

The Construction of Mainstream Thought on “Thainess”
and the “Truth” Constructed by “Thainess”

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Abstract

Mainstream thought on “Thainess” has been firmly defined by significant intellectuals since the reign of King Rama V. Intellectuals adjusted the key aspects and significance of “Thainess” periodically in responded to the changing political contexts. However, the original structure of “Thainess” was retained throughout these adjustments. As a result, the mainstream construction of “Thainess” has an overwhelming power upon the ways of thinking of Thai people.

The definition of “Thainess” originated within the context of the centralized political structure. This construction of “Thainess” then became the basis of the ideology that maintained the centralized political regime and the hierarchical social structure. Thai people have been dominated by this overarching ideology since the end of the 1950s, since then, the ideology has functioned as an obstacle to prevent Thai people from adapting themselves to the rapid, crucial changes in Thai society. Further, the meaning of this idea of “Thainess” has been too narrow to create “social space” for all groups of Thai people to attain justice, freedom and equality. Justice, freedom and equality are essential for people to access essential resources and to live a digified life. Therefore, we can say that mainstream thought on “Thainess” has been one part of the violent structure of Thai society.

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Executive Summary

This paper is synthesized from the results of the “History of Thai Intellectuals’ Thought on Thai Society and Culture, 1892-1992 A.D.” study, sponsored by The Thailand Research Fund. The purpose of this study is to analyze the definition of “Thainess” by a number of mainstream intellectuals who have profound influence on the Thai ideology of “society and culture.” This ideology formed the basis for prevalent explanations of various incidents and problems in Thailand’s political society, and has wielded tremendous influence on the Thais’ way of thinking through the years down to present day. This article focuses on M.R. Kukrit Pramoj’s idea of “Thainess,” because he was an intellectual who communicated so actively with the Thai society that he had the greatest influence on its thinking in the past fifty years.

The study was conducted by analyzing a large body of work by intellectuals under the prevailing political contexts. The analysis shows that the concept of “Thainess” as defined by Thai intellectuals was designed in response to political problems that faced the ruling class in each era, as well as to use “Thainess” in the construction of the social and political structure desired by the political elite. This ideology has been so consistently cultivated in the society that it became a “system of truth” that is highly influential on the way Thais think, and constructed many important “truths” in Thai polity.

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to show, through reason and historical evidence, how “Thainess” as defined by Thai intellectuals were created in the political context, and how important it is as a basis of the ideology that helped maintain centralized political regime and hierarchical social structure. The study seeks further to analyze how this ideology – as the “mainstream” way of thought since the 1950s – has functioned as an obstacle to prevent Thai people from adapting themselves to the rapid changes in their society. This is because the ideology of “Thainess” is too narrow to create sufficient “social space” for Thai people to attain necessary personal rights, freedom, and equality, as well as access to essential resources and the right to live a dignified life. Therefore, we can say that mainstream thought on “Thainess” has been one part of the violent structure of Thai society in the past few decades.

In general, a post-modern society usually comprises multiple fragmented societies that together encompass diverse bodies of knowledge and discourses. The discourse in each fragmented society is characterized by being “local,” i.e. applicable only to its society, not a “universal philosophy” that is a generally inclusive explanation of society as a whole¹.

¹ Chetta Puanghut, “*Wiwata Structure-Agency lae kanhathangoc hai kap panha tawilakniyom*” [Structure-Agency Debate and the Overcoming of the Problematic Dualism in Social Theory: Marxism versus Foucault] *Warasan aksornsat mahawittayalai sinlapakon* [Aksonsat Journal, Silapakon University]. 26,2 (December 2003-May 2004): 74-135. Chetta pointed out that Michel Foucault developed a systematic theory of poststructuralist movement which emphasizes the localized and fragmented nature of society.

Yet in the post-modern Thai society, the knowledge or discourse on “Thainess” as established by government-supported intellectuals and propagated through the media and government-regulated school system remains highly influential, and is “highly respected” by teachers and students as well as “reproducers” and “consumers,” despite the occurrence of several fragmented societies. This discourse is able to enjoy the mainstream status largely because the Thai media and education system have not been truly reformed, although recent decades have seen new meanings and “anti-establishment” thoughts on “Thainess” being formed by academics, social entrepreneurs, and residents of rural communities.

The author hopes that the results of this study will encourage Thais to collectively analyze the mainstream idea of “Thainess” to find out which elements are worth preserving (perhaps with modifications necessary to make them up to date), and which elements should be constructed anew as part of “Thainess” that will help Thais to live together in peace in a society that is characterized by equality.

The construction of “Thainess” under absolute monarchy

When Thailand had to face Western culture that came with superior power, Thailand’s ruling class chose to accept Western-style material progress and maintain most parts of “Thainess” in culture by assigning new definitions to various constituent parts of “Thainess” to prevent it from being seen as barbaric. At the same time, the ruling class had to ensure that “Thainess” can justify the political structure that centralized power at the king, and can justify the social structure that divided people into different classes according to their birthright – the kind of social structure that is extremely crucial in an absolute monarchy.

To maximize the effectiveness of power centralization process, King Rama V focused the efforts of defining “Thainess” on giving new meanings to various royal rituals and processions, and on constructing symbols that place the king at the center of state, wielding absolute power over aristocrats, civil servants, and subjects of all “races” whose lives depended on the king’s power, wisdom, and magnanimity. He paid special attention to the definition of “king” and “civil servants,” since this period marked the first time the king wielded absolute power and wielded it as a man, not as avatar of a god. Throughout his reign, he led the nation in selecting artistic and cultural expressions of “Thainess” that showed uniquely Thai traits, and made those traits sustain absolute monarchy at the same time. For example, he ordered that Wat Benchamabopitr (Marble Temple) be constructed in “Thai style” but with new symbols that represent his power under absolute monarchy.²

In the meantime, a modern bureaucracy was established to serve as an effective governmental mechanism – both in ensuring national security and managing national resources – while posing no threat to the king. King Rama V stressed that the king’s power was absolute over “northern Siam, southern Siam, central Siam... Laos... Malay peninsula,” as illustrated by the symbol of kingship on the royal flag mandated by the Royal Decree on Flags, 1891 A.D.³ In addition, he stressed the identity of civil servants as honoraries whose honor was conferred by the king, via conducting royal ceremonies that were made “more Thai” by accentuating the people’s social standing that was determined hierarchically in accordance with their social class, in combination with a judicious use of several “universal” symbols meant to promote “Thainess” to endure respectably as part of the civilized world⁴.

² Chatree Prakitnonthakan, *Kanmuang lae sangkom nai silapa sathapattayakam sayamsamai Thai prayuk chat niyom*. [Politics and Society in Art and Architecture: Siam during the Period of Applied Thai Culture and Nationalism]. Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2004. p.187-191

³ Sathian Lailuk, *Prachum kotmai pracham sok*. [Collection of Annual Laws] Volume 13 Bangkok: Daily Mail, 1935. p.79-80.

⁴ Saichol Sattayanurak, “Intellectuals and the Establishment of Identities in the Thai Absolute Monarchy State”, *Journal of the Siam Society* 90, 1&2 (2002): 101-124.

King Rama VI faced the concept of “Thai nation” that means nation of the people. This concept was popularized by journalists, a few aristocrats, several civil servant groups, and Chinese people in Siam⁵. Because this concept could easily provide the ideological base for movements to change the political regime, King Rama VI accelerated the efforts to define “Thai nation” and “Thainess” to reign supreme over all other definitions. He defined “Thai nation” as a nation that comprises people whose livelihood was intricately linked with Thai culture and who were loyal to the heart of “Thainess,” which consists of the royal institution and Buddhism. He stressed that Thai culture was “truly Thai” in that it was continually inherited from the olden days. But he suggested that this “Thainess” has a core that is no less universal than European civilizations, because it is based on Buddhism which was “superior” to all other religions, both in terms of rational dogma and Buddha’s royal lineage. At the same time, King Rama VI created the concept of “the other” which he focused on the Chinese people in Siam who was increasing both in numbers and economic influence, and who brought the political ideal of a republic as well as Chinese nationalist sentiment into Siam.

Defining “Thai nation” and “Thainess” therefore became an urgent matter, both to counter the threat to absolute monarchy from Western and Chinese influence, as well as to realign power relationships in the modern state. King Rama VI’s definition of “Thai nation” and “Thainess” therefore was focused on building a political unity in which the “king” who was the heart of “Thai nation” wielded supreme power because he was the focal point of Thai people’s loyalty. His intent was to reaffirm the importance of “king” as patron and chief architect of Thai civilization, and squeezed out the Chinese, who refused to “become Thai,” from membership of the “Thai nation.” At the same time, his definition also countered the idea that “the nation and its sovereignty belongs to the people.” In addition, efforts to define “Thai nation” and “Thainess” in Rama VI’s reign were meant to respond to internal political strife among many high-ranking aristocrats; King Rama VI became distrustful of civil servants since the “1984 A.D. rebellion,” and as a result tried to wield even more absolute power than during the reign of King Rama V.

We can say that the construction of a king-centered ideology of “Thai nation” had made “Thais” all over the country aware of the nation’s totality, with the king the focal point of their loyalty and unity. At the same time, King Rama VI tried to make Siam part of the civilized countries, but since he had to preserve “Thainess” because it was the cultural root that supported the power structure of absolute monarchy, he stressed that “Thainess” that was preserved and inherited by kings throughout the ages was “civilized,” i.e. having a universal essence that was no different from Western civilizations. This was to allow “Thais”

⁵ Nakharin Mektrairat, *Phalang khong naewkhid chat-chatniyom kap kanmuang Thai nai samai rakreum ratprachachat*. [Power of the Concept of Nation and Nationalism during the First Stage of Nation-state] Rathasat San 21, 3 (1999): 1-104.

to feel proud of their “Thai nation,” and to feel grateful of the king’s magnanimity which helped make “Thai nation” civilized, free, and able to see eye-to-eye with Western nations.⁶

Prince Patriarch Wachirayanwarorot helped delineate the ideology of “Thainess” that centered on the king who led Thailand to achieve Western-style civilization, in such a way that made it clear and memorable to people across all social classes. He did this by transforming the ideas regarding “Thai nation” and “Thainess” as constructed by King Rama VI into Buddhist-based ideas (“Buddhistization”) that were disseminated via sermons and monastic educational reforms. He also composed numerous Buddhist texts that were used by monks and apprentices in their examinations.

The use of Buddhist ideas in defining a king-centered concept of “Thai nation” helped create a clear, indivisible ideology of “nation, religion, and kingship.” This ideology was widely known among monks, most of whom came from lower-class populace both in the cities and the countryside. Many Buddhist texts written by Prince Patriarch Wachirayanwarorot became part of the monastic curriculum up to the present day.

It is also worth noting that, because he intended to frame the idea of “nation, religion, and kingship” as a Buddhist idea, Prince Patriarch Wachirayanwarorot was forced to focus only on the worldly part of Buddhism (*lokiya dhamma*), without any means to link it to the spiritual part (*lokuttara dhamma*). This is because the spiritual portion would have made the “nation, religion, and kingship” idea devoid of substance or dependable identity. It was this worldly kind of Buddhism that subsequent intellectuals intensively concentrated on, especially M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. As a result, the religious aspect of “Thainess” became extremely important, because being a Buddhist meant having beliefs and opinions that are profoundly attached to “Thai nation” and “Thainess.” For instance, a ‘proper’ Buddhist was one who accepted the virtues of “Thai-style governance,” swore utmost loyalty to “the king,” fully understood the meaning of governance in accordance with Buddhist virtues (*rāja dhamma*), and was proud of all Thai art and culture for which “Buddhism” was an important progenitor.

Prince Damrong Rajanubhap constructed a Thai identity without focusing on cultural aspects of “genuine Thainess.” Instead, he placed the emphasis of Thainess on the three “characters” or “virtues” of Thai race: “fealty to the nation’s independence, absence of spite, and wisdom in reconciliation of interests.” He showed that these three virtues were unique characteristics of Thais that enabled them to maintain dominance in their country. He stressed that although Thais were dominant in “Muang Thai,” they never exploited other ethnic groups because the Thais’ virtues of “absence of spite” and “wisdom in reconciliation of interests” allowed every ethnic group to coexist peacefully under “Thai-style governance.” Meanwhile, Thais’ “wisdom in reconciliation of interests” allowed them to

⁶ Saichol Sattayanurak, “Intellectuals and the Establishment of Identities in the Thai Absolute Monarchy State”, *Journal of the Siam Society* 90, 1 & 2 (2002): 101-124.

choose only desirable aspects of other nations to mix with existing culture, resulting in a vibrant and prosperous Thai art and culture that perpetuated from one generation to the next.

Another important idea that Prince Damrong Rajanubhap always stressed in his writings, in response to public calls to change the system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, was that absolute monarchy had ruled Thailand for so long that it became the tradition of “Thai-style governance” which should be maintained for posterity. This was because Thai kings did not freely use their power as a *devaraja* (god-king); in contrast, “Thai-style governance” was a “paternalism” that was full of kindness, and Thai kings in the Chakri dynasty embodied all three virtues of Thai people. This enabled “Thailand” to remain independent, peaceful, and prosperous. In addition, Prince Damrong Rajanubhap made King Rama V an ideal “Thai king” by establishing the title of “Somdej Phra Piya Maharaj” for him, which means “king who was loved by all” because he was the ruler “of the people” and “for the people.” This was an effort to reduce the intensity of public calls for a constitution, by instilling recognition in every social class that the king under absolute monarchy already belonged to the people and ruled for their interests; there was no need to change the governing regime.

In the religious sphere, Prince Damrong Rajanubhap emphasized that although Buddhism was the religion that most Thais practiced, the Thai king patronized every religion in Thailand because he had absence of spite, thereby allowing practitioners of all religions to coexist peacefully. All other aspects of “Thainess,” such as Thai language, literature, and all artforms were the result of Thai king’s “wisdom in reconciliation of interests.”

Prince Damrong Rajanubhap also constructed identities of different social classes in Thailand, to inform members of each class of their identity, place, and responsibilities in Thai state. This was an effort to build an ideological base for the absolute monarchy, and to sustain the class structure that was important to the stability of absolute state and the ruling class. At the same time, he tried to reduce conflicts between ethnic groups by concentrating on the concept of “Muang Thai,” not “Thai nation.” He avoided the concept of “Thai nation” because, as Minister of Interior, he realized that the populace he was responsible for comprised many ethnic groups. Since the process of transforming them “into Thais” had just begun, any focus on the concept of “Thai nation” as a nation that belonged only to “Thais” would further accentuate ethnic differences in the minds of non-Thai groups, and thus would make it much harder to govern them. He instilled the concepts that “Muang Thai” is a “nation” dominated by Thais, and that because Thai race is unique in their non-

aggressiveness and wisdom in reconciling different interests, Thai kings were able to govern every ethnic group to coexist in peace.⁷

We can conclude that during the period of absolute monarchy, although the thinking of four intellectuals were not perfectly aligned, they all shared the common focus on the heart of “Thainess” which was the concept of “nation, religion, and kingship” that justified and sustained the political structure of centralized power, and the social structure that divided people into hierarchical classes in accordance with their birthright, although the “language” or “vocabulary” that they used to build the concept of “nation, religion, and kingship” differed somewhat from each other.

Construction of “Thainess” after the 1932 revolution

After the 1932 revolution which changed Political regime from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, Thailand’s political structure remained centralized in the hands of the political ruler. The ruling aristocrats therefore did not significantly change ideals regarding the government that were constructed during the preceding period of absolute monarchy; they merely chose certain ideas that fitted the ruler’s needs under the new system, made them clearer, and modified their justifications in response to changing political situations. Although new ideas were proposed during certain periods, these ideas did not conflict with the existing framework of “Thainess” that stressed the ruler’s absolute power, and class-based responsibilities of members in each social class. They merely stressed the importance of performing duties to “Thai nation” rather than to each person’s birthright, and gave new meanings to “language” or “vocabulary” of democratic ideals in order to create validation for the state’s ruler (such as the terms “*matimahachon*” [“public opinion”] and “freedom”).

One intellectual who played a significant role in the construction of “Thainess” after the 1932 revolution was Luang Wichitwathakan. The prevailing political atmosphere following the revolution compelled him to accept the importance of “public opinion” in developing the state’s policies and projects. However, this “public opinion” was not the result of collective decisions of individuals, each of whom had his or her own opinion, but took place after the process called “*manuutpatiwaat*” or “human revolution” which occurred in accordance with a set of guidelines called “Thai nationalism” which already changed the outlook or character

⁷ Saichol Sattayanurak, *Somdet Kromphraya Damrong Rajanubhap: Kansang attalak ‘muang Thai’ lae ‘shan’ khong shao Siam*. [Prince Damrong Rajanubhap : The Construction of Identities of “*muang Thai*” and “Classes” of the Siamese]. Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2003.

of “Thais.” Therefore, “public opinion” remained within the boundaries that the state desired: whatever the ruler thought or did, the people would follow.⁸

In order to shape the “public opinion” in the form that Field Marshal Po Phibunsongkhram and Luang Wichitwathakan desired, Luang Wichitwathakan tried to create “Thainess” for Thais to jointly cherish. The core concept of “Thainess” that he stressed differed quite significantly from one period to the next, due to the rapidly changing political climate following the 1932 revolution.

Toward the end of the 1930s, Luang Wichitwathakan, who was Director General of the Fine Arts Department at the time, promoted “Thainess” in terms of Thai arts that had been prosperous from the ancient times, to instill Thais’ pride in their civilized nation. This effort followed in the footsteps of intellectuals under absolute monarchy. During the late 1930s, when Thailand officially allied with Japan in an attempt to become a Southeast Asian superpower, having recognized the risk that small countries could easily be conquered by large superpowers, Luang Wichitwathakan began crafting the concept of “Thainess” which stressed “Thainess” in terms of the trait or character that loves progress, has a fighting spirit, perseveres with hard work, and favors commerce. These traits were touted as ones that would allow “Thais” to make “Thai nation” prosper and to eventually become a superpower.

In order to illustrate to “Thais” that these traits that the state desired were original traits of Thai race, Luang Wichitwathakan changed the context of “national character” that he wanted to see in the present and the future by saying that this Thai character existed in ancient “Sukhothai culture,” but was destroyed by the influence of Hindu and Khmer cultures in the succeeding Ayudhya period. When Thais learned that their ancestors had such traits, they would feel it possible to have them again. Thus, we see how this process was part of the revolution of the “Thai character” that Luang Wichitwathakan called “*manuutpatiwaat*”.⁹

When World War II ended along with the dream that “Thai nation” would become a Southeast Asian superpower, Luang Wichitwathakan had to change the focus of “Thainess” to suit the reality that “Thai nation” was a small country facing the Cold War. Thailand’s ruling class including Luang Wichitwathakan not only was afraid of the communist threat, but also relied on anti-communist movements as a justification to receive aid from the United States of America.¹⁰ Therefore, the concept of “Thainess” during this period was concentrated on the “Thainess” that would assist the state in its anti-communist efforts, which meant “Thai nation, Buddhism and kingship” and.” The government widely broadcasted the idea that if Thailand became communist, “nation, religion, and kingship”

⁸ Saichol Sattayanurak, *Kuamplianplang nai kansang ‘chat thai’ lae ‘kuam pen thai’ doy Luang Wichitwathakan*. [Changes in the Construction of “Thai nation” and “Thainess” by Luang Wichitwathakan]. Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2002. p. 76-78.

would be utterly destroyed; therefore, those who loved and treasured “Thainess” should fight communism to the best of their abilities.

It is clear that, although the goals of Field Marshal Po’s government and Luang Wichitwathakan in late 1940s differed from King Rama VI’s, they stressed the same institution at the heart of “Thainess,” even though the meaning of “kingship” was significantly different from the absolute monarchy period in that it focused only on the king’s role as the nation’s spiritual center, who helped foster unity while posing no threat to the ruler’s absolute power in the new regime. As for the three uniquely Thai virtues that Prince Damrong Rajanubhap proposed, only the first one, i.e. “fealty to the nation’s independence,” remained in focus. The other two virtues, i.e. “absence of spite” and “wisdom in reconciliation of interests” were ignored. This is because the government wanted support from Thais in using violence to counter communists, whose leaders were Chinese. At the same time, the government accused the Chinese of being communists, in order to pressure them into submission or agreement to follow various schemes in the interests of the ruling class. If “absence of spite” and “wisdom in reconciliation of interests” remained in focus, the government could not have possibly achieved the aforementioned goals. Yet, making only “fealty to the nation’s independence” important while ignoring the other two virtues was in line with the intent of King Rama VI, who also did not consider “absence of spite” and “wisdom in reconciliation of interests” to be important.

Another intellectual who played an important role in constructing post-World War II Thai identity was Prince Wan Waithayakon, whose role encompassed two aspects: selective acceptance of material progress from the West, and controlling social and power relationships by using the cultural aspects of “Thainess.” Although the new government system called for considerable changes in the meaning and process of defining “Thainess,” his approach remained in line with the way of thinking and role of aristocrats during in the absolute monarchy period.

One sphere that Prince Wan Waithayakon played a role was in foreign relations. He tried to convince foreigners that Thailand was a civilized nation well-endowed with natural resources, in order to entice foreign capitalists to invest in Thailand and to encourage closer ties with Western nations and Japan. Another sphere he had influence in was social relations: he tried to control post-1932 changes in the Thai society so that they did not happen in undesirable directions or too quickly. He did this mainly by inventing new words to avoid direct transcription of English words, especially words related to ideas such as

⁹ Saichol Sattayanurak, “The Establishment of Mainstream Thought on ‘Thai Nation’ and ‘Thainess’ by Luang Wichit Wathakan” *Tai Culture* Vol.VII, No.2 (December 2002) p.7-34.

¹⁰ Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958*. Kyoto Area Studies on Asia, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Volume 3, 2001. p.130-137.

“revolution,” “populace,” “culture,” etc¹¹. Inventing such words in “Thai language” was the means to control Thai people’s way of thinking, or to define the boundaries and direction of social changes. In addition, he voiced an opinion that echoed the thought of many contemporary conservative thinkers, that “Thai-style governance” was already democratic because elections were held in accordance with the “*anekchonnikon samosonsommut*”¹² principle.

A number of other intellectuals also helped define “Thainess,” such as Prince Dhanivat, Phraya Sriwisanwaja and General Saweang Senanarong. But the ideas about “Thainess” proposed by these intellectuals were not so different from each other as to be new paradigms. The crux of these intellectuals’ ideas was their desire to prove that the royal institution and/or Buddhism remained valuable in the new system, and to establish a “Thai” political ideal under which the royal institution and/or Buddhism was the wellspring of ethics that would help shape Thailand’s political society to be righteous and organized. Therefore, although the ideas proposed by each of these intellectuals differed in details, their essence did not conflict. In addition, the majority of these ideas helped accentuate existing definitions of “Thai nation” and “Thainess” that were created by past intellectuals, making them appear clearer and more powerful.

M.R. Kukrit Pramroj belonged in the same intellectual wave that inherited the meanings of “Thainess” from the absolute monarchy period. But he was the most dominant intellectual who changed the ideology’s focus and explanations that enabled “Thainess” to powerfully respond to social situations and post-World War II politics, while preserving the main framework of “Thainess.” We can say that M.R. Kukrit played the most important role in the successful return of “Thainess” that formed an ideological basis in absolute monarchy, to profoundly and widely dominate the Thais’ way of thinking from the 1950s onward. He changed the explanations or meanings of various components of “Thainess” to endow it with enough strength to face challenges from competing ideologies such as liberalism and socialism.

M.R. Kukrit differed from Luang Wichitwathakan and Prince Wan Waithayakon in that he was not satisfied only with constructing “Thainess” to respond to political necessities of the ruling class and the new government system post-1932 revolution; he also harbored an intense ambition to be prime minister.¹³ His definition of “Thainess” therefore had two main

¹¹ Please see Prince Wan Waithayakon, *Wittayatat phraong wan*. [Academic Vision of Prince Wan] Bangkok: Text and Journal Publication, 2001.

¹² Nakharin Mektrairat, Kanpatiwat Sayam pho. so.2475 [Siam revolution 1932 A.D.]. Bangkok: The Foundation For The Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project, 1992. p. 151-156. (“*anekchonnikon samosonsommut*” was a kind of mutual agreement).

¹³ Nangseuphim Krung Thep Times [Bangkok Times] 3, no. 13 (1949) reported on M.R.Kukrit Pramroj as follows: “He wants to be a Prime Minister of Thailand” Afterwards, M.R.Kukrit himself periodically claimed that he wanted to be a Prime Minister (Please see “*Sayamrat na ha*” [Sayamrat page 5]. In *Sayamrat newspaper* 14 December 1970 and 3 June 1971 for examples).

goals that were interconnected: to use “Thainess” to align power relationships in the Thai society, and to imbue himself with sufficient intellectual authority or prestige to warrant election by the head of military junta and/or the public to the post of prime minister whenever political opportunities allowed.

It is widely believed that M.R. Kukrit was a genuine royalist, but his early works show that before 1951, he used to attack aristocrats in the absolute monarchy system, calling them “broken antiques” that had only “rigid, unmovable opinions,” full of “selfishness,”¹⁴ had “carelessness... indulgence... royal arrogance that is more obstinate and stranger than normal people... weak and languid... retain royal stature only because most Thais still like to worship household shrines.”¹⁵ In addition, M.R. Kukrit expressed his displeasure of having been “branded” as a royalist¹⁶, while at the same time often voiced opinions that supported Field Marshal Po and Police General Phao Sriyanond, but frankly attacked Mr. Kuang Aphaiwong and the Democrat Party many times. It was not until Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat became commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army in 1954 that M.R. Kukrit turned around and vehemently attacked Field Marshal Po and Police General Phao, with the intensity that increased over time. He greatly influenced the prevailing public opinion that the 1957 election was “a dirty election”¹⁷ – an opinion which destroyed all justification for Field Marshal Po’s government, and rallied the public to support Field Marshal Sarit in the 1957 *coup d’etat*.

In 1951, significant political changes compelled M.R. Kukrit to become a full-blown “ultra-royalist” who tried to promote “royalism” to increase its power and influence. Two important events were the permanent return of King Rama IX to Thailand, and the Democrat Party’s (which became M.R. Kukrit’s political enemy since the end of 1948) loss of power and influence in the parliament following the 1951 *coup d’etat*. In such a situation, the Democrat Party would no longer have much use from the gaining popularity of royalism, while M.R. Kukrit would directly benefit, because he could align himself with the royal institution and elevate his own status from a “lowly aristocrat”¹⁸ to member of the sacred and superior Chakri dynasty. His image was that of an intellectual who was well-versed in customs of the royal court, which was the superior model for every aspect of “Thainess.”

¹⁴ M.R.Kukrit Pramroj, “*Sam yuk*” [Three period]. Nangseuphim Kiattisak [Kiattisak Newspaper] (3 February 1949). In *Kukrit wa* [Kukrit stated]. Bangkok: Shailit Press, 1952. p. 106-107.

¹⁵ M.R.Kukrit Pramroj, *Samkok chabup nai thun ton Benghek phu thook kluan thang pen* [Samkok : the Capitalist Edition, episode on Benghek who was swallowed while still alive] 6th edition, Bangkok: Siamrat Press, 1987. p. 99-100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 190-191.

¹⁷ See M.R.Kukrit Pramroj. *Kukrit kap panha khong Thai smai luktang mai riaproi*. [Kukrit and Problems of Thailand at the Time of Incomplete Election]. Bangkok: Kasem Bannakit Press, 1968.

¹⁸ M.R.Kukrit Pramroj. *Kukrit kap kanmuang Thai*. [Kukrit and Thai politics]. In *Kukrit 2528*. Bangkok: Sawichan Printing, 1985. p. 40.

Since the early 1950s when he penned *Four Reigns* novel, M.R. Kukrit was highly successful in reviving the ideals of “royalism,” by convincing Thai people that the royal institution, and the kingship as an institution and a person, were indispensable in “Thai nation,” because it was mostly to their credit that “Thai nation” was organized, peaceful, stable, and prosperous. He also drew a close link between Buddhism and “kingship” and “nation,” by showing that Buddhism was a source of ethics that allows the “king” to be a righteous ruler, and allows Thais who relate to each other in a “know-thy-place” manner to co-exist peacefully without exploiting each other. In addition, “kingship” and “Buddhism” were the source and sustenance of “Thainess” in other respects that makes true the phrase “*Muang Thai ni dee*” [Thai nation is good], such as Thai-style governance, Thai language, Thai literature, Thai arts, Thai decorum, Thai traditions, etc.

“Thainess” as defined by M.R. Kukrit was highly influential because it provided an ideological base for the ruling military dictatorship, enabling it to utilize different kinds of mass media, including newspaper in M.R. Kukrit’s own *Sayamrat* Press, in its indoctrination of Thai society. Even though M.R. Kukrit had changed the meanings of different components of “Thainess” in response to changing situations, he firmly preserved the core of existing ideology inherited from intellectuals under absolute monarchy. This made “Thainess” an extremely broad and powerful ideology despite substantial changes in Thailand’s political society.

Political meanings of “Thainess” as defined by M.R. Kukrit

Since the early 1950s, M.R. Kukrit’s popular *Four Reigns* and *Red Bamboo* novels helped revive the value of “Thainess” in the eyes of Thais, in terms of Thai-style governance, fealty to the king, reciprocity-based relationships between social classes, as well as other aspects of Thai art and culture that focused on kingship and Buddhism. During that time, the efforts of many parties had increased the dominance of cultural nationalism. One important endeavor in this vein was Field Marshal Po’s attempt to seek popular support by portraying himself as a good ruler according to Buddhist teachings; for instance, by likening himself to King Ramkhamhaeng who ruled in a paternalistic manner, called his party “*Serimananga Sila*” (the name of King Ramkhamhaeng’s throne). He also tried to perform duties that followed in the footsteps of this king or past kings, such as supporting Buddhism, restoring morals in the society, sponsoring Thai arts, and encouraging other aspects of Thai culture.¹⁹ In addition, many intellectuals wrote and lectured in public about the importance and value of “Thainess,” especially the kingship and Thai culture angles. These intellectuals

¹⁹ See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. Bangkok: The Social Science Association of Thailand and Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, 1979.

included Prince Dhaninivat, Phraya Sriwisanwaja, M.R. Seni Pramoj and Phraya Anumanrajthon.

Since the early 1950s, an intensifying nationalistic fervor that favored customs-based culture left Field Marshal Sarit with no choice but to assume the role of “paternalistic ruler” like Field Marshal Po. Other than public lectures and speeches on various occasions that are believed to have been written by Luang Wichitwathakan²⁰, a new ideological base in preparation for intensifying nationalistic fervor that favored customs-based culture left Field Marshal Sarit’s highly successful social maneuvers that led to him being lauded as an ideal “Thai ruler” was constructed by M.R. Kukrit, who was highly respected by the educated class since the 1950s as an intellectual who could “lead the entire nation” or even “intellectually lead the entire Southeast Asia region.”²¹

During Field Marshal Sarit’s leadership, one facet of “Thainess” constructed by M.R. Kukrit focused on “Thai-style governance” to justify the authority of Field Marshal Sarit, a dictator who had overthrown constitutional monarchy that was based on parliament and democratic election. This was an extremely drastic upheaval in Thailand’s intellectual currents, which had valued the constitution and democratic election for many decades, as seen in the fact that the suggestion for Thailand to adopt the “constitutional monarchy” and “parliament” was made as early as 1927, and after that many groups argued that the state can be ‘good’ only when both “constitution” and “parliament” are in place.²² Even the “conservative” group had to show to the public after the 1932 revolution that “Thai-style governance” already had a “constitution” since King Ramkhamhaeng’s reign in the form of “Inscription One.” Similarly, they claimed that the “constitution” during Ayudhya period was a scripture called “*Dhammasatra*,”²³ and also claimed that an election based on the principle of “*anekchonnikon samosonsommut*” was held during the period of absolute monarchy.²⁴ Therefore, constructing the political justification for a system that had neither “constitution” nor “parliament” under Field Marshal Sarit must be done seriously and urgently.

M.R. Kukrit put a new spin on the explanations of Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, who suggested that although kings in the Sukhothai period wielded absolute power, not unlike kings in the adjacent Khmer empire, the latter was based on master-and-slave governing principle, while Sukhothai governance was based on paternalism, which had been inherited

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Surak Sivaraksa, “*M.R.Kukrit Pramoj thi khaprachao ruchak*” [M.R.Kukrit Pramoj that I Know]. in *Kukrittiyalai*. [Kukrit’s Position]. Bangkok: Santiprachatham Institute, 1996. p. 8-11.

²² Nakharin Mektrairat, “*Song krasae phom panya nai kan patiwat Sayam*” [Two Streams of Thought on Siam Revolution]. In *Kuamkid kuamru lae amnat kanmuang nai kanpatiwat Sayam* [Thoughts, Knowledge, and Political Power in Siam Revolution] . 2nd edition. Bangkok: Phadiokan, 2003. p. 162-167.

²³ “*Dhammasatra*,” is natural law in the Buddhist worldview.

²⁴ Please see details in Kriangsak Sheththapattanawanich, *Nao kuamkid prachattiphratrai bap Thai* [Thoughts on Thai Democracy]. Master’s thesis, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 1993. p. 39-126.

continually “up to the present day.”²⁵ M.R. Kukrit pointed out that “Thai-style governance” was a combination of Sukhothai and Ayudhya systems: the king was considered a reincarnated divine being, but used power for the sake of his subjects without spite, and also gave them opportunities to move up the social ladder. These benefits accrued because this government system was based on the Buddhist principle of “royal virtues.”²⁶

All the public benefits that occurred under “Thai-style governance” in the Sukhothai period, as cited by M.R. Kukrit as examples in his 1960 speech, are benefits that people are entitled to receive under liberal democracy. They are also the same benefits that M.R. Kukrit tried to convince the public that Field Marshal Sarit, a “Thai-style ruler,” had given them in the footsteps of Sukhothai kings of yore: particularly private property rights, crime suppression, national development, patronage of the people, as well as being a generous leader by “...promoting jobs that would help citizens to enjoy a good life, and suppress exploitations such as confiscating other people’s possessions. In addition... assist people to get on in the world by giving them aid.”²⁷

M.R. Kukrit also showed that the benefits of democracy that Thais were aware of already existed in the system of “Thai-style governance” that centralized power on one ruler, without the need for parliament or court of law.²⁸ This gave “Thai-style ruler” a moral justification to use “*Prakat khana patiwat*” (revolutionary party’s declaration) and “*Maatra sipjet haeng thammanoon kanpokkrong haeng raja anajak Thai*” (Section 17 in the Constitution of The Royal Kingdom of Thailand), which allowed the use of judicial power without the court of law. M.R. Kukrit cited the following text from Inscription one of King Ramkhamhaeng: “the king treats commoners and aristocrats alike with honesty and fairness, without favoritism” as evidence that a ruler who wields absolute power can use judicial power fairly. He also convinced Thais that this “Thai-style governance” would not cause the problem of “the state’s arm and leg,” i.e. the “executive branch,” abusing its power, because even in the absence of parliament, “head of the state... already uses the people’s power in controlling the executive branch.”²⁹

Furthermore, M.R. Kukrit stressed that being Buddhist makes the “Thai-style ruler” wholly ethical, so he could rule without the need for any means of check-and-balance. The “Thai-style ruler” was also a moral leader of others in the state, so that while “Thai-style

²⁵ Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, “*Laksana kanpokkrong pratet Sayam tae boran*” [The Siamese Government in Ancient Times]. In *Prawattisat lae kanmuang* [History and Politics]. A textbook for the general studies course in Thai Civilization. Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1973. p. 8-9.

²⁶ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Kanpokkrong samai Sukhothai*” [Sukhothai government] and “*Sangkhom samai Ayutthaya*” [Ayutthaya society]. In *Prawattisat lae kanmuang*. [History and Politics]. A textbook for the general studies course in Thai Civilization. Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1973. p. 31-67.

²⁷ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Kanpokkrong samai Sukhothai*” [Sukhothai government]. In *Prawattisat lae kanmuang*. [History and Politics]. p. 37-38.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 36-37.

ruler” controlled bureaucrats and civil servants not to abuse their power, Buddhist *dhamma* he upheld also kept him from abusing his authority. And “if [he] behaved unethically... citizens have the right to overthrow the king and establish another king in his place.”³⁰ However, M.R. Kukrit tried to convince Thais that Field Marshal Sarit perfectly fulfilled every duty that a “Thai-style ruler” should, be it national development, impartial lawsuit arbitration, suppression of corruption, and generous patronage of the people. Therefore, ousting Field Marshal Sarit to appoint a new ruler should not happen.

In this way, M.R. Kukrit showed Thais that “Thai-style governance” which “centralizes all power... in one individual” gave no less benefits to the citizens than the previous parliamentary democratic regime that Field Marshal Sarit overthrew. In addition, “Thai-style governance” in which the ruler himself wielded judicial power could result in justice to all. Therefore, Field Marshal Sarit’s regime which was “Thai-style governance” is fully justified.

After Field Marshal Sarit passed away, M.R. Kukrit tried to turn him into an ideal “Thai-style ruler,” as a ruler who did not desire power, but had to enter the “political life” because his tremendous loyalty to the king compelled him to protect the royal institution and to resolve national crises and restore order. M.R. Kukrit wrote that “the situation compelled him to enter politics and take control of the nation’s leadership, even though I understand that it was against his feelings and wishes.”³¹

To convince people that “Thai-style governance” is a good government system, M.R. Kukrit tried to show that Thailand’s aristocracy which formed the basis of governance in the ancient times was not an awful social system that “the left” attacked. This was because Thailand’s aristocracy was not related to feudal-style land allocation, but used “*na haeng sakdhi*”³² (property of prestige) in defining roles and responsibilities of each person. Furthermore, land ownership in recent times still showed that the ruling class never confiscated the majority of land to claim as their own; “according to available statistics, most land in Thailand belong to farmers. This fact could not have been the result of a Western Europe-style social order in which the powerful annexed most land as their own under the feudal system.”³³

M.R. Kukrit’s definition of “Thainess” helped Thais understand not only the “significance” of various consequences of the king’s affairs, but also the prime minister’s decisions or the government’s policies. Thais came to understand that a magnanimous and generous ruler not only helped develop the country to be prosperous and peaceful, lifting people from abject poverty, but also helped sustain precious “Thainess.” No matter how

³⁰ Ibid, p. 37.

³¹ M.R. Kukrit Pramroj, “*Asanyakam khong Chomphol Sarit*” [The Death of Field Marshal Sarit]. In *Kukrit thok muangthai* [Kukrit Discusses Thailand]. Bangkok: Bannakhan Press, 1971. p. 290.

³² M.R. Kukrit Pramroj used the term “*sakdhina*” to refer to the social status expressed in terms of the size of land entitlement.

³³ M.R. Kukrit Pramroj, *Farang sakdhina* [Western Feudalism]. Bangkok: Kaona press, 1961. p. 224.

much the society changes as a result of material progress, Thais would not lose the Thai way of life that is full of peace and stability, because their society is characterized by kindness, generosity, hospitality, and harmony under the unifying spiritual centers of kingship and Buddhism. These institutions help steer Thais toward virtues; at the same time, Thai society has efficient mechanisms for governing the nation and defending its sovereignty in its bureaucrats and soldiers, who help the ruler fulfill his aforementioned duties. With these arguments, we can say that M.R. Kukrit played a significant role in constructing Thai political culture, its “constitution: cultural edition,”³⁴ establishing it firmly in Thai polity thereafter.

It is also worth noting that M.R. Kukrit’s definition of “Thainess” has become an ideological basis for the conduct of Thai kings since the early 1950s down to the present day.

Interestingly enough, M.R. Kukrit maintained that Thailand’s government system should not be called “Thai-style democracy.” The real reason behind his insistence may be his desire to affirm his stature as the intellectual who was most knowledgeable about “Thainess” and “otherness,” as well as his desire to see Thai people wholeheartedly accept the government’s dictatorial power at that time without any question or ideological argument. This is because the term “new democracy” was already used by “the left” in late 1940s; if the governments of Field Marshal Sarit and Field Marshal Thanom had used the term “Thai democracy,” this usage would have provoked disputes regarding whether the system was a true democracy, and what kind of democracy Thailand should adopt. This would have not only led to ideological conflicts, but also would have encouraged public calls for individual rights and freedom according to principles of democracy in general, which “may induce tremendous troubles later on.”³⁵

M.R. Kukrit’s construction of “Thainess” was largely based on his own beliefs about Thai society and culture. He thought that the traditional social structure that divides people finely and complicatedly into different social classes in a detailed and complex manner was correct and appropriate. Although he always talked about “democracy,” “rights,” “freedom,” “equality,” and similar concepts, the meanings of these terms were restricted only to what he wanted Thais to recognize in each situation. M.R. Pakpring Thongyai, M.R. Kukrit’s former wife, recalled that M.R. Kukrit usually emphasized the importance of “*ru thi sung thi tam*” [know-thy-place] behavior.³⁶ Even in practice sessions of *Khon Thammasat*, his main purpose was to instill the students with a “Thai mentality,” which means “knowing and

³⁴ Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Ratthathammanoon chabap wattanatham Thai* [The Thai Cultural Constitution]. In *chat Thai muang Thai baprian lae anusawari* [Thai nation, Thailand, Textbooks, and Monuments]. Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1995. p. 136-171.

³⁵ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Prachatippatai bap Sukarno nai Indonesia*” [Sukarno-style Democracy in Indonesia]. In *Prachum phongsawadan prachatippatai* [Collection of Annals of Democracy]. Bangkok: Bannakhan press, 1969. p. 241.

³⁶ Interview: M.R. Pakpring Thongyai. Prachachat Newspaper 9 March 1975.

accepting the hierarchical society,” as well as transforming “*lookjin*” (Chinese’s sons) into Thai, which means having “Thai mentality.”³⁷

Accordingly, M.R. Kukrit defined “Thainess” that supports a hierarchical social structure, because he believed it would lead to “order, stability, peace, and prosperity”; adherence to “Thainess” will enable members of each social class to perform duties according to their class, and movements up or down the social ladder will happen according to the principle that says “each individual’s social status depends on his or her ability or karma.”³⁸ Preferential promotions normally should not happen because “true harmony can only happen when nobody is taken advantage of.” Since anyone who moves up the social ladder on his or her own ability or “*karma*” is entitled to have additional rights and duties to the society, this means that anyone who used favors to get ahead should be responsible for even more duties. Therefore, everyone has different rights and duties according to the principle that “aiding the society on the path of sustainable development and prosperity is the duty of every member, however rich or poor. That duty must be borne by each individual in accordance with his or her ability; people should not claim only their rights while refusing their responsibilities.”³⁹

In M.R. Kukrit’s opinion, economic development since Field Marshal Sarit’s regime and the constant inflow of American culture created the problem of “receding level of Thainess...at a worrisome level... we are increasingly forgetting our Thainess”⁴⁰ which threatened to render untenable the systems of social relationships and “Thai-style governance” that M.R. Kukrit believed was correct and righteous. He felt the need to make Thais recognize “Thainess” so that they “can be good citizens who can eventually protect and preserve the society and its organized government system.”⁴¹ M.R. Kukrit tried to make Thais adhere to “Thainess” by pointing out that if they do not recognize “Thainess” and cannot preserve “Thainess,” they would consequently “be walking on the road toward disappearance from history, not as a people but as a nation.”⁴² And if they have only Buddhism to provide moral compass, it would not be enough to preserve “Thainess,” because there are many other Buddhist countries; Thailand must concentrate on other aspects of

³⁷ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Thatsana likhit thi sam kansubnuang lae kanthaitod natasin Thai* [The Third Written Opinion: Continuity and Succession of Thai Drama] Paper presented in a seminar, “*Nattasin lae dontri Thai*” [Thai Drama and Music] Thai Khadi Suksa Institute, Thammasat University 23-24 June 1979. p. 40.

³⁸ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Khonmi khonchon*” [Rich People, Poor People]. In *Keplek pasomnoi* [Saving up, Little by Little]. Bangkok : Klangwittaya Prees, 1959 p.476. (emphasis by M.R. Kukrit). (*khon*’ is a kind of traditional Thai drama.)

³⁹ Ibid. (emphasis by M.R. Kukrit). p. 475-476.

⁴⁰ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Khong dee khong Thai*” [Thailand’s Values]. In *Lok kap kon* [The World and Human]. Bangkok : Bannakhan Press, 1976. p. 212-213.

⁴¹ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Kansuksa khong chat chapon kansuksa kae phonlamuang yangraidee*” [National Education: How Should We Provide Education for Citizens?]. In *Kukrit thok muangthai* [Kukrit Discusses Thailand]. Bangkok: Bannakhan Press, 1971. p. 203,

⁴² M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Jew* [Jews]. Bangkok: Dokya Press, 2000. p. 47.

“Thainess” simultaneously with Buddhism. Therefore, M.R. Kukrit stressed that “Thai nation” is superior to other nations because it has many valuable components of “Thainess,” including Thai king, Thai-style governance, Thai language, Thai arts such as literature and drama, as well as Thai decorum and Thai traditions. These elements of “Thainess” helped support the hierarchical social structure that formed the basis of a dictatorial political system. Therefore, while he fully supported economic development policies to the extent of concentrating only on worldly part of Buddhism (*lokiya dhamma*), M.R. Kukrit always restrained social relationships to remain “Thai.”

M.R. Kukrit wanted the same thing as intellectuals under the absolute monarchy regime, who wanted Western-style material progress alongside Thai-style social relationships. He argued that:

What I think is genuinely Thai is the Thai heart, which has remained the same since the ancient times. We are still genuine Thais... and I think relationships among Thais also remain constant. Most of us who are genuine Thais are loyal to the king, respect our parents and teachers, and are aware of seniority in a sense that children respect elders, while elders are kind to children.

These relationships are healthy relationship, are Thai relationships. I think that wherever... Thais meet each other, this kind of relationship always grows, making us aware of the fact that we are different from other people, and have much that is superior to them.⁴³

At the same time, M.R. Kukrit pointed out that Thais should not preserve material aspects of “Thainess,” because they were inappropriate to their modern life and would cause many problems. “...Genuinely Thai houses made of *phaprakon* exist only in the Central region... expensive... coldest during winter... wettest during rainy season... The genuine Thai house is for museums... Thai costumes are inconvenient... The way of eating... would be awkward if we return to the genuine Thai way...”⁴⁴ This is because M.R. Kukrit wanted Thais to accept Western-style development plan for their nation.

In addition to “Thai-style governance,” other important aspects of “Thainess” that M.R. Kukrit accentuated with ideas of past intellectuals, or changed meanings to suit the changing times until they became widely popular and became “uniqueness” or Thai identity up to the present day, are as follows:

⁴³ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Thai (boran) neramit* [(Ancient) Thai's Creations]. In *Kukrit thok muangthai* [Kukrit Discusses Thailand], p. 266-267.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261. (*phaprakon* is a Thai-style wooden wall)

Defining “kingship”

M.R. Kukrit tried to show that “Thai-style governance” after the 1932 revolution needed not only a “Thai-style ruler,” but also the king. He defined and outlined the status and roles of the monarch under “Thai-style governance.” In addition, because he intensely wanted to be part of the “royalists” since the early 1950s, he always stressed that “kingship” as an institution was important and most valuable to “Thai nation.”

M.R. Kukrit wanted to stress the significance of kingship in two aspects. One aspect concerns the sacredness of the Thai royal institution that inherited the concept of divine avatar from Khmer empire, and the other concerns the idea that the king upholds royal virtues that help him reign with magnanimity similar to how a father ‘governs’ his children. Both aspects of the “king” are important to “Thai-style governance” in that his adherence to royal virtues would help make the “king” an ideal ruler under “Thai-style governance,” and the sanctity of the royal institution means the king could supervise and control “Thai-style ruler’s” use of power on behalf of the people. The result is that to have an audience with the king, when a new prime minister and cabinet are appointed or when significant crises arise, has a genuine political significance that extends beyond traditional formality.

When M.R. Kukrit argued that Sukhothai kings controlled the state’s arms and legs, he also meant that the king controls the government’s use of power. This is seen in one passage about the king’s role in controlling the government’s use of power, in an article he wrote in honor of the present king. This article is similar to his speech entitled “national governance during Sukhothai period” as follows:

It appears that our Thai history has a different background from other nations... Thais in the old days did not think to establish an institution or association to control “arms and legs” of the society. Instead, we used the society’s “head” – that is, the royal institution – to guard against injustice and failures. Our nation has been ruled in peace for hundreds of years in this manner... this is the guiding principle we have always adhered to.⁴⁵

Since the early 1950s, although M.R. Kukrit preserved the core framework regarding “kingship,” he changed the focus in response to the changing political situation. In the novel *Four Reigns* which he wrote between 1951-1952, M.R. Kukrit portrayed the king as the heart of Thai nation, and concentrated on his status as an individual rather than an institution. His intent was to create the feelings of attachment and love for the king as a human being, and to make people feel deeply moved by the loss of absolute monarchy in 1932, and the death of King Rama VIII in 1946. This would make his readers see the value of

⁴⁵ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Nailuang khong prachachon* [The People’s King]. Cited in *Sala Likhitkun, Nailuang kap Kukrit* [The King and Kukrit]. Bangkok: Sapprasart Co. Ltd., 2003. p. 103-104.

“kingship” while hating Pridi Panomyong, whom M.R. Kukrit regarded as his most important political adversary, because he enjoyed so much popularity and prestige that it was difficult for M.R. Kukrit to beat him directly.

Since the late 1950s, M.R. Kukrit continued to portray the present king as a human being but concentrated his efforts on defining “kingship” to stress the intimacy between the king and his subjects, and influence the Thais’ feelings to feel profoundly attached and loyal to the king. At the same time, he made Thais feel proud of the king as representative of the civilized “Thai nation,” so that when he appears to the rest of the world, “Thai nation” appears to have no less honor and prestige than other civilized nations. Nevertheless, M.R. Kukrit did mention “kingship” as an institution from time to time to make “kingship” an institution that is so sacred that no one would dare to offend, and so important in various aspects that would compel Thais to constantly acknowledge that they must preserve this institution alongside “Thai nation” and “Thainess” forever.

M.R. Kukrit’s definition of “kingship” in the late 1950s was also concentrated on making Thais accept the power of military dictatorship that was extremely loyal to the king and ruled the nation under his majesty’s close supervision. Furthermore, he wanted Thais to recognize the king’s role as their moral compass, and accept hierarchical social relationships because all interactions with the royal institution must be governed by a profound sense of “know-thy-place.”

Instilling the royal institution’s sanctity was therefore part of the propaganda to make Thais believe in the correctness of an unequal social structure, which was the basis for the political structure in which people have no political right or freedom to participate in any decision-making process about the use of resources and check-and-balance mechanisms. M.R. Kukrit convinced Thais to accept “Thai-style governance” and to believe that there is no need for democratic institutions (such as the parliament or independent organizations) to supervise the government’s use of power, because Thailand already has the “king” to supervise the government, to ensure that it will not abuse or misuse its authority.

M.R. Kukrit always stressed the idea that the king is the spiritual center of Thai people, as well as the idea that the king embodies royal virtues according to Buddhism, and therefore will always do the right thing and care for the wellbeing of his subjects. Therefore, in addition to executing various initiatives to alleviate his subjects’ suffering and support the government’s development policies, the king can also receive petition from citizens who were unfairly treated by the government. Focusing on these ideas in late 1970s made “kingship” clearly more important than the government. And when M.R. Kukrit thought that Field Marshal Thanom and Field Marshal Prapaat remained in power too long, that they became obstacle to his own ambition, he began attacking the government and added a new idea

regarding “kingship”: when the political ruler does not fulfill his duties as a “Thai-style ruler” but acts out of self-interest, the “king” will “obstruct” that abuse of power.⁴⁶

We see from the king’s various royal duties that the discourse of “kingship in Thai-style governance” that M.R. Kukrit established has become the basis for the discourse on “kingship” thereafter, which resulted in the king having significance clout in Thailand’s political culture.

M.R. Kukrit gave new meaning to “Buddhism” as one important component of “Thainess” by making people aware that the worldly part of Buddhism (*lokiya dhamma*) was the source of various aspects of “Thainess,” such as Thai art, Thai decorum, Thai characters, as well as Thai-style governance that is full of kindness, because Thai-style rulers firmly uphold Buddhist ethics, which made them righteous and use their power justly, so that check-and-balance mechanisms became unnecessary. In addition, *lokiya dhamma* was the wellspring of Thai moral standard, which made Thai society organized and peaceful without hindering its economic development. In addition, *lokiya dhamma* made Thai society a “society of kindness” whose members are full of compassion and do not harshly exploit each other. Although Thai society has hierarchical social classes that typically characterize other societies, it is special in that the belief in Buddhist laws of *karma* helps promote virtuous men and demote evil men, so that social classes in Thai society are not permanent.

M.R. Kukrit convinced Thais of the importance of some aspects of the spiritual part of Buddhism (*lokuttara dhamma*), usually only when he wanted to achieve some specific goals, such as to insist that Buddhism is more profound than other religions, or to make Thais accept that suffering is a fact of life so they would not demand or pressure the government to solve various problems. In addition, he pointed out that Buddhism also offers a means of livelihood in the form of monkhood. He wanted Thais to see that Thai society’s solutions when it faces problems do not have to resemble other societies; for instance, there is no need for an economic revolution like the one proposed by the “old left,” or a social and cultural revolution like the one proposed by the “new left” at that time.⁴⁷ The hierarchical Thai society, in which the relationships between those in “high places” and those in “low places” are governed by Buddhist morals, must naturally be a good society. Therefore, other than “kingship,” “Buddhism” is another important factor that makes “Thai nation is good” a truism. Therefore, Thais must sacrifice even their lives to preserve “kingship” and “Buddhism,” so that “Thailand is good” remains true forever.

⁴⁶ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “*Sayamrat na ha*” [Sayamrat page 5]. In *Sayamrat na ha lem kao* [Sayamrat page 5, volume 9]. Bangkok: Kaona Press, 1973. p. 307.

⁴⁷ Prajak Kongkirati, “*Kon cha thung sipi tula: khuam khuanwai thang kanmuang wattanatham khong naksuksa panyachon paitai rabop phadetkan thahan po. so. 2506-2516*” [Before 14 October: Cultural-political Movement of Students and Intellectuals Under the Military Autocracy Regime (1963-1973)] Master’s thesis, Faculty of Arts, Thammasat University, 2002. p. 304-373.

“Thainess” or “Thai identity” that M.R. Kukrit constructed became quickly and widely accepted since the end of World War II, because they answered the needs of many groups in Thai society. Members in these groups grew up in the period when Thai society was facing rapid changes and many social and political upheavals. As a result, they felt confused and insecure, longing for an institution or a plan that would make “Thai nation” organized, secure, peaceful, and prosperous. M.R. Kukrit offered an answer that satisfied these people.

Aristocrats saw their prestige and power restored after their stature declined as a result of the June 24, 1932 revolution. Since the publication of *Four Reigns*, M.R. Kukrit returned the arts and culture of the upper class to the heart of Thai civilization once more. He made Thais aware that “Thai kings” even in periods of absolute monarchy were elected, saw the importance of education, and ruled for the wellbeing of their subjects. At the same time, the ruling upper class did not oppress other classes who were under their rule.

The concept of “Thai-style governance” gave justification to rulers in the new system, including bureaucrats, to use power. Soldiers saw their honor restored after losing in World War II and the student uprising on October 14, 1973, because M.R. Kukrit constantly reminded the public that soldiers are the protectors of “Thai nation” and “Thainess.”

The Chinese in Thailand faced a predicament when mainland China became a communist country. They had little hopes of returning to the mainland, and even contacting their relatives in China was next to impossible. Furthermore, they went through a bitter experience in late 1930s when Thai government radically implemented anti-Chinese policies in accordance with principles of racial origins⁴⁸. These Chinese had to figure out for themselves how they and their families could live safely, prosperously, and peacefully in Thailand. M.R. Kukrit’s definition of “Thainess” gave the Chinese an opportunity to learn about “Thainess” and to “become Thai” more easily, an achievement which would gradually earn them more rights as citizens of “Thai nation.” However, learning about “Thainess” did not automatically transform Chinese into Thai, because Thai government in the late 1930s aggressively instilled an “ultra-nationalistic” concept of “Thai nation,” as seen in the national anthem, historical works, historical dramas, as well as marching songs. This physical aspect of “racial origins” restricted their efforts to “become Thai.” As late as the second half of 1970s, a significant number of “Chinese descendants” still suffered from an identity crisis; their attempts to find a new identity was one important contributing factor to the birth of student movements at the time⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Saichol Sattayanurak, *Prawatsat kuamkit ‘chat Thai’ krasaelak*. [History of Mainstream Thought on ‘Thai Nation’]. In *Prawatsat kuamkit Thai kap neokit chumchon* [History of Thai Thoughts and Thoughts on Communities]. Bangkok: Sangsan Press, 2005. p.3-87.

⁴⁹ Please see Saichol Sattayanurak, *Kanmuang lae kansang kuam pen thai doi momrajawong Kukrit Pramoj* [Politics and the Construction of Thainess by M.R.Kukrit Pramoj]. Bangkok : Matichon Press. (forthcoming).

After the late 1960s, M.R. Kukrit constantly defined and redefined “Thainess,” most notably in *laksanathai* [Thai Character] and *Khun Chang Khun Paen chabap aanmai* [Khun Chang Khun Paen: New Reader]. His definition of “Thainess” during the 1980s did not differ significantly from previous definitions, except that he used several dimensions of “Thainess” in achieving several specific, urgent political goals. Although his book *Thai Character* focused on the idea of “kingship” as the heart of “Thainess,” *Khun Chang Khun Paen: New Reader* focused, once again, on the importance of Buddhism and the loyalty of “soldiers” to “kingship.” Therefore, his definition of “Thainess” during the 1980s strengthened the influence of “Thainess” in the minds of Thais, making it a dominant mainstream thought in Thai society up to the present day.

“Truth” that mainstream thought on “Thainess” constructed in Thai Society

The influence of “Thainess” as defined by past intellectuals and strengthened by M.R. Kukrit catalyzed the emergence of an important “truth” in Thai society: Thais became convinced that “society without politics” is a good society. Thais’ adherence to “Thainess” also resulted in such a long period of “political silence” that it is safe to say that “Thainess” helped make the military dictatorship or the centralized political structure extremely stable.

M.R. Kukrit convinced Thais to look very narrowly at “politics,” as the realm of struggles over power and interests which lead to various undesirable results. Rulers who are politicians care only about catering for electoral votes, to the extent that they cannot perform what is right, or what they should do as the nation’s leaders.⁵⁰

M.R. Kukrit convinced Thais that a good society can emerge or last only when the nation is led by a “Thai-style ruler” who is not a politician. “Thainess” as defined by M.R. Kukrit therefore led to Thai society being a “society without politics,” or one characterized by “political silence,” because in his principle, both “Thai-style ruler” and the public are outside the political space. If the ruler does not have to waste time with “politics” (the situation of “still politics” in today’s jargon), he can fully devote his time to work in the nation’s best interests. Meanwhile, the public does not have to worry that the ruler will abuse his power, because being a Buddhist (as well as respecting some monks) ensures that he would be ethical and righteous, and the king who was ‘pure power’ would also supervise to make sure that the ruler rules justly.

It is worth noting that even though lately Thais have begun to demand individual rights and freedom, what they demand are the rights and freedom to be informed about whether

⁵⁰ M.R.Kukrit Pramoj, *Songkram phiw nai saharat (3)* [Racism War in the United States of America (3)] (“*phan non*” 17 June 1963). In *Songkram phiw*. Bangkok: Dokya Press, 2002. p.240.

the ruler and his subordinates are corrupted or abuse the power for their own interests. If the public learns that the ruling faction abuses its power for self-interests without solving the nation's problems or enhancing its prosperity, they can elect a new ruling faction in its place. This is why Thais have demanded a constitution that grants them the right to vote. They do not want to alter power relationships, or empower local villagers to have the right in managing natural resources. Not only that Thais do not want political freedom in a sense of the freedom to demand various rights relating to natural resources, but they also feel that such freedom will cause chaos. Therefore, what Thais demand is a decisive and strong "Thai-style ruler," not a strong civil society.

"Thai-style governance" made Thais accord supreme importance to the ruler, and made democracy in their minds all about the process of electing a ruler, to make sure "a good person" is elected to govern the nation. For Thais, democracy is not about accepting the rights, freedom, and equality in day-to-day living, management of natural resources, and check-and-balance mechanisms to supervise state power. If a ruler uses absolute power in such a way that people are convinced is for the nation's security or the common good, that ruler will earn praise from Thais. Thais also believe that solving various national problems as well as national development must rely on a "Thai-style ruler." This belief is in line with the argument that Thai people are stuck in the vicious cycle of "stupidity-poverty-suffering"⁵¹ and have no ability to be independent and self-reliant.

It is also worth noting that the kind of "order" that Thais think is important does not mean the social order that is based on belief in the equality and freedom of individuals who make decisions with intelligence and reason. This is because mainstream intellectuals 'successfully' changed Thais' way of thinking. For example, Luang Wichitwathakan changed Thai's way of thinking to fit the framework that the ruling class desired via the process he called "human revolution." At the same time, M.R. Kukrit advocated the importance of order that results from when people behave according to their social status and relate to each other according to the "know thy place" principle. He frequently cautioned against exercising freedom 'over the limit'; because he believed that most Thais were still stupid, M.R. Kukrit was suspicious that Thais' freedom would lead to chaos. Therefore, he argued that whenever someone "disrupts order," or breaches "Thainess" that is the source of "order" in Thai society, the "Thai-style ruler" whose job is to "preserve national order" is entitled to use violent means in suppressing such disruption.

In addition, national development under a Thai-style ruler who is kind (or generous) and a righteous king who cares about his subjects' wellbeing and who is well-informed and closely follows the government's development policies became the hope for most

⁵¹ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Khun chang khun phean chabap aanmai* [Khun Chang Khun Phean: New Edition]. In *Nangsu anuson Kukrit Pramoj* [In Memory of Kukrit Pramoj] Bangkok: Amarin printing and publishing, 1996. p. 252.

intellectuals, academics, and the public since around 1957 for solving various national problems, particularly poverty. This reliance on “Thai-style governance” resulted in a long period of “political silence” that lasted until late 1960s.

In early 1970s, the “political silence” was briefly destroyed when people discovered that millions of people remained poor in Thailand despite a decade of economic development. Many intellectuals, academics, and students began to see the failure of development. M.R. Kukrit’s explanation that the failure of development occurred as a result of corruption, which meant immorality of the “Thai-style ruler” (who must use power for the common good), was part of the reason why Thais opposed the government. This anti-government sentiment was fueled by widespread feeling of acute insecurity at the time, when communists were about to win Indo-China, and the Thai economy was heading into a recession following the recall of American troops. It was widely acknowledged that Field Marshal Thanom’s government could no longer guarantee Thais with peace and prosperity. Calls for a constitution intensified, with hopes of holding a democratic election to wrench the governing power from the hands of military dictators and their relatives, whom the society no longer trust to lead with Buddhist morals. These calls were fuelled by rumors that the military dictator planned to change the nation into a republic, which signified that they were not loyal enough to the king to rule under his supervision. As a result, the anti-government movement gained considerable support from the masses, who widely believed in the importance of “kingship” to “Thai nation.”

We see that the October 14, 1973 student movement occurred under the framework of “Thainess” that Thais recognized, and that “Thainess” was extremely influential in the political conflicts and fights following October 14, 1973. Thais in general were led to believe that the student movement became an instrument of “non-Thais,” and that it was about to destroy “Thainess.” The people also felt that “politics” created chaos in the society, and as a result wanted the society to return to the the former status of “without politics” once more. Consequently, when the October 6, 1976 incident occurred, beliefs in the framework of “Thainess” resulted in the Thais’ silent acceptance of violent means the state used to suppress the student movement.

Thus we see how Thai politics during the period between October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976 cannot be explained only by the influence of “old left” and “new left” ideas in the student movement. Mainstream thought on “Thainess” had profound impact on events from October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976, and it is this influence of “Thainess” that made Thais always accept hierarchical social structure and centralized political regime. “Equality” and “democracy based on equality” that some students demanded in their movements were never really important in the minds of Thais.

Even today, it is clear that as long as the ruler portrays himself as a generous leader who sacrifices his own happiness to work for the nation, to further economic development

and solve problems that result in social disorder strongly and decisively, Thais will still remain “politically silent”; especially when Thais believe that “Thai-style ruler” rules under a close supervision of the “king” who is full of intelligence, honor and grace. Thais can rely on the king to solve problems, develop the nation, and supervise the government not to stray or use its power excessively or unjustly. Therefore, Thais feel no need to start a political movement to demand individual rights, community rights, or ways to supervise the government.

We can say that in the mind of a typical Thai, having a ruler who wields absolute power under the king’s royal grace is incomparably more efficient than the parliament system in dealing with social problems and fostering national economic growth.

It is notable that the influence of “Thai-style governance” idea made Thais pay attention to electing a “good person” to power. Once that “good person” is elected, Thai voters are content to leave that “good person” alone to perform his governing duties however he wishes, because a “good person” naturally would have all the qualifications required to be a good ruler; for example, he would be intelligent, able, and moral. The masses who are still stuck in the vicious cycle of “stupidity-poverty-suffering” naturally are not in the position to supervise the ruler or participate in any decision-making process. If they discover that the ruler is not truly a “good person,” the solution would be to elect a new “good person” to be a new ruler, not for the people to enter the political space to balance, control, or audit the ruler’s use of power, or to pressure him to respond to public demands.

In the concept of “Thai-style governance,” criticisms of the government or government officials never encompass their failures to form balanced development policies, unjust management of national resources, and the lack of appropriate redistribution of income. Instead, critics focus on moral deficiencies of any ruler who does not properly perform his duties of a “Thai-style ruler.” The solution is therefore to replace the individual ruler to bar “evil men” from leadership, not to demand any system-wide or structural changes. One influence of the “Thai-style governance” idea is that dictatorship is not a ‘bad’ government system in the minds of Thais. In contrast, Thais tend to believe that as long as they get a “good” ruler, dictatorship would be the most effective system in dealing with problems and developing the nation.

“Society without politics” or “political silence” are also the result of Thais’ acceptance of the concepts of “high social spaces” and “low social spaces,” and the belief that social inequality is normal. Although the 1932 revolution made social equality an ideal of many people, M.R. Kukrit played a significant role in reviving the “know thy place” culture, making it influential again. Since he could not focus on the concept of birthright as in the period of absolute monarchy, he had to instill the belief in hierarchical social relationships by defining various aspects of “Thainess” to dominate the Thais’ way of thinking. For example, he advocated the correct use of Thai language, which includes using language that is

appropriate to each person's social class, and proper Thai decorum, which means proper conduct in the relationships between people from different social classes. Therefore, unequal access to resources and extremely unjust redistribution of income are issues that Thais in general do not perceive as problems, and therefore do not feel that they need to seriously demand solutions to these "problems" from the government.

We can say that the acceptance of the idea that a hierarchical social structure is good and proper because it results in "order," "stability," and "peace" makes Thais accept favoritism and other injustices easily, or else view them as natural. Demands for the peoples' rights and resistance against those who violate their rights and freedom are therefore scarce and do not receive much popular support from the society. "Thainess" that supports a hierarchical social structure is therefore part of the society's violent structure because the idea that treats inequality as "right" made Thais ignorant of inequalities that exist in almost every dimension of their society, including law, political structure and policies, economic structure and policies, relationships between classes, sexes, economic status, as well as in the judicial process and even daily life. Since Thailand's capitalist economy is growing more intensively and extensively, and struggles over resources become more violent, the "lower class" problems, of losing resources or lacking opportunities to access resources that are important to their livelihood, become direr to them. Members of the "lower class" lack legal rights that would help them demand justice from the government and the society.

We can see that in Thailand, public protests or protests held to amass the bargaining power to demand certain rights for the underprivileged are not endeavors that most Thais support. In addition, Thais do not consider such protests to be a display of entitled rights, but instead consider them a display of "exercising freedom over the limit" that creates chaos in the society, damages the national image, and reduces attraction for foreigners in investment and tourism. Movements of the underprivileged, the powerless, and the "civil society" have therefore always been weak. This is one "truth" that is evidently the result of mainstream thought on "Thainess" that prescribes the way of thinking or looking at problems for Thais in the past decades.

Another success of the mainstream intellectuals was in showing that "Thainess" made "Thai nation is good" a reality. Although Thailand was fraught with problems, it was still better than other nations because being Buddhist made people in different social classes and standings behave kindly and generously toward each other. Thais were united because they had the king as their spiritual center. "Thainess" therefore helped prevent severe conflicts or exploitations in Thai society, because Buddhism made Thais kind and patient, and the Thai king was the focus of people's loyalty, which made him the center of harmony for the whole nation. Furthermore, "Thai-style governance" helped Thais live more peacefully than other nations, and made "Thai nation" independent, prosperous, honorable, etc.

Such “Thailand is good” image influenced Thais to accept the dictator’s absolute power, and to more easily accept troubles in their lives. Because, although the ruler wielded absolute power, and although he used that power considerably for his own benefits, he did not make the nation too intolerable to live in. No matter what happens, Thailand was still better than other nations, particularly those in Southeast Asia. Thais should therefore not move against the government; on the other hand, they should stay united to make “Thailand is good” a truism forever. The lack of unity would give “the other” an opportunity to take control and destroy “Thainess,” in which case “Thailand is good” would no longer hold true.

This “Thailand is good” mentality became a framework for the field of historical research that focused on the role of kings in making “Thai nation” prosperous, and became a framework for the analysis of Thai literature in terms of aesthetics, which helps affirm that Thai language and literature have been prospering since ancient times. Most importantly, the “Thailand is good” mentality became the framework for writing textbooks in every level up to the present day.⁵² Such mentality created a dominant image of Thai society and culture for Thais, convincing them that everything in Thai society and culture was already ‘good’; all the ‘bad’ elements were the result of foreign influence. This image made Thais ignorant of the complexities of problems, and led to frequent failures in solving such problems.

Because mainstream intellectuals convinced Thais that “Thailand is good” because it has “Thainess,” therefore, any group that tries to cause any kind of structural change in the Thai society would be treated with suspicion that they want to destroy “Thainess,” which would lead to the end of “Thailand is good” situation. This explains why Thais want changes that are led by a “Thai-style ruler,” not ones that result from social movements. Therefore, Thais were very pleased with the government of General Prem Tinnasulanonda, who proved to be an ideal “Thai-style ruler” who could enhance prosperity by fixing economic instabilities and putting the nation on the path of economic growth. As a result, Thais remained “politically silent” even though the political system remained a “half democracy.”

It is notable that one important reason behind the middle class’ uprising in May 1992 was that Thais felt the military leaders of *coup d’etat* was not a “Thai-style ruler,” but wanted power for their own interests. Thais therefore were concerned that those leaders would remain in power for a long time, because electing a “good person” to rule the nation was impossible under the rule of “*Khana raksa khuam sa-ngop riap-roi heang chat*” [The Coup Party of the national peace and order]. Therefore, it can be said that Thais in general are not

⁵² See Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Chatthai muangthai baprian lae anusawari* [Thai Nation, Thailand, Textbooks, and Monuments]. Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1995. And Saichol Sattayanurak, *Kanmuang lae kansang kuam pen Thai doi momrajawong Kukrit Pramoj* [Politics and the Construction of Thainess by M.R.Kukrit Pramoj]. Bangkok : Matichon Press, (forthcoming).

opposed to military dictatorship or unfair economic or social policies; they are merely opposed to individuals who they are unsure of whether or not are “good.”

Consequently, after the “Black May 1992” event, “political silence” persists in Thailand to this day, and the society remains “without politics.” Meanwhile, a decisive ruler who is efficient at solving problems and developing the economy was still in high demand. Anand Panyarachun was an ideal leader for most Thais especially the middle class, because he did not crave power, but sacrificed his own interests to work for the nation’s benefits. Furthermore, he used the power to return order, peace, and economic prosperity to Thailand. The middle class did not pay attention to the government officials’ use of violence to suppress a protest by villagers in Buriram, although the incidence occurred only three weeks after Black May 1992; nor did the middle class pay much attention to the government’s subsequent use of violence in Nakorn Ratchasima.⁵³ Even today, any “Thai-style ruler” who wields absolute power but demonstrates that he is generous to the public, is loyal to the royal institution, and has close ties to popular monks (to prove his adherence to Buddhism) is still an ideal ruler in the minds of most Thais. It is not until that ruler starts to show that he abuses the power too much for his own benefits, which severely violates the ethics of “Thai-style ruler” and creates widespread concern among those in the middle class that Thailand’s economic growth would be halted without effective solutions from the ruler, that he would begin to lose popular support.

Narrowness of “Thainess”

Since the late 1960s, Thailand’s social and cultural structures have changed so rapidly that the mainstream thought on “Thainess” is too narrow to respond to such changes. As a result, Thais have found it difficult to adapt while facing problems that increase in diversity and complexity.

The concept of “Thainess” was defined to support a hierarchical social structure, stresses that everyone must “know thy place” via Thai decorum, Thai language, Thai ethics, etc. Although this concept allows people to move between social classes, such movements depend on each individual’s own ability and ethics, without any alteration of the social and political structures to allow the underprivileged to truly move up the social ladder. At the same time, “Thainess” leaves no room for “raising political awareness” of the middle class. As a result, the divide between “Thainess” defined by intellectuals, and the realities of Thailand’s rapidly changing society and culture, has been growing wider and wider. When

⁵³ Saichol Sattayanurak, *Kanmuang lae kansang kuam pen Thai doi momrajawong Kukrit Pramoj* [Politics and the Construction of Thainess by M.R.Kukrit Pramoj]. Bangkok : Matichon, (forthcoming).

the 1960s were drawing to a close, Thai social structure consisted of many new social classes that were very different from traditional ones. Thais' social relationships moved further and further from the framework of Thai ethics, because they were increasingly governed by commercial relationships that concentrate on profits and losses. The use of natural resources became more diverse, and the struggle over resources became more violent. The government's management of resources remained imbalanced, i.e. favoring capitalists and businessmen, placing laborers and farmers at a disadvantage. Tension and conflicts in Thai society have dramatically increased as a result. "Thainess" could not solve these problems, especially when the ruler did not fulfill his duties of a "Thai-style ruler," but instead want only used power for his own benefits. There is not enough mechanism in "Thainess" that could help control, supervise, audit, and influence the governing system to be effective.

I have said earlier that in the "Thai-style hierarchical social structure," those in "high social spaces" must be kind to those in "low social spaces," to prevent exploitation and oppression in the society. But the expansion of capitalism in which people relate to each other mainly commercially has turned profits and losses into the basis of social relationships, weakening the ethics of "kindness" to ultimately lose influence. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the kind of Buddhist ethics that mainstream intellectuals advocated is the worldly part (*lokiya dhamma*) that they wanted Thais to obey and follow, without understanding the entire Buddhist philosophy. Because Thais rely on monks and teachers as revered persons who spread Buddha's teachings, respect for monks and teachers is an important condition to accepting and upholding Buddhist ethics. Since the late 1960s, the social status of monks and teachers in Thai society has declined precipitously compared to other middle classes, resulting in the situation where "Thai ethics" no longer has the clout to be the basis of compassion-based social relationships. Therefore, while the government has no real policy to distribute national income, the widening gap between the rich and the poor is aggravating the poor's plight much more severely than in the past. "Thainess" in terms of ethics cannot address unfair income distribution and struggles over resources in the capitalist economy at all.

At the same time, the mainstream intellectuals' success in making Buddhism one "heart" of "Thainess" while ignoring the supramundane states (*lokutara dhamma*) makes the worldly kind of Buddhism Thais uphold too "narrow" to address the complex livelihood and problems in the age of capitalism. Thais are unable to apply Buddhist thoughts to use in a more complicated environment in their lives.⁵⁴ In addition, rigid Buddhist ethics do not facilitate adaptations of Thais in the age of globalization, which forces them to ponder and solve various problems, including moral dilemma, constantly on their own.

⁵⁴ Please see Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Sapap setthakit sangkom Thai yukmai jariyatham nai kansuksa samrap anakot*. [Condition of Modern Thai Socio-economy: Ethics in Thai Education for the Future]. Bangkok: Office of the National Education Commission, 1993.

“Thainess” is not only too narrow for people in traditional “social classes”; it is even narrower for new social classes and groups who emerged during periods of high economic growth. All groups, both old and new, exist in a society that is rapidly changing in every aspect, and is full of differences between people in terms of environment, occupations, income levels, education levels, etc., not to mention the expansion of American culture that has changed the lives of many people. Various and diverse changes since the 1960s are too numerous to be addressed by “order” as prescribed in “Thai-style social relationships.” As a result, Thais find themselves confused, caught between traditional social values defined by “Thainess,” and new social values that are different from, or even conflict with, traditional values. Traditional social values do not facilitate a modern livelihood in which people are more individualistic and relate to each other on commercial terms. Meanwhile, new social values are condemned by conservatives, resulting in an identity crisis.

“Thainess” is also too narrow to address the problem of racial origins. Although the concept is not fixated on early principles of racial origins, it does not accept racial diversity. In contrast, “Thainess” pressures other races to “become Thai.” This problem was not severe when people of each race did not have to relate to bureaucrats. However, national development expanded bureaucracy into the countryside, forcing every race to fall under its sphere of influence. Many races who did not or could not truly “become Thai” did not receive certain rights from the state, did not find convenience in their contact with bureaucrats, and were even oppressed in various ways, ranging from taunts to extortion and use of force. These non-Thais did not receive the rights, equality, and justice under Thai law and judicial system, even though they were born in Thailand.

The fact that “Thainess” is not broad enough to accommodate all races in Thailand, but forces other races to “become Thai,” is one part of the identity crisis problem, which has become more acute since the late 1960s. When rapid expansion of the capitalist system has connected people of all races to a single political economy that is increasingly cohesive, but that remains fraught with numerous uneven advantages and disadvantages in the economic and political structures, the “Thai-style governance” that centralizes the power to manage resources therefore causes more frequent clashes between non-Thais and “Thais” in many areas, both in terms of cultural conflicts and struggles over resources.

In addition, the “Thainess” that forces people of all races to “become Thai” also means forcing those people, who used to have cultures that sustain their livelihood in a particular environment, to renounce their opinions on “truth, virtues, and beauty” they used to adhere to, and to adopt instead “Thai truth, Thai virtues, and Thai beauty.” Members of certain races do not want to, or cannot, wholeheartedly adopt such “Thainess,” or adopt only a small part of it. This situation causes confusion over social values that relate to “truth, virtues, and beauty,” which brings considerable hassles and stress to social life and relationships, both within each ethnic group and between ethnic groups in “Thai nation.” In many situations,

some non-Thais who adhere to their own opinions of “truth, virtues, and beauty” became “quaint merchandise” that exists to attract tourists. Ultimately, those races can no longer hand down and alter their opinions of “truth, virtues, and beauty” smoothly, because the context of their lives changes too rapidly as a result of government policies.

Furthermore, the meaning of “Thainess” that Thais recognize prevents many groups, especially non-Thais who have not “become Thai,” from having any “space” in the Thai political society because they have less “Thainess” than other groups or have no “Thainess” altogether.

“Thainess” is also too narrow to help Thais understand the complexities and diverse changes of their society, especially economic, social, political, and cultural problems that have happened since the late 1960s. Since Thais do not profoundly understand all aspects of these changes and problems, they cannot effectively solve both life and social problems. In other words, “Thainess” has functioned as an obstacle to prevent Thai people from adapting themselves to the rapid and crucial changes in Thai society.

All the mainstream intellectuals who defined “Thainess” wanted Thais to strongly adhere to the key framework of “Thainess,” by convincing them that “Thainess” is a priceless inheritance from the past whose core remains unchanged through the centuries. Thais therefore can imagine social changes only in terms of material progress, but cannot imagine changes in terms of social relationships, and see no changes in the social structure that are rapidly happening alongside changes in the economy and culture. Instead, Thais see things in the modern system of social relationships that do not fit in the framework of “Thainess” as “abnormal” behavior that must be quelled or corrected; for example, when “children” or those in “low social space” disobey those in “high social space,” or when Thais become more individualistic and demand more individual rights and freedom. Looking at changes without understanding like this is another factor behind increasing social conflicts, and induces those in power to use violence in correcting various problems. They frequently use their authority to force, control, and suppress without constructing new social and cultural policies that would facilitate alterations of social relationships to suit the changed context, and without finding ways to change the economic, political, and cultural structures that create problems for people’s lives.

The narrowness of the mainstream thought on “Thainess” mentioned above leads many Thais to wonder whether the “Thainess” they are aware of is real, because explanations of social problems in the framework of mainstream “Thainess” do not lead to an understanding of such problems that is sufficient to finding appropriate solutions. At the same time, various experiences that have happened since late 1960s do not correspond to mainstream “Thainess” to such an extent that they raise questions as to whether many characteristics of “Thainess” are real. For instance:

“Thailand is good” and Thai society is characterized by kindness.

There is only one kind of “Thainess”: high-class Thai culture that sets a proper and righteous standard.

Members of every race or ethnic group must “become Thai” before they can be considered part of “Thai nation.”

The masses will always be stuck with “stupidity-poverty-suffering,” waiting for kindness and generosity of the state or “bureaucrat master.”

Etc.

The more rapid and complex changes in Thailand’s political economy become, the more questions and doubts will be asked regarding the above-mentioned issues concerning “Thainess.” This is the “Thai identity crisis” that every faction of the Thai society must together unravel as quickly as possible, by finding a way to redefine “Thainess” in such a way that is broad enough to give each member of every group his or her own “space” in the Thai political society on an equal basis, and can live a dignified life as befits every human being.

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