the reign of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910), the practice of erecting such “sacred-cum-secular” edifices was epitomized by the commission of Wat Benchama Bophit in Bangkok, widely known as the Marble Temple.

Informed by the post-colonial theories, this research presents a critical inquiry on the temple regarding its roles in : 1) providing a means of power meditation for the state and ruling authority; 2) signifying the national and cultural identities known as “Thainess” or *khwampenthai*; and 3) expressing the ideological views of the ruling elites on Thai nationhood. Consequently, not only do the investigations on the architectural symbolism and iconography of Wat Benchama Bophit illustrate Chulalongkorn’s efforts in turning Siam into a “civilized” and “modernized” nation-state, which incorporated the use of cultural artifacts in terms of a material embodiment for his vision of the kingdom and its history, but also argue that the practice of colonization in Southeast Asia did not exclusively come from the West, but took place among states within the region as well. Siam was a regional colonial power, not just a wronged victim of Western aggressions as usually propagated by the conventional historiography.

In examining the ramifications of the colonial past that have continued to affect the present narratives of the Thai nationhood, the studies focus on the construction and transformations of the Thai identity. By utilizing *khwampenthai* as a mode of problematization, the upcoming discussions address several important issues related to the subject of Thai nationhood, and evolve around the themes of : 1) The Marble Temple as a material embodiment of the “civilized” Siam; and 2) the transformation of its meanings as a result of the country’s changing socio-political contexts.

2. Architecture, Identity, Ideology, and Power : a Post-colonial Perspective

Drawing on linguistic theories, a remark can be made that architecture signified meanings through representations, just like words and signs in language.³ Buildings represented their meanings in the same way as proper names stood for the objects denoted by them. Because the meanings were constructed along with the practices that produced them, the uses of stylistic elements presupposed the practices aimed to provide justifications for architectural significations.⁴

For architecture of the state like Wat Benchama Bophit, the practice of power mediation signified its symbolic meanings. While the exercise of power always associated with desire, this link had to be hidden if the desire and power were to be legitimized and materialized. The masking of power in built forms : 1) originated from rapid changes in political situations, which required swift moves from one method of exercising power to another to conceal itself in the transitional process; and 2) derived from the fact that a naked will to power was morally unacceptable. Hence, self-deceit or hypocrisy was needed to legitimize one's rise to power in terms of the common good of a society, which was normally carried out through an allusion to ideologies.⁵ Although buildings and public space propagating political contents usually operated under an ideological guise by the creation of identity, the identification ascribed to an ideology did not present any intrinsic quality of it, but simply represented what it created. Buildings were not inherently subjugating or liberating, but people employed them to generate such meanings. By a discursive mode of signification, architecture could serve interests for which it was not initially intended.⁶

In addition, the writings of Thai national history had collectively demonstrated that colonialism--conspicuous by its physical absence--had served as a main source of references for the constructions of the country's self-image and the Thai identity.⁷ So, the subjects of colonial domination and resistance

together with colonial collaboration and competition constitute a framework of inquiry on the politics of representation at the Marble Temple. Being a specifically post-modern intellectual discourse, post-colonialism comprises a set of theories from diverse academic disciplines, consisting of reactions to, and analysis of, legacies of colonialism as well as imperialism.⁸

As will be shown in the forthcoming analyses, the design of Wat Benchama Bophit suggested that the Thais were not voiceless in dealing with Western expansions. For instance, by resorting to a method of hybridization,⁹ a Cartesian grid system was integrated with the Siamese form of the ordination hall or *ubosot*. Accordingly, it could be argued that the Marble Temple offered a means for power negotiation with the West in a postulate of hybridity.¹⁰

In spite of the above complexities, the relationships among architecture, power, identity, and ideology are quite essential to understand the mediation of power at Wat Benchama Bophit. On the one hand, the temple's Western and modern architectural elements were parts of a comprehensive program to "refashion" the self-image of the ruling elites via new material and symbolic practices intended to maintain and legitimize their status and authority. On the other hand, this stylistically hybridized structure testified to the process of power negotiations, in which the powerful Western culture found itself being appropriated by an asymmetric counter-colonial resistance drawing upon many diverse methods of self-determination to defy, delegitimize, discard, and displace the tremendous power of the West.¹¹

In any case, the said polarity portrays two sides of the same coin. Whereas conventional Thai historiography has always presented the Marble Temple in terms of a material manifestation for the royal elite's wisdom in appropriating Western culture to negotiate or even resist and defy Western domination, this research would like to remind that the same building too could be interpreted as an indication of the elites' collusion and collaboration with Western powers.

3. Wat Benchama Bophit as a Representation of the “Civilized” Siam



Above : The Ubosot (Ordination Hall) at Wat Benchama Bophit.

Below : The Replica Image of Phra Phutta Chinarat (Buddha Jinaraja).

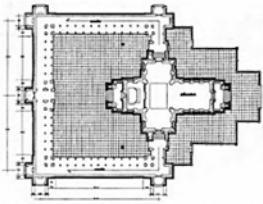
Source : Koompong Noobanjong

After his journey to Europe in 1897, King Rama V commenced the project for a garden residence named Dusit Palace within a walking distance of the Grand Palace. Linking the two was Ratchadamnoen Avenue surrounded by several handsome European-style mansions built for Chulalongkorn's descendants.¹² As the entire area around the new palace known as Dusit district was converted to a suburban enclave, a need for a space for the socialization of the entire royal elites arose.¹³

In order to accommodate such necessity, King Rama V renovated an old monastery originally called Wat Laem or Wat Saithong standing within his garden palace boundary that was pulled down during the road construction. The sovereign eventually renamed it to Wat Benchama Bophit Dusitvanaram, simply called Wat Benchama Bophit meaning temple of the Fifth King. The most recognized feature was the ordination hall, clad in white Carrara marble from Italy; whence its English name the Marble Temple.¹⁴

Archival document disclosed that the use of white marble came from an idea of Carlo Allegri, an engineer, who also arranged for King Rama V to select the stained glass for the ordination hall during the monarch's brief visit to Milan in May 1907.¹⁵ Furthermore, under the supervision of King Rama V's half-brother Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongse (Naris)--highly credited as the great teacher of traditional Thai art and architecture--the team of Italian artists and architects employed at Dusit Palace worked here as well.¹⁶

The foundation stone of Wat Benchama Bophit was laid on March 1, 1900.¹⁷ Eighteen months later, the construction of the ordination hall or *ubosot* commenced, but remained incomplete until after Chulalongkorn's death.¹⁸ Based on Prince Naris' design, this building has been hailed as a masterpiece because it broke away “from the traditional construction of a Siamese temple”¹⁹ reminiscent the concept of eclecticism in Europe during the 1860s-1870s.²⁰ The edifice housed a sacred



A layout Drawing of the Ubosot.

Source : Manop Isaradej, “สถาปัตยกรรม ฝีพระหัตถ์สมเด็จเจ้าพระยา นริศรานุวัดติวงศ์ [Architectural Works of Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongse]” (M. Arch. Thesis, Silpakorn University, 1990), 181.

The Galleries of the Buddha Images.

Source : Wikipedia, *Marble Temple* [online], accessed 9 October 2011. Available from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wat_Benchamabophit_Dusitvanaram_04.jpg

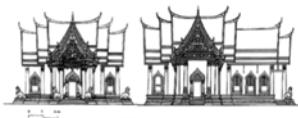


and revered Buddha replica image known as Phra Phutta Chinarat (Buddha Jinaraja), arguably the most beautiful statue of Buddha in Siam, with ashes of King Rama V later buried beneath it.²¹

Unlike typical layout for temple complexes, the ordination hall at Wat Benchama Bophit was not placed at the center of the court space, or being surrounded by galleries--known as *rabieang kot*--on four sides. Instead, it has been integrated as a part of the enclosure, with two arms of the galleries extending out from the *ubosot*. The juxtaposition of the ordination hall and galleries, then, required a solution for visual differences in height between these two structures. As a consequence, rather than having the usual multilayered-roofs, the superstructure of the ordination hall utilized five levels of tiered roofs, leading the eyes through a smooth vertical transition by creating a visual hierarchy of roofs from the highest (the *ubosot*) to the lowest points (the *rabieang kot*).²² The galleries housed fifty-two Buddha images, collected by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (Damrong), an influential figure who was one of Chulalongkorn's half-brothers.²³

The Thais' aesthetic esteem for Wat Benchama Bophit largely stemmed from its elegant proportions in conjunction with the materiality. The design of the ordination hall was adjusted to support the modularity of the finishing material--the marble slabs cut into equal pieces regulated by a modern principle of Cartesian grid--rendering a rational proportion of the edifice's formal and spatial organizations. By means of shortening, de-curving, and regularizing the roof components, Prince Naris modified the traditional form for the roof structure of the *ubosot* to suit the tectonic capacity of the marble slabs, generating a more serene and sturdy visual expressions for the overall profile of the structure.²⁴

A number of scholarly publications on architecture of the fifth reign devoted considerable attention to Wat Benchama Bophit. Nevertheless, they mainly saw the building as an accouterment of the royal identity acquisition, and largely ignored its symbolic implications for politics.²⁵ Although some



Façade Drawing of the Ubosot at Wat Benchama Bophit
Source : Karl Döring, *Architectural Drawings of Historic Buildings and Places in Thailand*, redrafted by Li-Zenn Publishing Co., Ltd. (Bangkok : Li-Zenn Publishing Co., Ltd, 2008), 126-127.

recent studies convincingly pointed out that : 1) Chulalongkorn's appropriations of Western forms and modernity actually encompassed political motives as exemplified by his commission of the Marble Temple; and 2) this architectural masterpiece of Prince Naris was a reflection of King Rama V's view and ideology of the Thai nationhood, the authors did not quite clearly elaborated on the theoretical premises employed in their investigations.²⁶

Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, rituals, and practices usually functioned as a point of departure for inquiring into the politics of representations at Wat Benchama Bophit. Influenced by the Khmer culture, Siamese architecture was infused with symbolism bounded with a distinct notion of the universe and sacredness. Such a cosmological idea was combined with the utilization of Western materials and modern concept of spatial arrangement of the Marble Temple. Albeit being a deviation from the traditional model, the layout of the *ubosot* and *rabieang kot* originated from a square-shaped mandala diagram, depicting the *traiphumi* sacred cosmology.²⁷

A mediation of monarchical power via religious structures was nothing new in Siam, but the signification of the regal authority by the *ubosot* at Wat Benchama Bophit did not strictly adhere to the convention either. Whereas its spatial planning and architectural iconography symbolized the imagery *traiphumi* cosmology, the white marble and Cartesian grid system manifested the existence of the holy universe on the earthly realm that could be physically experienced. Rather than being perceived as opposite polarities, or separation between the sacred and profane, the dualism of the ordination hall was complimentary and unifying. The coexistence of the divine cosmic model and the physical reality became a discourse of "homologous opposition" strategy for the king and ruling elites to assert their authority.²⁸ Therefore, not only was this building an expression of the consecrated Hindu-Buddhist universe : the house of god, but also a spiritual residence of a monarch, who was an *avatar* of the deity possessing both superior celestial power and modern knowledge.

The application of Hindu-Buddhist reliefs at the Marble Temple, then, mediated the authority of the kings and the ruling elites, bestowing them with creative and assertive powers. Apart from securing the dominant position and preserving the status quo of the monarchy in Thai society under the guise of religious devotion, the homologous opposition of the ordination hall kept the populace in place through spiritual indoctrination and domination. It instilled the people that were born as subalterns because of their poor *karma* from the past lives. Only by committing good deeds--including a loyalty to the sovereign--could that person be reincarnated in a better place.

Be that as it may, Wat Benchama Bophit was dissimilar from other buildings in Dusit district in manifesting the royal authority. Unlike beautiful and spacious Dusit Palace and other regal mansions along Ratchadamnoen Avenue,²⁹ the Marble Temple by its virtue of a religious structure was practically accessible to everyone and became a quasi-public utility. For instance, the monastery on the temple ground lodged an ecclesiastical college for young men of humble origins to get their education. During the latter half of Chulalongkorn's reign, the temple's ground became a place where different socio-economic classes could interact as well. King Rama V often held annual fund-raising fairs, where the royal elites including the king himself assumed entrepreneurial roles by running stalls to raise money for the temple.³⁰ Aside from serving as a showcase for the cultural modernization of the elites, the *fête* at Wat Benchama Bophit was as a well-crafted public relation measure, rendering the image of King Rama V as a benign and progressive monarch, and helped him cultivate immense popularity with the populace.³¹

While much had been said on the subject of the Marble Temple as a material embodiment of the refined and forward-thinking image for the royal Self as much as for the cultural and national identity of the modern absolutist Siam, few studies realized that the “the nation of Siam” was a concept completely foreign to the Thais. On the contrary, it was invented during the 19th century as a result of the Thais'

experience from encountering colonialism.³² In antagonizing the Europeans' expansions, Chulalongkorn reformed and reorganized the administrative system, changing Siam from an *ancient régime* to a modern nation-state. Nonetheless, the king's notion of nation, or *chat*, was vastly different from the nationalistic principles of the contemporary Western regimes, focusing on the ideals of citizenship, civil rights, and liberty. For him, *chat* was more akin to Louis XIV's vision of the state, where the royal subjects divided into orders by birth were united as one socio-political entity under a divine ruler.³³ In other words, King Rama V's vision of *chat* is an amalgamation between the Indo-Buddhist notion of righteous kingship or *dharmaraja* and European absolutism into an idea of nation uniting the Siamese of all classes and races in the personality of the sovereign.³⁴ His concept was strengthened by the holy Buddha Jinaraja in the *ubosot*, which was a representation of the perfection of a crown according to the *chakravatin* or the King of Kings belief.³⁵

At Wat Benchama Bophit, Chulalongkorn's idea of a modern administration that instituted a nation or *chat* was articulated by the design of the ordination hall. Being a part of King Rama V's hegemonic discourse, the temple was abundant with regal paraphernalia and ministerial iconographical references. To cite some examples, the pediments of the *rabieang kot* were decorated with emblems of ten ministries. The royal seals denoted his majesty's business in different capacities--*garuda* (man-bird) for foreign affairs, *airavata* (three-headed elephant) for royal correspondence, *unaloame* (a sacred script for the Sanskrit syllable *aum*) for colonial affairs over Laos, Cambodia, and Malaya, and *chakra* (disk) for domestic royal commands--embellished the pediments of the *ubosot*. They were accompanied by images of celestial animals, e.g. *singhas* (lions) guarding the entrance and *nagas* (serpents) on the roof of the ordination hall.³⁶

Moreover, the locations of the pediments symbolized the unification of *chat* : the *ubosot* being integrated with the *rabieang kot*, placing the monarch at the heart of the nation, reigning through the royal elites in each ministry characterized

by the encircling galleries. The idea of *chat* was further exemplified by the geo-body and historiography of Siam embedded in Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's collection of the fifty-two Buddha images around the galleries.³⁷

The prince organized the sequence of the Buddha images according to the empiric periods of Dvaravadi, Srivijaya, Lopburi, Chiang Saen, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin (Bangkok), regardless of where the figures were found.³⁸ These statues collectively contributed a long historical narrative of a nation known as Siam notwithstanding the fact that the indigenous denizens of the territories inducted into the “geo-body,” such as the Laotians and Cambodians, did not necessarily consider themselves as integral parts of Siam.³⁹ The geo-body was reinforced by eight mural paintings inside the ordination hall, portraying the life of the Buddha according to the sacred *traiphumi* topography, marked by the locations of eight *stupas* scattering across the Siamese territories claims.⁴⁰

In essence, Damrong's mode of national historiography defined the geo-body in terms of the territoriality of the nation and the collective concept of self for Thai people. This concrete notion was crucial for ruling elites to manage the Thai nationhood, to distinguish concepts of integrity and sovereignty, and to control over internal processes. However, contrary to its implied nature of continuity and limitless history, the geo-body was formulated by the meeting of indigenous spatial discourse with the modern methods of representations, as shown by the collection of Buddha images.

Resembling Chulalongkorn's idea of nation and Damrong's national historiography, the Thai identity, too, was constructed in terms of a discourse. The hybridity of the ordination hall revealed that Thainess was syncretic, reflecting inherent problems of the Thai identity that resulted in its intricate dynamism and paradoxical nature. Whereas the West and modernity were normally viewed by the ruling elites as “suspected Other,” both the refashioning the royal image and the creation of *khwampenthai* could not be possible without

non-Thai contributions--also known as the roles of otherness--as evident from the aesthetics of the Marble Temple's *ubosot*.⁴¹

Apparently, the otherness in the design of Wat Benchama Bophit fell into a well-established Occidentalizing project,⁴² initiated since the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1858). Because the Siamese ruling elites regarded the Western model of modernization as the sources of and methods for achieving a respectable status among the civilized countries, the Occidentalizing project furnished them a new and refined identity and framed their worldview about the West and modernity itself, by historical and cultural experiences with and/or against Western powers and modern world.

Royalist advocates always portrayed the Occidentalizing project as anchored in a selective approach to the Westernization and modernization processes. Bearing in minds that the West and modernity were “suspected Other,” the royal elites were cautious for taking on all aspects of Western and modern things, imported and directly supplanted in their cultural soil.⁴³ On that account, the hybridized Marble Temple signified an active and authoritative role of the Thais in generating, combining, and projecting their versions of contested meanings upon the immediate world and beyond, while instantaneously asserting their self-identity through their consumptions of material culture.⁴⁴

Although the processes of Westernization, modernization, and colonization were not the one and the same, they are related to each other indeed. In this respect, buildings of the fifth reign suggested that the royal elites' claim for selective Westernization and modernization was simply an illusion. Since most architecture of the state during the time of King Rama V was commissioned in Western style, these structures ironically implied that in order to maintain its sovereignty through a creation of a modern nation-state, Siam had to sacrifice precisely what it fought for : independence. True, the country might be able to escape a physical occupation by Western powers. Yet, it succumbed into another colonial

trap : an indirect rule or “crypto-colonization,”⁴⁵ particularly in cultural and intellectual terms.

In sum, the Marble Temple subversively contradicted the belief proposed by the royal-national history⁴⁶ that *khwampenthai* was something intrinsically genuine and fixed.⁴⁷ In contrast, the edifice demonstrated a dilemma faced by the Thais in constructing their national and cultural identity, which were inconsistent, ambiguous, and even self-contradictory. The homologous opposition made it the stage where two antagonistic forces of accommodation and resistance competed, reflected, converged, and integrated with one another,⁴⁸ which was subjected to more appropriation and contestation, generating a slippage of symbolic meanings as exhibited by the following analyses.

4. Wat Benchama Bophit : From a Royal Sacred Ground to a National Commodity

The transformations of symbolic meanings for the Marble Temple took place after the death of Chulalongkorn in 1910. With a vastly different personality from his father, King Rama VI (Vajiravudh 1910-1925) preferred to socialize with a small circle of courtiers and entourages. Theatrical performance, literature, and music composition were a passion of the crown, who did not commission any Buddhist temple during his reign. With the temple fare discontinued, Wat Benchama Bophit simply turned into a shrine for King Rama V. As the royal elites of the sixth reign moved to assume a more thoroughly Westernized identity, the hybridized design of the Marble Temple was no longer deemed as a fashionable accouterment and appropriate way to be “civilized.”

King Rama V left behind fairly strong, relatively stable, and prosperous Siam to his Western-educated sons. Nevertheless, the lack of power sharing, exacerbated by the global depression during the 1920s, coupled with the rising force of the bourgeoisie finally brought down the absolutist rule during the reign of King Rama VII (Prajadhipok, r. 1925-1935).⁴⁹ On

June 24, 1932, a small group of foreign-educated military personnel and civil servants known as the People's Party (or *Khana Ratsadon*) successfully staged a bloodless *coup d'état* and installed a democratic regime.

Following the nationalization of palatial mansions along Ratchadamnoen Avenue and in Dusit district after the 1932 revolution, Wat Benchama Bophit exhausted its social attractiveness to host a public congregation. Similar to other places that mediated the regal authority, the architectural characteristic and iconographical program of the Marble Temple did not appeal to the coup promoters to signify the Thai identity. As a result, Wat Benchama Bophit and other royal temples were consigned to their utilitarian purposes as places for worship, monastic residences, and ecclesiastical colleges.

Within less than twenty years since the fall of the absolutist rule, the People's Party regime met its demise after a long and bitter vying for political domination between its military and civilian factions. Influential figures in the People's Party took turns rising to assume key positions in the government, but they quarreled with each other and were eventually ousted from power by military *coup d'états*. From 1957 to the mid-1970s, regardless of some elections and bureaucratized civilian administrations, the country was governed mostly by a series of junta, beset with coups and counter-coups. The new leaders namely Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-1973) were traditionalists. Espousing orderliness, cleanliness, and conformity, the nationalistic principles of these strongmen derived from a military/martial ethos and reverted to King Rama VI's absolutist triad values of nation, religion, and monarchy, substituting exotic and intangible ideas--like democracy, egalitarianism, and constitutionalism--promulgated by the People's Party.⁵⁰

In order to legitimize and maintain his despotic rule, Sarit resuscitated the role, status, and ancient custom of sacred kingship, coupled with enacting the *lèse majesté* law. Influenced by the Khmer culture, the Thai kingship was : 1) Sanskritic; 2) magical and sacred; and 3) rule by force and coercion. The

revival of the monarchical grounding in the discourse of Thainess also instituted the omnipotent and sacrosanct position the incumbent crown, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. On the contrary, in their efforts to relegate the influence of the preceding regimes, Sarit and his royalist progenies depicted the People's Party and its members as being anti-monarchy and thus "un-Thai."⁵¹

In socio-cultural dimension, with the revival of the monarchical ground in the discourse of *khwampenthai*, Wat Benchama Bophit along with architecture of the absolutist period had been recognized and admired for their significance in terms of a cultural heritage and national treasure in the collective Thai psyche. The post-People's Party administrations celebrated the regal genesis of the Marble Temple, whose images were extensively employed in official document and in many cases were juxtaposed with pictures or emblems of the crown, as demonstrated by Thai banknotes circulated during that period.

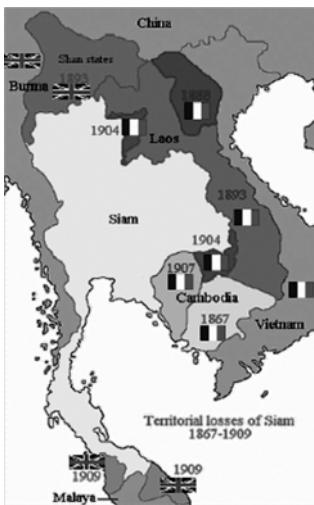
In order to propagate a new sense of nationalism under the regal authority buttressed by the power of the military regime, Prince Damrong's mode of national historiography embedded in the collection of the Buddha images at the Marble Temple was revitalized. Originally introduced with the temple itself, the statues around *rabieang kot* were subsequently "re-semanticized" to signify the public memory of the trauma from amputations of Siamese territorial claims to Western colonial powers. Apart from symbolizing the geo-body of the Thai nation, the references to the places of origins of these Buddha images--engraved on the pedestals around the galleries--metaphorically recounted the conventional history of the loss of territories of Siam from 1867-1909.⁵²

In effect, the narratives on the territorial recessions can be conceptualized by a map. The losses of Laos, Cambodia, and Malaya states--previously a humiliation largely confined to the Siamese royal elites--were re-appropriated and turned into an integral part of the long and bitter struggles of the Thais to overcome their legacy of colonial defeats. Being the constituents of the geo-body of the Thai nationhood, these



The front and Back Sides of a Ten Baht Banknote (1969-1978).

Source : The Bank of Thailand, *Banknotes, Series 11* [online], accessed 28 March 2009. Available from http://www.bot.or.th/English/Banknotes/HistoryAndSeriesOfBanknotes/Pages/Banknote_Series11.aspx



A Map showing the Territorial Recessions of Siam to Western Powers.

Source : Wikipedia, *Franco-Siamese War* [online], accessed 4 April 2010. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Siam_territorial_losses.gif

areas had been defined in terms of the territoriality of the nation and the collective concept of self for Thai people. Such a tangible notion was critical for the junta regime to manage *khwampenthai*, to distinguish concepts of integrity and sovereignty, and to exert control over internal processes. The insertion/allusion of Wat Benchama Bophit's iconography with the traumatic memory was also crucial to the formation of the national consciousness during the 1960s,⁵³ especially after the International Court of Justice (ICJ)'s ruling on the disputed ownership over the Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia in 1962⁵⁴ as shown by Sarit's heated reactions to the ICJ's decision as an example.⁵⁵

The aforementioned reinterpretations on the national geo-body and sovereignty went hand in hand with the royalists' revisions of Thai national historiography. Under the authoritative umbrella of the royal-nation history, the Buddha images together with their underlying colonial connotations were incorporated into the discourse of "chosen trauma," rendering the monarchical institution, notably King Rama V, as national saviors by giving up large areas of land in order to preserve the independence of Siam from Western aggressions. The so-called "lost-territories" from 1867-1909 were re-commemorated and re-articulated into public memory, not in terms of a mark on the end of Siam's struggle for national sovereignty, but a beginning of the Thais' attempt to salvage what it could from an impossible situation by "sacrificing fingers to save the hand."⁵⁶ Nonetheless, contrary to its implied nature of continuity and limitless history, the geo-body was formulated by the meeting of indigenous spatial discourse with the modernizing of methods of representation,⁵⁷ as demonstrated by the symbolic and iconographic revisions of Wat Benchama Bophit after 1910.

With unprecedented financial aid, trade, investment, and military assistance from the U.S., the European community, Japan, and China, Thailand had gained tremendous economic prosperity since the 1970s. Tourism had been developed into one of the major industries, generating an enormous amount of revenue annually for the Thais. Socio-culturally, the

productions of Thai cultural artifacts, as well as the cultural consumption of the Thais, were geared up towards the country's primary driving force : materialism and consumerism. To stimulate economic growth, all aspects of Thai culture were revisited and commercialized. Things of qualitative or abstract values such as traditions, customs, beliefs, ways of living, practices, knowledge, and natural beauty were assigned quantitative values, having tangible monetary prices and calculable numbers. These "cultural capital" included Wat Benchama Bophit, which ranked among prime examples for the commodification process of Thainess.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) had promoted the Marble Temple as a major tourist attraction, advertising that to stand at the main gateway and look upon Wat Benchama Bophit "is a sight to behold. The perfect symmetry and proportions must inspire admiration of this architectural masterpiece."⁵⁸ The ordination hall also appeared in several TAT's media outlets, e.g. postcards, posters, calendars, books, and web pages, and became synonymous with Thailand. Apart from reflecting the commodification of *khwampenthai*, the pecuniary link between Wat Benchama Bophit and tourism revealed that the Thai identity had transmuted to be the nation's viable asset to be invested and exploited,⁵⁹ as epitomized by the royal flair, flamboyant embellishment, and luxurious materiality of the Marble Temple.

Accompanying the capitalization of Wat Benchama Bophit by the TAT was a revival of the royal elites' appraisal on Phra Phutta Chinarat (Buddha Jinaraja)--namely by Chulalongkorn--as the "exemplary Buddha image in Buddhist arts of the Classic period" of Thai society,⁶⁰ which was closely associated with King Rama V's process of developing Siam into a the modern nation-state. Its connotative meaning in terms of a key material manifestation on the historical origin of Thai nationhood put forward by Chulalongkorn's father--King Rama IV—⁶¹ has been revisited, thus helping re-establish this particular statue to be one of the most important symbols and representations of *khwampenthai*. For that reason, it is not

A Promotional Poster of
Wat Benchama Bophit.
Source : The Tourism
Authority of Thailand,
Thailand Holidays
[online], accessed
24 August 2005.
Available from
<http://www.flightcentre.com.au/holidays/thailand>



surprising to see that the images of Phra Phutta Chinarat (Buddha Jinaraja) have been subjected to a great number of reproductions and become the most popular of all among the holy Buddha images in modern Thailand, whereas its stylistic expressions strengthened by many theoretical studies by art historians have continued to be significantly and mostly referred to by the academic, scholars, government officials, and ruling authorities as the most beautiful statue of Buddha in the country.⁶²

5. Conclusion

The above discussions reveal that the royal elites, People's Party government, junta regime, and successive administrations alike resorted to the discourse of Thainess under dissimilar definitions to mediate, legitimize, and maintain their power by constructing, reinterpreting, and refashioning the meanings of Wat Benchama Bophit. In symbolizing *khwampenthai*, the hybridized design of the Marble Temple at the same time : 1) represented the ideological perceptions of the ruling elites on Thai nationhood; and 2) testified that the Thai identity was a product of modernity, which had been hybridized in various aspects. To put it differently, the identification of *khwampenthai* was an outcome of a historically rooted and culturally grounded system of knowledge and power production, which had been defined and redefined itself over the course of the Westernization and modernization processes in Siam and Thailand.

In addition, Thai people's experience with colonialism--or the lack thereof--not only contributed to a formation of the Thai identity, but also a creation of national historiography. However, as seen from the analyses on the collection of fifty-two Buddha statues at Wat Benchama Bophit, both Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's historiographical mode and King Rama V's notion of *chat* were in fact misleading. Despite the common socio-cultural heritage from the Indo-Sinic civilizations, historical ties between the Thais and their neighbors

happened in terms of suzerainty-tributary power relations or *vice versa*. Because the native peoples of the so-called “lost-territories”—e.g. the Laotians, Khmers (Cambodians), and Malays—were never fully incorporated into the Siamese domains, they were never really part of the Thai nation-state.⁶³ Accordingly, it could be maintained in a corollary view that : 1) Siam had never been deprived of those territories since it had never actually owned any of them; and 2) what really exists is a myth of the geo-body of the nation, promoted by the discourse of “chosen trauma.”

In a nutshell, the politics of representations at the Marble Temple serves as a reminder that the narratives of national history are always abundant with stories of struggles for independence and suffering from national enemies. Yet at the same time, the same history, too, is full of fictional and irrational episodes, encompassing ideological as well as psychological excuses and deceptions. As evident from the symbolism and iconography of Wat Benchama Bophit, Siam and Thailand were not helpless sheep being bullied by colonial wolves from the West as widely publicized by the conventional historiography, but one of the wolves—even though a smaller one—competing with the bigger predators from afar in hunting colonial sheep in Southeast Asian region.⁶⁴

Finally, owing to the fact that the present Thailand is progressing towards a more pluralistic society, public awareness on the true nature of *khwampenthai* must be promoted. As exhibited by the politics of representations at the Marble Temple, the Thai identity is indeed a product of taxonomies mistakenly identified as methodology instead of theoretical foundations. Under various ideological pretenses, Thainess has been utilized to support an established point of view projected by the ruling authorities as a legitimate discourse about Thailand to advocate and defend certain perspectives, sentiments, constraints, taboos, alibis, possibilities and plausibilities while repressing and negating others.⁶⁵

As an ending note, while all Southeast Asian nations are currently merging into a functional single socio-economic

union by 2015, the task of advocating a mutual understanding among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the writings of their national histories has become urgent. Such a goals cannot be met unless the following observations are recognized : 1) national and cultural identity should not be promoted at the expense of other races, ethnicities, or countries in the form of antagonistic and xenophobic attitudes towards them; and 2) not only did the practice of colonization in Southeast Asia come from states outside the region, but also took place among the indigenous peoples.

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² This observation was supported by the fact that, during his reign of forty-two years, King Rama V commissioned only three royal temples, including Wat Benchama Bophit.

³ F. D. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds., C. Bally, A. Sechehaye, and A. Reidlinger, trans., W. Baskin (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1966), 14, 65, 68-69, 112-113.

⁴ N. Goodman, *Languages of Art : An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis : Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 1-12.

⁵ K. Dovey, *Framing Places : Mediating Power in Built Forms* (London : Routledge, 1999), 15.

⁶ I. Bentley, *Urban Transformations : Power, People, and Urban Design*. (London : Routledge, 1999), 16.

⁷ See : D. Streckfuss, “The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam : Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890-1910,” in *Autonomous Histories*, ed., L. Sears (Madison : Center of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1993) for a review on the national historiography.

⁸ B. Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Post-colonial Readers*, eds., B. Ashcroft, G. Griffits, and H. Tiffin (London : Routledge, 1995), 36-44.

⁹ See : F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans., C. Farrington (New York : Grove Press, 1963), 250; E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York : Penguin Books, 1978), 65-67; G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? : Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” *Wedge* 7, 8 (1985) : 120-130; and H. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders : Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1917,” in *The Post-colonial Readers*, eds., B. Ashcroft, G. Griffits, and H. Tiffin (London : Routledge, 1995), 24-28.

¹⁰ G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 120-130.

¹¹ Also see : B. Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Post-colonial Readers*, eds., B. Ashcroft, G. Griffits, and H. Tiffin (London : Routledge, 1995), 36-44.

¹² Prince C. Chulachakrabongse, *Lords of Life : A History of the Kings of Thailand* (London : Alvin Redman, 1967), 225.

¹³ M. Peleggi, *Lords of Things : The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*, (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 92-93.

¹⁴ “Ensuing Protection of the Crumbling Bank in front of the Revenue Department and Allegri's Examination of Protection Methods in Europe,” April 11-December 3, 1901, Department of Public Works, RV 1/26, National Archives of Thailand.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ P. G. Jansen, “Costruttori e Artisti Italiani nel Siam [Italian Builders and Artists in Siam],” *Le Vie d'Italia e del Mondo* 1, 10 (1933) : 1279-1294.

¹⁷ Phra Thammakit Sophana, ed., พระพุทธเจ้าหлев กับวัดเบญจมบพิตร [King Rama V and Benchama Bophit Temple] (Bangkok : Wat Benchama Bophit, 1988), 15, 23.

¹⁸ Ibid., 131-146.

¹⁹ A. Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand* (Singapore : Oxford University Press, 1992), 138.

²⁰ M. Peleggi, *Lords of Things : The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*, (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 86.

²¹ Wat Benchama Bophit Dusitvanaram, *The Ordination Hall* [online], accessed 4 September 2010. Available from <http://www.watbencha.com/history/uposatha-e.html>.

²² S. Thavornsuk, พระบรมวัดและงานศิลปะของสมเด็จพระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ เจ้าฟ้ากรมพระยานริศรา努วัตติวงศ์ [*Life and Works of Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongse*] (Bangkok : Thai Watana Panich, 1966), 214.

²³ See : ประมวลเอกสารสำคัญเรื่องในการสถาปนาวัดเบญจมบพิตรดุสิตวนาราม [*Collection of Important Document regarding the Inauguration of Wat Benchama Bophit*] (Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University Press, 1992) for the development of the temple's construction.

²⁴ M. Isaradej, “สถาปัตยกรรมฝีพระหัตถ์สมเด็จเจ้าพระยานริศรา努วัตติวงศ์ [Architectural Works of Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongse]” (M. Arch. Thesis, Silpakorn University, 1990), 308-317.

²⁵ For instance, see : M. Peleggi, *Lords of Things : The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*, (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 86-87; A. Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand* (Singapore : Oxford University Press, 1992), 138.

²⁶ For example, see : C. Prakitnondhakarn, “พระพุทธชินราชในประวัติศาสตร์การสร้างความเป็นไทย [Phra Phutta Chinarat in the Evolution of Thainess],” *Muangboran* 32, 3 (July-September 2006) : 64-86; “สมบูรณากุลสิทธิราชย์และจักรราศีวิทยาสมัยใหม่ในพระอุปสกัดเบญจมบพิตร [Royal Absolutism and Modern Cosmology at the Ordination Hall of Wat Benchama Bophit],” *Silapawatthanatham*, no. 24 (July 2003) : 80-96 and พระพุทธชินราชในประวัติศาสตร์สมบูรณากุลสิทธิราชย์ [*Phra Phutta Chinarat in the Royal-absolutist History*] (Bangkok : Matichon, 2008), 21-30.

²⁷ See : C. Aasen, *Architecture of Siam : A Cultural History Interpretation* (Kuala Lumpur : Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-12. for the *traiphumi* cosmology and architectural signification.

²⁸ G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? : Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” *Wedge* 7, 8 (1985) : 120-130; H. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders : Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1917,”

in *The Post-colonial Readers*, eds., B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin (London : Routledge, 1995), 24-28.

²⁹ See : N. Saksi, *Palace Architecture in Bangkok* (London : Thames and Hudson, 1996) for more information on these regal residences.

³⁰ *Bangkok Times*, “Wat Benchamabophit Fair,” December 14, 1907.

³¹ E. Jottrand, *In Siam*, trans. and intr., W. E. J. Tips (Bangkok : White Lotus, 1996), 318-320; S. Siriphan, *กษัตริย์และกล้อง [Kings and Cameras]* (Bangkok : Dansuttha, 1992), 96-102.

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³⁴ S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer : A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against Historical Background* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1976), 198.

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³⁷ Also For a basis of this interpretation on the national historiography, see : C. Prakitnondhakarn, *การเมืองและลัทธิในศิลป-สถาปัตยกรรม สยามสมัย ไทยประยุกต์ ชาตินิยม [Political and Social Factors in Thai Art and Architecture]* (Bangkok : Matichon, 2004), 175-187.

³⁸ ประวัติวัดเบญจมบพิตรดุสิตวนาราม [*History of Wat Benchama Bophit*] (Bangkok : Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2000), 161.

³⁹ T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped : A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 17.

⁴⁰ C. Dharmawarangkul, “พระอุโบสถวัดเบญจมบพิตรดุสิตวนาราม [The Ordination Hall at Wat Benchama Bophit],” *Silpakorn* 2, 43 (March-April, 2000) : 61.

⁴¹ Another example of the otherness in *khwampenthalai* could be seen from names of the foreigners working on “Foreigners Hired for the Construction of Amphorn Palace, Ananta Throne Hall, Dusit Royal Palace : Ferro, Natali, Rigotti,” October 21, 1903-February 14, 1910, Dusit Palace in Miscellany (Bettalet), RV 9/64, National Archives of Thailand.

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⁴⁴ T. Aphornsuvan, “หมอบรดไดร์กับมายเรกัน โอเรียนทัลลิซึมในสยาม [Dr. Bradley and American Orientalism in Siam],” *Silapawatthanatham*, no.25 (July 2004) : 96-105.

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⁴⁸ R. M. Kessing, “Creating the Past : Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, no. 1 (1989) : 22-23.

⁴⁹ D. Wyatt, *Thailand : A Short History* (Chiang Mai : Silkworm Books, 2004), 232-236.

⁵⁰ T. Mokrapong, *History of the Thai Revolution : A Study in Political Behavior* (Bangkok : Thai Watana Panich, 1972), 229, 298-293.

⁵¹ S. Jeamteerasakul, *ประวัติศาสตร์ที่เพิ่งสร้าง [Recently Constructed History]* (Bangkok, Thailand : Hok Tula Rumluek, 2003), 34-36.

⁵² S. Strate, “The Lost Territories : The Role of Trauma and Humiliation in the Formation of National Consciousness in Thailand” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), 4-5.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ International Court of Justice, *Judgment on June 15, 1962 : Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)* [online], accessed 1 October 2011. Available from <http://www.icjcij.org/docket/index.php?sum=284&code=ct&p1=3&p2=3&case=45&k=46&p3=5>

⁵⁵ This 11th century Hindu sacred place and adjacent area had long been a contested space, as demonstrated by the Franco-Thai War in 1940 as an example. In 1954, Thailand reoccupied the temple after Cambodia gained independence from France, who was retreating from Indochina following its military fiasco at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. The country contended that the ICJ’s ruling did not adhere to the 1904 Franco-Siamese bilateral agreement. Although Thailand eventually handed over the temple--albeit reluctantly--it has not relinquished the sovereignty claim over the surrounding territory, leaving Cambodia only an access to the Preah Vihear by climbing up on a steep hillside.

⁵⁶ S. Strate, “The Lost Territories : The Role of Trauma and Humiliation in the Formation of National Consciousness in Thailand” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), 10-15.

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⁵⁸ The Tourism Authority of Thailand, *Wat Benchama Bophit* [online], accessed 1 April 2010. Available from <http://www.tourismthailand.org/attraction/bangkok-10-3176-1.html>

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⁶⁰ King of Siam Chulalongkorn, พระราชนรารถเรื่องพระพุทธชินราช [H.M. King Chulalongkorn's *Reflections on Phra Phutta Chinarat*] (Bangkok : Bumrungnukoonkit Printing, 1917), 16, 38, 27-28.

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⁶³ C. J. Reynolds, ed., *National Identity and Its Defenders* (Chiang Mai : Silkworm Books, 2002), 19-20.

⁶⁴ C. Kasetsiri, “Thai Historiography from Ancient Times to Modern Period,” in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, Asian Studies Association of Australia, *Southeast Asia Publication Series*, No.4, eds., A. Reid & D. Marr (Singapore : Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), 156-170.

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เอกสารชั้นต้น

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