KING MONGKUT'S POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES THROUGH ARCHITECTURE AT PHRA NAKHON KIRI¹

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Abstract

This research investigates King Mongkut's vision of modernity as expressed through the medium of Phra Nakhon Kiri in Phetchaburi. King Mongkut used hierarchically traditional architecture as a means of bolstering national pride and legitimising claims to the right of kingship. Simultaneously, a political position of Siam as a modern state was manifested through European-Sino-Siamese hybrid architectural styles in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, the bell-shaped pagoda style within the site complex reflected his religious reform directed at upgrading monastic practices and purifying the canon. His reformed

Buddhist sect, Thammayut, is characterised as rational, intellectual, and humanistic. Such religious reform was integrated with scientific knowledge, which he had learned during his contact with Christian missionaries as a monk and later as king.

Introduction

King Mongkut, through his long association with Christian missionaries while in the monkhood and on the throne, and the Siamese elite were aware of the increasing threat of European colonisation in Southeast Asia, particularly after the British defeated the Burmese in 1837, and when western firearms were used to settle the Opium War in China in 1842 (Batson, 1984: 4). In response to global political circumstances, the Siamese elite introduced the concept of modernity and Westernisation to Siam by incorporating Western ideas of governance and administration, changing the economy to a market, cash economy (Keyes, 1989: 45). Notably, these Siamese elite, who had foreseen the potential benefits from the trade treaty, welcomed the British demands and later signed commercial treaties with European countries beginning with Britain in 1855. Subsequently, these Western treaties, led by the Bowring Treaty, removed all trade barriers and established extraterritoriality for European subjects in Siam. Inevitably, the mass arrival of Europeans had major socio-cultural influences on people of Siam, especially in term of modern scientific knowledge, health, and travel. This began with the ruling elite who learned Western scientific knowledge such as mechanical

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engineering, medical science, navigation, and astronomy from their close contact with foreigners.

According to a record in the Thiphakornwong chronicle of 1861 (cited in Koompong, 2003: 146), the modern notion of physical retreat travel was also initiated by Westerners, who submitted a petition to the king for an open air plot to ride carriages or horses for pleasure and to recuperate. Similarly, visiting new places was also believed to be beneficial to health and longevity. Subsequently, the first three roads in Bangkok: Charoen Krung (New Road), Bamrung Muang, and Fuang Nakhon, were constructed, was followed by the use of horse-drawn carriages introduced during the reign of King Mongkut. This also coincided with the move from water-based transportation to land-based transportation.

According to the ancient system of divine kingship, Siamese monarchs and their royal families usually resided only in the Grand Palace. This was regarded as a sacred place and the administrative center (Sarakadee, 2003). Royal travel was usually restricted to day-trips to the provinces near Bangkok, due to security concerns and undeveloped infrastructure. The kings would rarely make a long trip away from the residence, unless they were required to travel on important missions such as witnessing the search for white elephants, enshrining sacred Buddha images, and commanding troops during wartime (Benjawan, 2000). However, according to Naengnoi and Freeman (1996), this changed during the reign of King Mongkut for two reasons. Firstly,

while leading a monastic life, the princely monk made pilgrimage trips to many provinces and became well acquainted with the living conditions of his subjects. Thus, when King Mongkut ascended the throne, he realised that visiting the provinces was essential to good governance. Secondly, steamboats came into existence during his reign, therefore making travel much faster than before. Consequently, the king built seven country residences both close to and far from Bangkok. Those to the north included Bang Pa-In Palace and Chankasem Palace in Ayutthaya and Narai Ratchanivej Palace in Lopburi; and to the south, Phra Nakhon Kiri, in Phetchaburi.

Unlike Phra Aphinaowaniwet in Bangkok which was demolished during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Phra Nakhon Kiri is still in existence and is the largest and most outstanding country palace erected during King Rama IV's reign. It significantly reflects the influence of western notions of science, health, and travel. This site complex has a unique geographical setting and attractive landscape and also contains a number of buildings in European-Sino-Siamese hybrid architectural styles manifesting King Mongkut's personal identity, in terms of his vision of modernity and religious beliefs. In addition, Phra Nakhon Kiri is currently one of Thailand's most visited national museums and the leading symbolic landmark in Phetchaburi. In spite of such heritage values, it is surprising that so little empirical research has actually been conducted to analyse King Mongkut's intelligent thoughts and symbolic meanings embedded in the

content and patterns of the cultural artifacts, especially the architecture at Phra Nakhon Kiri.

As architectural buildings significantly reflect the priorities and values of the makers and users through their designs, forms, styles, and characteristics of cultural materials, this study therefore attempts to investigate and analyse the abstract meaning of King Mongkut's ideology of modernisation, religious beliefs and personality through the medium of static buildings at Phra Nakhon Kiri that now have no 'life'. Indeed, the study also attempts to 'seek' rather than to 'ascertain' the meanings of his intelligent thoughts. In conducting this enquiry, it is not the source of the insight which validates the claim; instead it is the explicit nature of the reasoning which sustains it and the means by which the available data can be brought into relationship with it (Renfrew, 1994). To infer about architectural history in Siam, and determine to what extent political visions are embedded in the architectural forms of Phra Nakhon Kiri, and the reason why, a thorough investigation was first required to understand the socio-political phenomena and the background of the king. As the site complex consists of a large number of residential and religious buildings, the following section discusses the political and cultural values of the stylistic architecture at the royal palace, and that of the royal temple.

Compositional Architecture at Phra Nakhon Kiri

Phra Nakhon Kiri, commonly known among local residents as *Khao Wang* (the celestial city on the mountain), is a 95-meter high rural palace erected in 1859 under the royal aspiration of King Mongkut. The Hilltop Palace creates a spectacular cultural landscape where the European-Sino-Siamese hybrid architectural styles of the edifices blend into the natural surroundings comprising woods, rocks, and caverns. His vision of modernity was revealed through the architectural style embedded in the palace complex that included throne halls, religious edifices notably the royal chapel and chedi (a domed or bell-shaped pagoda), and other buildings including the pavilion and citadels. Also present were some Neo-Classic Western styles, as well as Chinese workmanship as seen in the roof structures, and in the roof layouts. The result is an interesting hybrid of architectural styles particular to this place. Furthermore, it is the first palace that has three prominent peaks erected on the same mountain: the West, the Middle, and the East peaks.

The West Peak is the setting of a complex of the royal structures known as the Phetphum Phairot Throne Hall, which currently serves as a museum featuring royal belongings and utensils of both King Mongkut and his son, King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1910). Some cultural artifacts in this hall include furniture, bronze sculptures, porcelain and glasses in European, Chinese, and Japanese styles. Originally, Phetphum Phairot was the hall

in which the king gave an audience to his courtiers during his stay at Phra Nakhon Kiri. In 1910, the hall was converted to accommodation for visiting dignitaries including the Duke Johan Alberkt and his consort Princess Elizabeth Stolberk from Brunswick in Germany. To make the building suitable for this purpose, the interior was renovated accordingly.

One of the more interesting halls reflecting King Mongkut's personality is the Pramot Mahaisawan Hall, a royal residential hall consisting of three rooms: a living room, a bedroom and a dressing room. For security purposes, the small bedroom was hidden and connected to narrow stairways, which also revealed his simple and humble personality, very likely deriving from his rigorous and disciplined life as a Buddhist priest.

On the contrary, the West Peak houses a large number of buildings such as the Wechayan Wichien Prasat (King Mongkut's statue hall), a ceremonial hall, an observatory called the Chatchawan Wiengchai, for the king to observe stars and constellations, a large residential area for state guests, and a theatre for masked dance drama performances. The observatory clearly strongly reflects the king's great interest in Western knowledge of astronomy. The palatial complex possesses scientific values of modern technology, using steel for constructing the high observatory and the four towers on the corner of the Wechaya Wichien Prasat. Naengnoi and Freeman (1996: 34) described the modern architectural style of these towers as:

The two-storey cylindrical tower has massive walls with semi-circular openings surrounded by a dome made of curved steel members and ring beams, the interstices covered with pieces of glass that are curved to the contour of the dome. The four, octagonal towers of the Phra Thinang Wechayan Wichien Prasat are built in the same style but are smaller and lower with openings of Gothic style.

The great chedi enshrining the relic, called Phra That Chomphet, is situated on the Middle Peak, whereas the Eastern Peak houses a royal temple called Wat Phra Kaew Noi built in the same style as the Grand Palace, in Bangkok. The temple contains numerous Buddhist edifices such as the *ubosod* (ordination hall), the bell-shaped stupa called Phra Sutthasela Chedi, Phra Prang Daeng (a Khmer-influenced tower in brick and stone), the belfry, and some small pavilions. These buildings are situated on a multi-layered base. Most notably, the elements of this monastery are arranged in a manner consonant to the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767) as the ordination hall was made the most prominent, with the chedi to the rear, and the belfry placed lower to the front.

In accordance with the ancient divine kingship system, royal palaces were traditionally built in relation to the Buddhist cosmology of *Traiphum*. The palace was divided into three main areas: the outer, the middle, and the inner courts. The outermost court consisted of official buildings. The middle court contained

three main *mahaprasat* (tall sacred symbolic buildings for the kings), each with a palatial spiral roof, used as royal residences and for royal ceremonies including granting audience to foreign dignitaries. The inner court of the palace was the private quarters of the king and the ladies of the court.

In *An Architectural Design Study of Phra Nakhon Kiri*, Benjawan Thatsanaleelaporn (2000: 231) notes that the three courts are not orderly placed. In particular, the inner (ladies) court consisting of Santhakarn Sathan Hall and other structures within the Nari Prawet Gate were not located behind the royal residence and the Audience Hall, as is in the traditional Grand Palace in Bangkok. Instead, Santhakarn Sathan Hall is on the right on the way to the Audience Hall, Phetphum Phairot. In contrast, at least three studies (Naengnoi and Freeman, 1996; Fine Arts Department, 1999: 76-77; and Somchart interviewed on 7 September, 2006) claim that the Hilltop Palace contains only two courts: the outer and the inner courts. This was very likely because the palatial complex was geographically constrained by its location. These two courts are connected by paths and stairways leading up the slope. At the intersections, there are guard posts to maintain security. These are called the Front Sala, the Middle Sala, and the Rear Sala. There are outer and inner gates, and five strategically located forts. It can be said that the architecture of the Hilltop Palace is in the traditional Thai style where the inner part is at the highest spot, while the outer part is located below. In essence, there is no 'precise' knowledge with respect to the number of courts at

Phra Nakhon Kiri. As the site has limitations due to its setting, the palace may be divided into two or three courts depending on how the individual scholar views the architectural design of the site.

Apinan Poshyananda (1992: 5) called these European-Sino-Siam hybrid buildings an eclectic combination of 'Doric columns, Ionic capitals, balustrades, and brickwork, in places mixed with glazed ceramics designed in the Chinese style'. Whereas Koompong Noobanjong (2003) stated that several buildings at the western peak share several characteristics that make the entire compound look 'Western' - heavy masonry and white-washed stucco walls, arches and arcades, as well as simplified classical ornaments such as the Ionic order. Interestingly, Pensupa Sukanya (2000: 15) suggested that the palatial complex was an early European architectural structure built in the countryside. Thus, officials and craftsmen probably relied on pictorial references like prints, photographs, postcards, calendars and posters from American and French missionaries as their architectural sources. It should be noted that the plan, design, scale, space and architectural elements have been distorted and adapted to meet the requirements of Siamese builders (Apinan, 1992). However, the importance of architectural hybridity reflects a transitional period in Siamese aesthetics between traditional eclecticism and aspiring modernism.

Political Legitimacy through Wechayan Wichien Prasat

According to the ancient political system of divine kingship, the monarch was not only considered a ruler but also a supremely holy person, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu or Indra, the god who protects Buddhism. As a result, palaces of the God-King had to reflect the ethos of heavenly architecture. The style of such buildings and the elements with which they were decorated are of a special type reserved only for use in palaces and temples. These elements include multi-storeyed roofs, gables depicting gods, for instance Vishnu mounted on a mythical bird, Garuda or Indra mounted on a three-headed elephant, Airavanta, gilding and other decorative detail. King Mongkut and the other ruling elite were aware of the West's influence and simultaneously they also safeguarded the identity of their own moral culture. Significantly, the king refined and strengthened the traditional Siamese values, notably the political legitimacy in which he grew up, to counter the spread of Christianity. His vision of the traditional values of hegemony was embodied in the architectural style of Wechayan Wichien Prasat, a Khmer cruciform-shaped building used as a throne-hall or religious edifice, and reserved for the monarch only. Notably, the *prasat* is crowned by a tall spire (*prang*), a high sanctuary or monument on a square plan, with a corn-cob-shaped top. In Hindu mythology, the *prang* represents the thirty-three levels of heaven, with the summit occupied by the god Indra.

One of the most outstanding features of Wechayan Wichien Prasat is its five spires. The main spire, signifying Mount Meru (a residence of the god Indra), is surrounded by four minor spires symbolising the four continents (residences of human beings and other animals) in relation to the traditional cosmology of *Traiphum* (Naengnoi and Freeman, 1996). The superstructure is decorated with Thai-style ornaments. The towers on the four corners of the upper tier are in the Western style with domed glass roofs, which makes the small *prasat* more prominent, especially at night. Apparently, Wechayan Wichien Prasat, which was built to honour King Mongkut, as was the custom, stands higher than any other architectural hybrid building on the west peak, and perhaps is the most dominant structure erected by the king as a new means of presenting his political legitimacy to the outside world.

It is interesting to note that although King Mongkut criticised the supernaturalism of indigenous Siamese religious forms, he did not fully accept the empiricism of Western science. The king was wise to support the traditional metaphysical view of Buddhism with its belief in heavens and hells populated by a diverse range of supernatural entities. In his writing, Somboon Suksamran (1993: 109) commented that 'Buddhism not only provided the state with the ideological basis and political legitimacy but it could also be used to facilitate the government and to maximise the legitimacy of traditional government'. This can be interpreted that the ruling elite in Siam strove to maintain their legitimacy since it

permitted them to achieve their goals and maintain their power without resorting to coercion. Undoubtedly, such power can be reserved for possible major crises in the future. Also, Jackson (1989: 45-46) argued that due to his religious reforms, King Mongkut did not radically reject *Traiphum*, a Buddhist cosmology of 'Three Worlds' comprising Heaven, Earth, and Hell, with punishments meted out in accordance with sins committed. Instead, King Mongkut tried to supplant local religious traditions with his own semi-rational royal ideology. Hence, it can be asserted that the Brahmanical or Hindu deities were still worshipped by him. Additionally, *Traiphum* would constitute an invaluable means of maximising his legitimacy, enabling him and the political regime to be accepted as rulers.

Significantly, the concept of political legitimacy through *Traiphum* cosmology will greatly enhance an understanding of the geographical setting of the palatial complex. According to Ringis (1990: 7), the symbolism of *Traiphum* cosmology was expressed in the evolution of religious architecture, decoration, and mural painting. Pensupa Sukata (2000: 14) pointed out the legendary Mount Meru in *Traiphum*, the 33-tiered mythical mountain at the center of the universe and home to the gods, notably Indra, remarkably influenced King Mongkut's decision on geographical setting. The king attempted to dominate his palatial complex, especially Wechayan Wichien Prasat, which is a replica of the universe and represents an earthly model of the cosmic world. The top tower rises from

the center of the monument symbolising the mythical Mount Meru.

In short, understanding political legitimacy and Mount Meru in the *Traiphum* cosmology will help answer two important questions regarding the geographical setting: why did King Mongkut have his palatial complex erected on the hill? Moreover, what is the symbolic meaning of Wechayan Wichien Prasat standing on top of the west peak?

After analysis of King Mongkut's political vision of modernity through architectural discourse at the royal palace, the following section will discuss the prominent characteristics of his religious reform, the Thammayut sect as embedded in the stylistic architecture at Wat Phra Kaew Noi within the site complex.

The Revival of the Bell-Shaped Stupa of the Ayutthaya Period

As Phra Nakhon Kiri contains two bell-shaped stupas: Phra That Chomphet on the Middle Peak and Phra Sutthasela Chedi on the East Peak, it is interesting to examine why these religious structures were erected in the form of bell-shaped architecture. What is the symbolic meaning of this bell-shaped architectural style? To what degree does this architectural pattern relate to the characteristics of the Thammayut sect?

The world's oldest Buddhist edifice, the bell-shaped stupa, regarded as the pure original canon, was used as a cultural medium in promoting the Thammayut sect

and traditional identity. The close contact between King Mongkut and the Mons and Ceylonese Buddhist monks resulted in an exchange of Buddhist knowledge and artistic practice. While in the monkhood, King Mongkut cultivated a relationship with Ceylonese monks who came to visit Siamese temples and shrines in 1840. He also sent a group of his disciples to Ceylon twice in order to borrow 72 volumes of the oldest surviving Buddhist scriptures so that Siamese collections could be revised and expanded (Vella, 1957: 40-41; Griswold, 1961: 19). During his reign, King Mongkut wisely used the architectural forms to symbolise his religious ideology in accordance with the Thammayut sect, which focused on the pure original canon.

As the Thammayut sect was initially directed at upgrading monastic practices and restoring the faith to a pure original canon, the king also used the bell-shaped stupa originally from Ceylon, to manifest the characteristics of his Thammayut sect. To the king, Ceylon was considered the fountainhead of the purest doctrines in the 14th and 15th centuries, when there had been numerous cultural exchanges between Ceylon and Siam. Notably, the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism originated from the oldest surviving text which was written in the Pali language in Ceylon, in the first century (BC), known as the Pali canon. Some Siamese monks in Sukhothai (Thailand's first kingdom) went there to study the Dharma and later returned home to preach and promote Ceylonese artistic practices, notably mural painting, sculpture and architecture. This can be seen through a bell-shaped stupa

with a ring of elephant sculptures encircling the base at Wat Chang Lom in Sri Satchanalai, Sukhothai.

It has been noted that the bell-shaped stupa is symbolic of the Buddha's death or *Parinirvana*. This symbol was originally derived from the ancient mounds of India that enshrined the Buddha's remains after cremation. In Siam, the bell-shaped stupa (chedi) was favoured during the Sukhothai period (13th century) and subsequently adapted in various ways during the Ayutthaya period, according to the aesthetics of the time. The bell-shaped stupa was extensively used in Ayutthaya but it was given a new elegance, notably the most well-known triple stupa with the entrance porches at Wat Phra Si Sanphet. The base of the bell was capped by a colonnaded hamika porch and crowned by a slim spire that imparted an airiness not previously seen (Van Beck and Tettoni, 1991: 145). Ayutthaya architects played with this style, squaring its shoulders and elongating it to create one of Siamese architecture's most graceful expressions of soaring weightlessness. However, in the mid 19th century, the bell-shaped stupa was again seen. King Mongkut revived it as he found the architectural form particularly fascinating.

It is interesting to investigate why most Buddhist monasteries during the reign of King Mongkut were modelled on the temples of the Ayutthaya period and not on those of the Sukhothai period. This can possibly be explained by the fact that the king used a particular expression of what Williams called 'selective tradition'. According to Williams (1977: 115), such a

tradition is perceived of as 'an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification'. It was a model of the past which the king applied to a contemporary situation for the sake of promoting his kingship in relation to the idea of continuity with a glorious past. Apparently, he revived the physical, traditional identity, and cultural splendors of Ayutthaya, which was the kingdom's capital for the longest duration in Thai history. Also, Ayutthaya was the origin of ancient court ceremonies derived from Buddhist philosophy and the Brahman concept of divine kingship. Similarly, the Buddhist monk turned king applied the 'selective' tradition model to promote and support an image of his monarchy as 'the Great' by introducing his royal regalia *the Victorious Crown* in his palaces, religious edifices and other cultural materials. With respect to his global views on the 'selective' tradition, King Mongkut established Thailand's first museum to house a collection of cultural artifacts intended to promote his civilised kingdom in the eyes of foreigners, as noted in his personal correspondence with the heads of the colonial powers (Cary, 2000: 131).

Ayutthaya was related to the origin of King Mongkut's ancestry. Unlike King Rama III whose mother was a commoner, King Mongkut took pride in his royal family lineage. Likewise, he was keen on the historical background of his clan. In his royal writings, King Mongkut wrote that there were two original tracks of Siam. The former track was under Khmer

control which Siam was subsequently able to dispel, and establish a new empire called Sukhothai. King Mongkut believed that the other track came with King Uthong, the founder of Ayutthaya, whose clan descended from Chiang Rai, settled in Ayutthaya and subsequently moved to Bangkok. Hence, Ayutthaya was clearly associated with his clan, in terms of historical background.

Politically, most temples erected during the reign of king Rama III were influenced by Chinese art, primarily due to the increase of sea trade with China. King Rama III, who noticed the deterioration and the fire hazard of the wooden structures, ordered the carved wooden structures replaced with decorations in brick and stucco. Unlike King Rama III who had opposed the unequal trading treaties with Western countries, King Mongkut was aware of increasing 'Western' domination in the world economy and politics, notably during the Opium War in 1842. If Siam still had many Chinese influenced architectural buildings, this would threaten his sovereignty because the Western powers might have perceived Siam as a barbarian vassal state to China (Somkid, 2004: 206). Therefore, King Mongkut did not give much significance to Chinese influenced architecture, but instead revived the traditional architectural forms of the Ayutthaya period. It can be emphasised that most bell-shaped stupa monasteries today are associated with the king, in Bangkok and upcountry such as Phra Prathom Chedi in Nakhon Prathom, the Golden Mount at Wat Saket, Wat Phra Kaew in the Grand Palace, Wat

Bavonivet, Wat Pratum Wanaram, Wat Makut Kasat, Wat Sommanat, and Wat Phra Kaew Noi in Phetchaburi (see an analysis of religious architecture in the reign of King Mongkut in Somkid, 2004).

Unlike during the time of Ayutthaya, a number of religious buildings in the reign of King Mongkut were built in the chedi architectural form instead of *prang*. This is likely because the *prang* was regarded as a Khmer-influenced Hindu tower thought to be incompatible with Buddhism. According to characteristics of the Thammayut sect, the king firmly attempted to purify Buddhist teachings and rejected traditional beliefs and practices concerning magic, superstitions and spirit-medium cults in Hinduism. Hence, the number of *prang* architectural buildings declined or had no significant religious meanings during his reign, in particular the Prang Daeng at Phra Nakhon Kiri. This Khmer style tower, at Wat Phra Kaew Noi within the palatial complex, possesses distinctive characteristics in that there is only a single red tower with less detailed decorations around the corners of the building. Unlike the traditional Khmer *prangs* built in the Lopburi, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya periods, which are heavy and with an open entrance at the base, Prang Daeng is relatively thinner and lighter. It appears more like a *prasat* than a *prang* as in former reigns, and, the interior is hollow from top to base (Naengnoi and Freeman, 1996). Furthermore, more space on the top of the *prang* for the light and segmental pediments also reflected Western architecture influence (Somchart, 2001: 119).

Humanistic Concept of Thammayut through Cultural Materials

In an attempt to understand the humanistic concept of Thammayut, the author has applied a logical analogy to this study by arguing that if the styles, designs, and characteristics of cultural materials at Phra Nakhon Kiri looked the same as other buildings erected by King Mongkut in the historic literature, then meaning is likely to be the same.

It has been suggested in the preceding discussion that many of the Siamese ruling elite struggled to maintain political independence from the colonial powers. However, they nevertheless appeared to be colonised intellectually and culturally (Thongchai, 2000). This can be explained in the concept of humanism, one of the remarkable characteristics of the Thammayut sect, seen in the religious architecture and other cultural materials at Wat Phra Kaew Noi. An innovative monarch, King Mongkut made a clear distinction between Buddhism and Brahmanism. He revised the Brahmin ceremony slightly, and introduced Buddhist elements into it, and added a human touch to reinforce Buddhism. His modernity and Westernisation are also reflected through his cultural materials, notably photographs, sculpture, architecture, mural painting, art, and clothes. These subjects were significantly manifested in the effort to promote Siamese modernity.

The first attempts to change traditional artistic presentations and pictorial elements occurred during the reign of

King Mongkut. Royal portraiture was one of the multi-cultural imports from Europe that were localised in Siam. According to the ancient custom inherited from the Khmer courts, memories of departed kings were kept alive in the form of Buddha images that were dedicated posthumously, and it was a strict taboo to make royal portraits and visual representations of the sovereign's body for public display prior to the mid-nineteenth century (Apinan, 1990 cited in Peleggi, 2004: 136). King Mongkut's predecessors showed little interest in sculptures and photographs, purportedly due to a suspicion that a photograph was to invite death (Cary, 2000: 125). However, this did not concern the scholarly monarch. From his Western scientific knowledge introduced by Bishop Palagoix, King Mongkut was aware of the use of royal portraits in the West as symbolic statements about a sovereign's power and vehicles of diplomatic change. Instead, the king agreed to have his portrait done by artists and photographers. Incidentally, people in Europe became aware of his appearance before his own subjects.

King Mongkut used his own sculptures and photographs for political purposes, introducing himself as the Siamese monarch to other heads of Western countries, and to promote Siamese modernity in which he rejected magical practices, spirit-medium cults, and other superstitious forms. The Siamese envoys dispatched to the courts of Queen Victoria in 1857, and Napoleon III and Pope Pius IX in 1861 presented them with daguerreotypes of his royal family (Sakda, 1992 cited in Peleggi, 2004: 136). In other

words, his correspondence with these prominent Europeans was not only a courtesy or an exchange of information, but also an intellectual battle in the campaign to maintain Siamese sovereignty in the face of European colonial imperatives (Cary, 2000: 124).

Given that there were no modern cameras during his reign, the procedure involved in photographing King Mongkut was elaborate and rigorous. This could be explained by the fact that technological advancement during his reign was still at the early stages resulting from the Bowring treaty in 1855, which brought Siam into the world economic trade. Notably, the characteristics of humanism can be manifested through his sculpture placed at Wechayan Wichien Prasat, which is consistent with the notion that he made a distinction between Buddhism and Brahmanism by adding the human touch.

In architecture, through his far-sighted diplomacy, King Mongkut was the first Siamese monarch to apply western symbolism to promote his modernity. The king introduced his royal insignia, *the Victorious Crown*, as architectural innovations on pediments, doors, and window panels of the palaces and religious structures associated with him (Somkid, 2004: 28). The most important of all was the motif moulded in stucco on the pediment of Wat Phra Kaew Noi, one of the masterpieces found in Phetchaburi. Until now, other royal members of the Chakri Dynasty have also inherited Mongkut's innovations of symbolism portraying their royal insignia on buildings and other cultural materials.

Traditional characteristics of Siamese mural paintings were associated with the life and former lives of the Buddha, and scenes from *Traiphum*, which were crowded with beings and divine attendants in traditional appearance and dress set in a familiar landscape (Ringis, 1990: 90 and Chatri, 2003). King Mongkut's religious reforms, incorporating Western scientific knowledge, had a great influence on the characteristics of Siamese mural paintings, in terms of humanism, rationalism, and realism. The rationalistic ideal replaced the traditional theme of Buddhist cosmology. Krua In Khong, the most renowned court painter to King Mongkut, revealed the exotic world of the West in a three-dimensional 'realistic' style of mural painting of Wat Bovonnivet, where King Mongkut became an abbot prior to ascending the throne in 1851. Krua In Khong's visions of Western life were derived from the increasing number of missionaries in Bangkok. His Western figures with scenery, topography, and human activities were realistic and up to date in their authentic nineteenth century fashion. The introduction of these Western perspectives sparked a movement away from traditional Siamese painting and opened the door to new forms.

Conclusion

This empirical research yields major insights into methodological and epistemological problems. However, there is a methodological problem as it is impossible to ask King Mongkut directly about his thoughts or make mute buildings speak on their own behalf. Instead, one must investigate and document the

material evidence of past socio-political situations, and then from that deduce his visions. However, the study of political vision is relatively abstract, and is difficult to interpret validly and reliably. This is because of the incomplete and imprecise nature of available information, a strong reliance on inference, and the difficulties in applying a truly scientific method. Thus, how is one to impute intentions, values, and personalities from architectural buildings that now have no 'life'? How does one validate the research results?

The study encompasses a wide range of sub-disciplines and attempts to foster an understanding of King Mongkut's vision of modernity. To understand the complex interplay between the king and his palace, it is important to have a holistic knowledge of other disciplines, especially the politico-religious history and architectural history of Thailand. So how is one to bridge the gaps between the *realpolitik*, religious beliefs, personalities, and architectural expressions?

There is an underlying epistemological problem: the way of seeing how the world changed steadily over a period of 17 years (1851-1868). There were gradual shifts in the way that Siamese knowledge and modernity were being variously constructed in accordance with and in reaction to Western influences. Simultaneously, understanding King Mongkut's intelligent thoughts as well as Thammayut characteristics through architectural expressions will significantly contribute to a better insight into the

abstract meanings of other heritage buildings associated with him.

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Illustrations

The European-Sino-Siamese hybrid architectural styles of Ratchathammassapha Building, towards Wechayan Wichien Prasat in the background of the West Peak of Phra Nakhon Kiri, Phetchaburi.

Wat Phra Kaew Noi, a Buddhist monastery, was arranged in Ayutthaya period style, within the palatial complex.

Chatchawan Wiengchai observatory reflecting King Mongkut's enthusiasm for Western scientific knowledge.

A sculpture of King Mongkut, one of the diplomatic tools, was used in promoting Siamese modernity.

The design of the bell-shaped chedi piercing the sky with multi-tiered conical spires at Phra That Chomphet situated at the Middle Peak of Phra Nakhon Kiri.

A modern architectural style of Prang Daeng at Wat Phra Kaew Noi, Phra Nakhon Kiri.

The innovative architecture with the *Victorious Crown Insignia* portrayed on pediment of Wat Phra Kaew Noi.