Chapter 8

Contested Modernities and Spectres of Progress in Twentieth-Century Siam/Thailand

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I am a spectre brought forth by time to haunt the people of the old world with old ideas. Nothing can console you; nor can you stop the march of time that will bring forth yet more spectres.

...

Sai Sima in Pisat (The spectre), by Seni Saowaphong

...

There must be many spectres, not just one.

...

Seni Saowaphong, speaking of Pisat

...

Introduction

“Clearly, there are many possible solutions to the question of how one understands the predicament of the Thai modern”, argues Dipesh Chakrabarty in his

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1 Seni Saowaphong 1994:192, translated by and quoted in Chusak Pattarakulvanit 2015:459. All subsequent translations of quotations from the Thai texts in this chapter are taken from the translation into English of Pisat, under the title Ghosts by Marcel Barang (2009), Internet Edition and referenced as Seni Saowaphong 2009. However, because Barang translates the Thai term pisat as ghost(s) we have replaced this with the term spectre, in keeping with our preference for this rendition of the novel’s title.

consideration of the “Names and repetitions of postcolonial history” in relation to semi-colonial Siam. In this chapter we explore some of the multiplicities and ambiguities of modernity that pertain to Thailand at key historical and political junctures of the twentieth century. We do so with reference to a series of cultural texts, from literary translations and adaptations to political pamphlets and photographic portraits of both monarchs and commoners, tracing the trajectories of modernity, and its association with questions of space and social class. The chapter subsequently moves to an analysis of Seni Saowaphong’s novel Pisat (The spectre), set largely in post-World War Two Bangkok.

In these discussions of Thai modernities we remain cognisant of potential likenesses to the evolution of modernity in other parts of Southeast Asia and beyond. For the failure to do so only serves to reiterate the unhelpful framework of exceptionalism so favoured by conservative, nationalist narratives of Thai historiography that maintain an entirely separate, culturally superior course of history for a Siam that never fell to Western colonial intervention. With notable exceptions such as historian Thongchai Winichakul’s work, mainstream approaches of the type located in Thai educational curricula as well as wider forms of accepted cultural wisdom steadfastly hold to the view that nineteenth-century Siam escaped colonization as a result of the erudite and skilful diplomacy of the auto-Westernizing Bangkok elite, most notably King Rama IV (Mongkut, r. 1851–1868) and V (Chulalongkorn, r. 1868–1910). A prime example of the way such narratives have been linked to upholding national pride is the construction of national history by the younger brother of King Rama V, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943). Granted the accolade, the ‘Father of Thai history’, Prince Damrong popularized and cemented the nationalist narrative of an unbroken lineage of Thai kingdoms from Sukhothai to Ayutthaya to Bangkok that remained steadfastly and valiantly independent of foreign rule. And within this geographical framework he defined the oft-invoked “national characteristics of the Thai people” as a “love of national independence, toleration and power of assimilation”.

Nevertheless, transitions from the colonial to the post-colonial and engagements with multiple forms of modernity are marked by ambivalences and hybridities in Siam/Thailand that differ in some senses from those of the formally and formerly colonized nations of Southeast Asia. At the same time, however,

3 Chakrabarty 2010:ix.
5 These terms were first presented in his keynote address “The nature of government in Siam since antiquity” (Laksana kan-pokkrong prathet sayam tae boran) made in 1927 (Damrong Rajanubhab 1928:9).