

**STATE MASCULINITIES IN SIAM, 1910-1925**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the crucial role of certain types of gender constructions in the nationalist project. The Siamese state had to reform in the late nineteenth century if it was to survive in an Asia dominated by European imperial powers. The Chakri dynasty created a salaried bureaucracy both for its civilian and military functions, and perhaps more importantly, strictly separated the two functions in the process. This bureaucracy created new problems for the dynasty. How could it ensure loyalty to a hereditary monarch when his position was becoming increasingly superfluous? How could the monarchy maintain its centrality within the state? King Vajiravudh responded to the new challenge by resorting to a gendered strategy; through creating the paramilitary organization, The Wild Tigers Corps, he built up a solidarity among the men staffing this single-sex institution. The king cultivated a warrior ethos among the bureaucrats and positioned himself as the chief warrior. Additionally, through his didactic writings, he encouraged his 'wild tigers' to reform their domestic life so that they could serve the state more effectively. Government officials were told to stick to monogamous relationships and be content with a humble Thai wife who could provide a nurturing home life. This analysis of King Vajiravudh's initiatives demonstrates that changing conceptions of masculinities were intimately linked to the formation of the Siamese nation-state.

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*To my grandparents, Ed and Vi*

## Introduction

King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) was coronated twice. The first coronation was an elaborate Brahmanic ceremony, held at the Grand Palace among the close circle of the royal family and the court. Far different were the proceedings that took place a year later on December 2, 1911, during his second coronation. This time in attendance were lesser civil and military officials and the general population – the first time people from so many different strata of society witnessed and participated in the festivities of a coronation.<sup>1</sup> In an unprecedented move, the king granted an audience with a segment of the public gathered in the courtyard outside Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall. The inclusive nature of the event was captured by the *New York Times*: “they [the public] had been sitting in a pavilion, and at a signal came out and waited bareheaded in the courtyard. The national anthem and the ancient music were suddenly begun, the curtains were drawn aside, and men fell down praying.”<sup>2</sup> Also unique about the second coronation was the participation of foreign dignitaries. In attendance were twenty-five royal representatives and officials from fourteen different governments, including England, France, Russia, Germany, the United States, and Japan. A reporter from the *Bangkok Times*, the leading English language newspaper in Siam at the time, remarked that, “[n]ever before have there been gathered in this capital so many Princes from foreign Reigning Families. Such a gathering of Royalties, the guests of the Sovereign, is comparatively a rare thing in a European capital, and is without precedent outside

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<sup>1</sup> Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1978).17.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times* (January 21, 1912). C12. Also see, *National Geographic* (April, 1912). 389-416. *National Geographic* devoted twenty-seven pages to the event. Its also commented on the event’s inclusive nature, noting that the king “received the homage from the various classes, each being represented by one member – the royal family first, then the military, civil officers, and members of the household.”

Europe.”<sup>3</sup> The highlights of the event included a procession through the capital and surrounding areas, parties and pageants, theatrical performances, troop displays, music and song, and fireworks. It was the first time that the Siamese public and foreign dignitaries had been invited to participate in a royal coronation.

King Vajiravudh planned the second coronation for over a year, likely beginning even before he ascended to the throne. The event cost close to five million baht – more than double the budget of King George V’s coronation held the same year.<sup>4</sup> The king prepared for the arrival of his foreign guests by demanding people living on designated procession routes to paint their homes. He further renovated the Grand Palace, established a new museum to showcase Siamese heritage, transformed an old royal hall into a dramatic theatre, and refurbished guest accommodations with western-style furniture and bathrooms.<sup>5</sup> The event signalled to the Siamese people and the rest of the world that a new era had begun for the country. It brought the diverse Siamese population together in celebration of the new reign and demonstrated to foreign powers Siam’s ‘civilized’ status – as a unified, progressive, and worldly kingdom.

King Vajiravudh’s second coronation reflects the thinking of the Siamese ruling elite around the turn of the century. Siam, wedged between French Indochina and British Burma and Malaya, was the sole sovereign nation in Southeast Asia. Siam was forced to negotiate its independence within the context of aggressive colonial powers and, from the perspective of the monarchy and the ruling elite, it was only able to maintain its sovereignty through a “self-civilizing” process that transformed the state and society to

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<sup>3</sup> *Bangkok Times* (November 29, 1911).

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, *Lord of Things: The Refashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002). 24.

<sup>5</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 19.

reflect western nations.<sup>6</sup> Widespread reforms, then, were conceived of in a manner that sought to honour and preserve critical aspects of what existed to be merged with new principles largely derived from western precedence.

What is perhaps unique about Siam's trajectory is that the country's unstable global position necessitated extensive reform to take place in a very short time frame. These reforms began before the ascent of King Vajiravudh. His father, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910), had achieved several administrative and political reforms – establishing clearly demarcated borders, a centralized royal government, and new economic and infrastructure initiatives.<sup>7</sup> King Chulalongkorn's reforms came late in his reign and were further restricted by time constraints and limited resources. He was well aware that the speed of his reforms had left work incomplete.<sup>8</sup> Of paramount concern was that administrative reform had left Siamese culture in a state of chaos when cultural norms no longer fit with new practices and institutions.

The newly centralized professional bureaucracy posed the greatest challenge for father and son. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the ranks of the bureaucracy swell from 25,000 to 80,000 men.<sup>9</sup> Never before had Siam's government been more centralized; however, integrating the bureaucracy and the royal dynasty produced new tensions. By the time King Vajiravudh began his reign, many in the royal family worried that the bureaucracy was diminishing the king's mystical aura, weakening

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<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the “self-civilizing” process, see Thongchai Winichakul, “The Quest for ‘Siwilai’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (3). Also, see Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 2006). 100.

<sup>8</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003). 196-197.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966). 94.



old ties between the king and nobility, and creating a group of ‘emasculated’ paper-pushers. Prior to King Chulalongkorn’s reforms, the king gave meaning to all things beneath him through personal relations of vassalage with the officials. The sheer size of the new bureaucracy limited personal interaction between the king and his officials and greatly tarnished the king’s charisma, repositioning him as a mere director of government affairs. Before, the positions in the government had been patrimonial-based and reserved for nobility. The reforms opened the bureaucracy to the general population and made promotion dependent on merit. Also, the new system was no longer based on warrior noblemen who held both military and civilian powers within their regions. King Vajiravudh feared that the civilian bureaucracy was cultivating a large group of government officials who, after sitting day after day behind desks, would be unprepared for war.

The fact that this new bureaucracy consisted entirely of men, that it was a single-sex institution, also produced new tensions. Polygamy, which had been common in the royal family and in the nobility, was deemed impractical for the purposes of sustaining the bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup> The expenses involved in supporting the multiple wives and children of the salaried officials would be an extraordinary drain on the budget. Moreover, a complicated, extensive home life would be a constant distraction for the officials and would reduce their productivity.

When King Vajiravudh came to power, he embarked on a mission to forge a cultural project in which the monarchy and the new bureaucracy could thrive. His father had completed much of the administrative reform and had left him the more difficult task

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<sup>10</sup> Polygamy was a common and accepted practice in Siam until the 1935 Monogamy Law. For an in-depth analysis of polygamy in Siam, see, Loos, *Subject Siam* (2006).

of bringing Siamese lifestyles and customs in line with norms of the modern nation-state. In the early years of his reign, he waged an aggressive campaign to recast masculine and feminine ideals and bind gender identity to his state-building project.

This essay examines two vehicles that were central to his initiative. I first focus on the king's paramilitary organization, The Wild Tigers Corps, and argue that its main purpose was to establish masculine ideals in the service of militarization and state building. I then analyze one of the king's more popular didactic theatre productions, *The Heart of a Young Man*, to show how it instructed men on the virtues of bureaucratic careers and participation in The Wild Tigers Corps while simultaneously advocating monogamy and a domestic role for women. My analysis of these two initiatives demonstrates that changing conceptions of gender roles during the reign of King Vajiravudh were intimately linked to the king's efforts to overcome problems caused by the new bureaucracy and encourage masculine values that emphasized unity, militarism, and loyalty to the dynastic state. In so doing, this essay reveals the crucial role of certain types of gender constructions in the formation of the nation-state.

Historians of Thailand have overlooked the relationship between bureaucracies and gender relations. Histories of the Thai bureaucracy have, for the most part, centered on a debate with Max Weber who defined the bureaucracy as a system of formal control based on technical knowledge in reaction to the increasingly large and complex administrative goals of industrial societies.<sup>11</sup> He argued that "the decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization."<sup>12</sup> Scholars have applied, discussed, and criticized

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<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *Sociological Writings* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994). xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Max Weber et al., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2007). 214.

Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy. But they have been preoccupied with the common patterns of organizing, namely the technical and functional imperatives, and have ignored the diverse, power-laden social values, solidarities, conflicts and initiatives that shape and transpire within bureaucracies.<sup>13</sup> Every bureaucracy is inherently gendered in one way or another: gender is a basic part of the bureaucracy and work life, present in its processes, practices, rituals, ideologies, and distributions of power.<sup>14</sup> The bureaucracy is a site in which gender norms are both constructed and reinforced.

Histories on gender in Thailand, meanwhile, have neglected the role of the bureaucracy. The small body of Thai and English language scholarship on gender has largely focused on the embedded nature of patriarchal relations throughout the entire social fabric, concentrating squarely on the experience of Thai women as a corrective to male-centered historical narratives. Studies have focused extensively on women in Thailand – women leaders, women in labour, women's exploitation, and women's resistance to patriarchal structures.<sup>15</sup> Scholars interested in gender have neglected the

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<sup>13</sup> Though Weber himself was aware of some cultural implications of the bureaucracy, I am referring specifically to how scholars have interpreted his work. See, for examples, David Elliot, *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule* (London: Zed Press, 1978); Neil A. Englehart, *Culture and Power in Traditional Siamese Government* (New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2001); Moshe Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976); Chaiyan Rajchagool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994); Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966); Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy* (1966); Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1978); David A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1962); David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Mike Savage and Anne Witz (Eds.), *Gender and the Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992). 49.

<sup>15</sup> For examples, see Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Peter A. Jackson and Nerida Cook (Eds.), *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999); Leslie Ann Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); Lin Lean Lim, *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1998); Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Oxford, 2000).

bureaucracy as an institution comprised of men, limiting our understanding of changing constructions of masculinities within the bureaucracy, as well as the implications of these internal processes on the private and public spheres. There remains an important uncharted territory to be investigated concerning crucial links between masculinities and state formation. A more sophisticated gender analysis develops from the work of Tamara Loos and Scot Barmé. Both scholars attempt to chart the experiences of women or to rewrite women into the nationalist project.<sup>16</sup> Although women remain at the forefront of these studies, Loos and Barmé include men to capture the relational development of gender identities. Within their work, they have examined the effects of state policy on the relationships between men and women, but again have neglected the gendered processes internal to bureaucratic structures. While the best scholarship on gender in Thailand takes the state into account, it focuses on larger social relations between men and women. I will be undertaking a more exacting analysis of the way the state developed masculinities in all-male environments.

This study, then, brings two distinct literatures into dialogue to demonstrate how gender relations and bureaucracies are inextricably linked. As constructions of masculinity in Siam are the primary subject matter of this article, I consider it important to briefly discuss the bureaucracy and its relationship to the concept of “masculinity”. Useful for thinking about bureaucratic culture is Pierre Bourdieu’s work. Bourdieu argues that the bureaucracy is the key instrument by which the state operationalizes its programs. The state has the responsibility to regulate and police the national community; and power is the mechanism it employs to fulfill this duty. The power of the state rests in its ability

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<sup>16</sup> Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002); Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

to produce and impose the categories of thought that social agents apply to all aspects of their social world. This power comes in the form of capital: instruments of coercion (army, police), economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital.<sup>17</sup> Although these different dimensions of state processes are interdependent, the last two – cultural capital and symbolic capital – are most relevant here.

Culture is unifying. The state, Bourdieu argues, “contributes to the unification of the cultural market by unifying all codes, linguistic and juridical, and by effecting a homogenization of all forms of communication, including bureaucratic communication.” Through “classification systems” embedded in law, bureaucratic procedures, education, and ritual, the state “molds mental structures and imposes common principles of vision and division... and it thereby contributes to the construction of what is commonly designated as national identity.”<sup>18</sup> Because of the state’s dominant social position, its discourses, acts and codes, and practices regulate and conduct the activities of all other fields. Symbolic capital refers to the process of social agents using their categories of thought to conceive of a property (such as cultural property), recognize it, and give it value.<sup>19</sup> An example is how certain patterns of behaviour become recognized as honourable or dishonourable. All forms of capital are perceived of by using state produced and imposed categories of thought. It follows, then, that the state – in that it possesses the means of inculcation – is able to exercise various forms of symbolic power.

The state, then, creates and possesses legitimate authority. It has the ability to regulate and control cultural and symbolic capital and establish accepted cultural norms.

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<sup>17</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field.” *Sociological Theory* 12 (1). 4.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 9.

This has many implications for gender. Masculinity refers specifically to social constructions of biological maleness. These constructions are products of complicated and fluid relationships of power, expressed through cultural and ideological forms.<sup>20</sup> My interest here is how bureaucracies and fraternal organizations emphasize and produce a number of masculinities. To be sure, the value and adherence to these ideals vary in time and place and take shape in what can be understood as hegemonic masculinities. Because state social practices make ideas appear natural and ahistorical, hegemonic masculinities become more than a set of ideals; they are pervasive, taken for granted, and materialize over time. This is not to suggest that there is a consensus throughout a national setting about the specific qualities of the ideal male, but to argue that certain hegemonic forms, whether challenged or celebrated, develop as standards that other subordinate masculinities are defined against.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, hegemonic masculinities are constructed in opposition to a number of subordinate masculinities, often in cases where specific forms of male behaviour are singled out and demonized by people or groups in positions of power. Hegemonic masculinities not only result in the oppression of men over women, but also create destructive distinctions between different categories of men – distinctions reinforced through coercion or exclusion and validated through cultural and symbolic means. One method to access the production of hegemonic forms of masculinity is to focus on the state bureaucracy as a site where norms are constructed and promoted – as

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<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation: Gender Ideologies in Traditional Korea and in the 1890s-1900s Korean Enlightenment Discourse." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (4). 1033.

<sup>21</sup> I have borrowed my concept of "hegemonic masculinities" from John Tosh and R.W Connell. See, John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005).43-44; also, see R. W. Connell, "The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History. *Theory and Society* 22. 607-612.

well as classified in law, bureaucratic procedures, education, and ritual – and evaluate how these ideals become standards for male behaviour, thinking, and action.<sup>22</sup>

In addressing the role of gender in state formation, this study is divided in four parts. The first examines problems posed by bureaucratic reform at the outset of King Vajiravudh's reign. The second details the formation of the Wild Tigers Corps and how this all-male association targeted bureaucrats to overcome tensions in the workplace and recast official masculinities. The third extends the focus of the study to include how bureaucratic reform had an enduring effect on the private realm and the institution of marriage. And the fourth proceeds to analyze one of the king's literary works, *The Heart of a Young Man*, to demonstrate how the king used his writings to incite new (hetero)sexual relations between Siamese men and women that directed the energies of men towards the interests of the nation-state. This study concludes with some thoughts on how successful state initiatives were in their efforts to redefine gender ideals in Siam and suggests the importance of analytical frameworks that consider the imperative role certain types of gender constructions have in the formation of national imaginaries.

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<sup>22</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2005). In light of Tosh's theoretical approach, I focus on how masculine identities take shape in three critical spheres: work life, fraternal associations, and home life.

## **Bureaucratic Reforms**

Towards the turn of the century, the monarchy and ruling elites initiated changes influenced by European models and developed under the supervision of foreign advisors working for the Siamese government. During these years thousands of foreign officials served the kingdom, many in direct consultation with the king and his closest advisors.<sup>23</sup> It also became common for men from royal and aristocratic backgrounds to study in Europe. Several young Siamese men spent their early years abroad, including King Vajiravudh who spent seven years in England where he underwent military training at Sandhurst and studied history and law at Oxford.<sup>24</sup> The influence of foreign advisors and western models remain critical to understanding the motives behind bureaucratic reform. Although King Vajiravudh argued against making Siam into a western nation, he was in favour of adopting western ideas when he believed their utility to be unmistakable. Colonialism influenced Siamese reform along European lines where models and ideas were ultimately interpreted and transformed in Siam's particular context.

The Chakri dynasty, prior to the reforms of the late nineteenth century, led a state that can be described as more or less "patrimonial" (to use Weber's term). The royal court appointed officials as much as it recognized the authority of local powerbrokers who appointed themselves officials. The court's power over the local officials decreased the further away the district was from the court. The officials did not receive a salary from the court; they took a share of the tax revenue they collected from their area, a practice termed "eating the country" (*kin muang*).<sup>25</sup> The officials were incorporated into the court's nobility, a complex status hierarchy based on face-to-face interaction between

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<sup>23</sup> Loos, *Subject Siam* (2006). 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand* (2003). 211.

<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007). 104.



the king and his nobles. King Chulalongkorn's centralized and expanded bureaucracy was marked by entirely different systems of action, organized along different lines. Staffed by salaried officials, its authority began to spread uniformly throughout the territory under Bangkok's rule. New requirements were imposed on attaining and holding a bureaucratic post, while new restrictions were placed on the personal rights and rewards of the officials. His reforms, although effective in managing increased numbers of officials, challenged existing liberties and hierarchies and produced new power divides between bureaucrats over issues of authority and advancement.

The reform process produced three tensions recognized by King Vajiravudh at the beginning of his reign. First, the new rules of advancement within the bureaucracy created deep fissures between a growing commoner class and an anxious aristocracy.<sup>26</sup> Top positions were still reserved for the nobility. However, new measures of competence were being introduced as the bureaucracy required specialized personnel and a growing number of literate officials and clerks to make innovative contributions. Many officials were recruited from the population at large.<sup>27</sup> The old practice of appointments largely based on lineage was merged with new forms of meritocracy, requiring the creation of educational institutions and standards, a revised hierarchical status system, standardized salaries, and routine conformity to certain procedural rules. By the turn of the century, reforms had eroded nineteenth-century status hierarchies. Rewards and privileges had become inextricably linked to educational attainment and productivity. Tempers flared as an emerging commoner class resented the pre-eminence of birth and social connections

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Wyatt, *Thailand* (2003). 200-201; also, see Rajchagool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy* (1994). 106-107.

<sup>27</sup> Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy* (1966). 94-95.

over individual capability in determining rank and salary, while many nobles looked disapprovingly upon commoners rising through the ranks.<sup>28</sup>

Governmental administrative reforms also led to interministerial, interdepartmental, and interpersonal competition. Fixed administrative practices leftover created durable bonds of loyalty and service between high officials and their staff. King Vajiravudh was aware that these parochial interests were dividing the bureaucracy and the country as a whole. The king argued that “officials often seem to believe that their first and only debt of loyalty is due to the particular minister or department in which they serve.” He further complained that officials “must do all they can to advance the interests and prestige of that ministry or department even at the cost of another branch of the service.”<sup>29</sup> The young king was consumed by the parochial interests and rivalries that plagued the bureaucracy. Of paramount concern was the channelling of the collective interests of officials to broader goals of the nascent nation-state.

Second, personal authority was supplanted by bureaucratic authority. On the one hand, formal restraints were issued on personal freedoms and officials were reduced to components in an intricate system. The reformed bureaucracy curbed personal authority and relied upon rules, routinization, and systematic determinants of accomplishment. As William J. Siffin suggests, bureaucracies “classify jobs – and their incumbents – in various ways, and spell out patterns of authority, information transmission, and work flow, in an attempt to establish stable patterns of appropriate activity.”<sup>30</sup> In many ways, the Palace Ministry from 1898 onward operated as a personnel agency. It maintained

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<sup>28</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 110.

<sup>29</sup> “Brochure on The Wild Tigers Corps”, reprinted in *Bangkok Times* (December 4, 1911), as quoted in Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 31.

<sup>30</sup> Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy* (1966). 110.

records, reviewed proposals, monitored codes of conduct, and collected statistical data to assess performance. Management depended on written documents and upon thousands of subordinate officials and clerks recruited largely from temple schools.<sup>31</sup> By the first decade of the twentieth century, the *kin muang* era had ended and the personal prerogative to “eat the country” was replaced by standardized rules and procedures, clerical tasks, and the supporting paper work. In the process, a strict divide was made between a civilian bureaucracy and a professional military. Officials were confined to clerical work and were entitled to avoid otherwise compulsory military service.<sup>32</sup> As Walter F. Vella has suggested, military service was becoming unpopular and even shameful. King Vajiravudh, while carrying the reforms, was unhappy about the demilitarization of the administration. He sarcastically referred to desk-bound bureaucrats as men “sitting in an office playing at making black ink marks on paper” and worried that in times of war their only defence would be to “splash ink on the faces of the enemy or beat their heads with paper.”<sup>33</sup> His concern was that the new bureaucracy was producing weak, emasculated men, incapable of defending the nation.

Finally, the position of the monarchy was threatened. In one respect, the royal court had been strengthened through the centralization and expansion of the bureaucracy, but it had also sacrificed its sacred, ritually defined powers for a bureaucratic role.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform* (1969). Wyatt suggests that temple schools became the foundation of a modern education system in Thailand, in which young men were trained for low-level positions in the bureaucracy.

<sup>32</sup> By “emasculated” men, I am referring to how these men were seen by Vajiravudh. In many ways, it is possible to see official positions in the bureaucracy as empowering – especially for men who previously were not allowed to participate in government affairs. However, the king saw the bureaucracy as offering an alternative to military training and service and was concerned about how effective young officials would be in times of war.

<sup>33</sup> *Kings Lecture to the Wild Tigers* (March 11, 1918), as quoted in Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 51.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen L.W. Greene, *Absolute Dreams: Thai Government Under Rama VI, 1910-1925* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1999). 10.

king, himself, was repositioned within routine procedural standards, a mere director of the administration, while a burgeoning class of officials began questioning the usefulness of the monarchy. As Benedict Anderson has suggested, King Vajiravudh and his father were well aware of the threats posed to the monarchy by the emerging “nationally-imagined community.”<sup>35</sup> The reformed bureaucracy further dissolved the charisma of the divinely ordained dynastic realm. Although all ministries and departments were under the king’s rule, the king became as replaceable as any other bureaucrat.

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<sup>35</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 2006). 99-101. Anderson uses Siam as an example of how dominant groups, threatened by marginalization or exclusion, adopt official nationalisms as pre-emptive initiatives.

## The Wild Tigers

If the objective of King Chulalongkorn's reforms was to centralize the state bureaucracy, then King Vajiravudh's objective was to overcome the internal bureaucratic tensions and create a social milieu in which the monarchy and the new bureaucracy could prosper. Six months after his first coronation, King Vajiravudh introduced a paramilitary organization, The Wild Tigers Corps, which served as his primary instrument to unify civil servants, blur the line between civilian and military masculinities, and establish his authority over the bureaucracy. As Captain General, he maintained an omnipresent role in all Wild Tiger practices.<sup>36</sup> He served as absolute director, composed mottos and songs, designed uniforms, led parades, organized drills, and drafted the oaths and rules.

The Wild Tigers Corps was a home guard merged with the civilian bureaucracy.<sup>37</sup> In early 1912, there were four units in Bangkok and the beginnings of local units within the provinces; total recruitment was approximately 4,000 members. Recruitment increased throughout the first decade of King Vajiravudh's reign and by 1920 there were close to 13,000 members, nearly all of them civilian officials of the government.<sup>38</sup> The corps served primarily as a reserve army in the case of war, but a 1911 decree also made it the duty of its members to maintain law and order. Members were to assist in crime prevention, fighting fires, protecting the person of the king, and humanitarian efforts.<sup>39</sup> Instead of just "sitting in an office playing at making black ink marks on paper," the civil servants were to acquire the skills of a soldier, participating in war games, marches, and

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<sup>36</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 27-29.

<sup>37</sup> Studies, such as Greene, Ratanapat, and Vella, have discussed in part the importance of the Wild Tiger Corps to King Vajiravudh's nationalist project. In contrast to what these works have argued, I have relied on their primary sources, such as quotations from The National Archives Documents of the Sixth Reign and The Wild Tiger Corps Records (*Chotmai het Su'apa*), to demonstrate the bureaucratic origins of the corps and how gender was conceived as an important part of the nationalist project.

<sup>38</sup> Greene, *Absolute Dreams* (1999). 41, 81.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* 41-42. Also, see Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 33-37.

drills. The bureaucrats were given military titles and required to dress as soldiers, learn war manoeuvres, carry rifles, and march at various ceremonies and festivals.

A junior branch of the corps was also created around the same time. The Tiger Cubs, the Boy Scout organization, shared the same objectives as the parent body. Its members too, marched, drilled, engaged in war games, and learned to follow orders. The king justified the creation of the junior branch by arguing that “the instilling of the proper spirit must begin when one is still young. A tree that is to be shaped into a pleasing form can be most easily trained when it is young and supple.”<sup>40</sup> Enlistment for the group grew rapidly. At the end of the year in 1911, there were approximately 2,000 young boys in 63 units in Bangkok. A decade later that number had grown to over 21,000 members in 177 units throughout the country. By 1913, the principles of the Boy Scout movement had been integrated into school curriculum.<sup>41</sup> Scout masters underwent rigorous training to ensure they understood protocol and knew how to inspire the spirit of the wild tigers. Young scouts were rewarded for outstanding service with special medals and their drilling and marches were often put on display during parades and festivals.

The Wild Tigers Corps was constantly showcased to the Siamese public. Marches, parades, and pageants were held frequently and thousands of onlookers came to watch from Bangkok and surrounding rural districts. The men also marched and performed drills at the king’s second coronation and his birthday celebration. The king’s second coronation, for instance, included a field display with marches and a flag presentation. Over 4,200 men from the corps were asked to come out for the celebration

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<sup>40</sup> *The Wild Tigers Records* (January, 1912) as quoted in Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 42.

<sup>41</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 42-44.

from all areas throughout the country.<sup>42</sup> Towards the end of the production, King Vajiravudh entered on horseback as leader of the paramilitary group. His entrance was followed by salutes, more entertainment, and speeches. The Pageant of the Wild Tiger Traditions was an event that lasted three days in January of 1912. The king himself was in charge of planning, staging, and organizing the pageant, which concluded with the troops singing the patriotic song, “Love of Our Race and Our Fathers’ Land.”<sup>43</sup> The corps participation in several royal events elevated the status of its members and made membership something to be valued and admired. The performances were well crafted attempts to show discipline, honour, and loyalty to the monarchy; they helped form ideals of manliness that infiltrated the thoughts of the general public.

The importance of the corps to King Vajiravudh is perhaps best reflected in the amount of money he budgeted for the organization. In the final years of the corps in 1924 and 1925, the Privy Purse and Ministry of the Palace were allotting 1.6 million baht alone to the segment of the corps directly under the king, an incredible amount considering the total royal budget for these years was 9 million baht.<sup>44</sup> The significance of these expenditures is even further amplified when considering the economic recession the country was experiencing in the post-war years. The press politely criticized the king for his inability to control the royal budget. He no doubt saw a growing deficit and negative public opinion as only temporary and minor concerns, considering he understood the corps as a decisive vehicle for instilling national unity and reaffirming the monarchy’s role in the nation-state. His hopes for the corps was best put forth in a keynote speech the king made at his coronation:

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* 39-40.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand* (2003), 220.

The aim of this national institution is to instil in the minds of the people of our own race love and loyalty towards the High Authority that controls and maintains with justice and equity the political independence of the nation, devotion to the Fatherland, Nation, and our Holy Religion, and not least of all, the preservation of national unity and cultivation of mutual friendship. These qualities form the strongest foundation on which our national existence will rest and not belie its name as the Nation of the Free.<sup>45</sup>

The Wild Tiger Corps was clearly a priority for the king: its purpose was to target officials within the bureaucracy and produce manly men united under the pillars of God, king, and country.

The corps consisted of Siamese middle and high-level bureaucrats, exempted from the regular armed forces. Strict measures were taken to ensure participation. Civil servants were subjected to intense pressure to join and promotions in the bureaucracy often reflected performance in the corps. Those who did not join were immediately ostracized and deemed disloyal and untrustworthy. In one instance the king went as far as to have a list drafted of all non-members in the Secretariat Department.<sup>46</sup> Many officials, however, voluntarily joined in hopes of displaying patriotism but also no doubt to help their careers. Within the first decade of the king's reign, the corps was well-known to all visitors to the country as a paramilitary organization comprised of bureaucrats. As Joseph Crosby, the British Majesty's Consul-General at Bangkok, remarked in 1920: "[r]ecruits for this body are found among government officials all over the country; the members wear a distinct uniform, and undergo military training in their spare hours."<sup>47</sup> Crosby's

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<sup>45</sup> *Bangkok Times* (Dec. 5, 1911). 4.

<sup>46</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 35.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Crosby, *Siam* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1920). 16.



report on all socio-political aspects of Siam gives the wild tigers as many words as the military under the heading “Naval and Military”.

The Wild Tigers Corps was a highly effective measure for suppressing growing pains left in the wake of bureaucratic reform. The corps functioned by breaking down officials’ civil identity and generating a solidarity among them through a military identity. In a speech to the corps, the king extolled the virtue of camaraderie, stating, “[i]n living together you must know that you have to depend on each other. Do not be selfish and only think of what you want. Be flexible in dealing with each other. As members of the same group, you have to know how to reach consensus in order to live together.”<sup>48</sup> The corps’ hierarchical structure did not reflect that of the bureaucracy and was deliberately intended to dismantle bureaucratic loyalties and ranks while reforming officials around common goals. A high official in the bureaucracy might have been a common soldier in the corps. This was a revolutionary approach, considering that an official’s bureaucratic rank determined his salary, number of subordinates, the language used to address him, and his entire social status.<sup>49</sup> Ranks within the corps sought to disturb hierarchies and loyalties and were awarded on the basis of military performance and knowledge.

Tensions between the growing commoner class and the aristocracy were diffused through a process of male bonding – “the formation of a lasting group identity through shared suffering.”<sup>50</sup> Bonds were established through overcoming hardships experienced during war games, sports, and retreats. Battle simulations brought together middle and

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<sup>48</sup> Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Politics and Political Change in Thailand* (Bangkok: Bannakit, 1980). 63, as quoted in Ratanapat, “King Vajiravudh’s Nationalism and its Impact on Political Development in Thailand” (1990). 101.

<sup>49</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 32.

<sup>50</sup> McCoy, *Closer Than Brothers* (1999). 12.

high level officials from different departments and forced them to unite under trial and adversity. Team sports, which were often played when the corps was not drilling, further solidified these bonds. As John Tosh has argued in his study on nineteenth-century British masculinities, team sports trained young men “to obey (and later give) orders; they subordinated the individual to the team effort; and they instilled stoicism in the face of pain and discomfort.”<sup>51</sup> At retreats, Wild Tigers were subjected to the deprived conditions of camp life. The king limited personal belongings and comforts, while confining members to camp grounds. The men rose at five in the morning and participated in war games and chores. On off days, the men drilled and played sports.<sup>52</sup> Six months after the formation of the corps, the king reflected on its success:

Officials of different department, who used to think only of their own particular job, are now being thrown together, and this has had a very good effect upon the administration as a whole. Things are beginning to move along easily and the officials are beginning to understand that they all have got to work towards a common end, namely the benefit of the nation.<sup>53</sup>

As an alternative to the impersonal, immobilized official capacities and status frictions which characterized bureaucratic life, the rituals and practices of The Wild Tigers Corps produced masculine bonds of sympathy, understanding, and trust that passed over into bureaucratic life and the nation as a whole.

A pressing concern for King Vajiravudh at the beginning of his reign was the “emasculated” role bureaucrats held as clerks in the new bureaucracy. The king saw

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<sup>51</sup> Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2005). 198; also, see Eleanor L. Hannah, *Manhood, Citizenship, and the National Guard, Illinois, 1870-1917* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press). 123-124.

<sup>52</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 40-42.

<sup>53</sup> *Letter from Rama VI to Bavoradet* (October 23, 1911), as quoted in Greene, *Absolute Dreams* (1999). 44.

bureaucratic authority as detrimental to a man's character. The divide between military and civil service, moreover, was creating problems in the first decade of the twentieth century, as young men turned to clerical work as a way to avoid the military. The king understood that the reformed bureaucracy had, in many ways, created a threat to Siam's military strength and sovereignty and understood the need for martial values: "when other countries see we are prepared to fight, they are likely to give up the attack, for an attack on a country that is prepared to resist to the fullest becomes too costly to pursue."<sup>54</sup> His insecurities were in part a response to the Franco-Siamese conflict in 1893, when France sent gunboats up the Chaophraya River with their sites set on the Grand Palace. As a result, France forced Siam to give up control of Laos. King Vajiravudh was only a child at the time but was in the palace during the French ambush. This traumatic experience had a lasting effect on the king's sense of national security and in an effort to build on past weaknesses he sought to blur the line between civilian and soldier:

We should understand that although we have separate names for soldier and civilian, the truth is that we have one name that applies to both, and that is the word Thai. Soldiers are one part of the Thai people, civilians are one part of the Thai people; how can they then be separate groups? Every soldier is a civilian. Every civilian likewise ought to be a soldier.<sup>55</sup>

In many ways the name, The Wild Tigers, reflected the sort of men the king desired for protecting the homeland. Wild tigers were apex predators, ferocious animals at the top of the food chain. An ideal male, then, could master both the routines of the bureaucracy and the militarism of the corps, and be useful in both times of peace and times of war.

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<sup>54</sup> *Speech to Wild Tigers* (June 6, 1911). 10-22, as quoted in Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 30.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* 31.

The corps was an anticipatory strategy adopted by a faltering monarch. The new bureaucracy had challenged the power and mystical aura that had characterized past reigns and the king intended to reaffirm the centrality of the Chakri dynasty in Siam. He mythologized the institution of the absolute monarchy and attempted to reinstate the divinity of his own person by enacting several measures. A noteworthy attempt came in the early years of his kingship when he initiated the royal designation “Ram” to follow his name and the names of his Chakri predecessors. His second coronation, moreover, presented the young king as a direct descendant from the Hindu god Vishnu to a wide ranging populace.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps his most aggressive campaign, however, developed from his own interest and formal training in history. King Vajiravudh recognized the value of a usable past and few obstacles prevented him from inventing a history of Siam that could stimulate martial values, national loyalties, and esteem for the monarchy. First, there were problems with Siamese historical records which were limited at best. Second, the majority of Siamese people had only a cursory understanding of their history.<sup>57</sup> King Vajiravudh therefore realized that historical research and popular histories could be employed for present day nationalistic purposes. The corps held a key role as embodiments of past and present virtue. Through myth creation he effectively depicted past kings and his own self as capable and indispensable leaders, while simultaneously demonstrating the need for wild tigers, and Siamese men in general, to be manly, united, and willing to die for sustaining the dynastic realm.

In issuing history lessons, the king wished to show that Siam was strong when its kings were strong. The king incorporated two important historical figures, King Naresuan

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<sup>56</sup> Mattani Majdara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Chiang Mai: Silkwork Books, 1999). 166.

<sup>57</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 203.

and Phra Ruang, into his teachings for the corps and the population at large. Both were, in his account, exceptional kings, military leaders, and unifiers of the Siamese people. King Naresuan was Siam's monarch in the late sixteenth-century and was renowned for his leadership in ending fifteen years of Burmese suzerainty in Siam. He had successfully defeated an aggressive Burmese army in 1593 and, as a way to celebrate his victory, had erected a Buddhist shrine at the battle site.<sup>58</sup> The site had been lost from the historical record and the Siamese government only had a vague idea of where it might be located. As early as 1911 King Vajiravudh had used the legend of Naresuan to exemplify bravery and the ideals of a wild tiger. In 1914, however, the king brought Naresuan's epic victory to the public, when he organized an expedition of over one thousand wild tigers from the camp at Nakhon Pathom to search for the forgotten monument in Suphanburi Province. It took the men one week to find the remains. The following January King Vajiravudh held a grand commemorative service during which he honoured Naresuan's kingship and the men who stood by their capable leader in a patriotic address to the public.<sup>59</sup> The implications of the expedition were clear. In their shared efforts to find the lost monument and recover an important aspect of Siamese history, the king and the wild tigers became part of the legend of Naresuan. Wild tigers – loyal to the leadership of their captain general and monarch – were to rediscover and become the unified patriotic people the Siamese had once been.

The king referenced Phra Ruang in several of his writings, although the most popular account was his historical play titled "Phra Ruang: Drama in Verse", which focused on the thirteenth-century king's skilled leadership in recovering Siamese

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* 207-208.

independence and establishing the kingdom of Sukhothai. The play took at least three forms over the course of King Vajiravudh's reign. The first version was a dance-drama he wrote in 1912; the second was a spoken-drama adapted in 1914; and the third was a musical, first presented in 1924. Although the king had originally composed the play as a dance-drama, he revised it to be a spoken-drama. His reasons for rewriting the play were twofold. First, the king wanted it to be performed by the wild tigers since it was "a good story to stimulate a sense of nationalism."<sup>60</sup> The majority of the men, however, were untrained in *lakhon* traditional dance. The spoken-drama was therefore easier for those who had little or no dance experience. Second, the play's nationalistic message was too important to be overshadowed or lost in the traditional style of dance-drama, which the king considered ineffective for communicating new ideas to the public. Spoken-drama was a better vehicle for nationalistic didacticism. In having the wild tigers perform "Phra Ruang", the king had them internalize its message and display the virtues of Siamese kingship and national unity.

Phra Ruang was the king's attempt to build a national myth of a legendary leader who battled Khmer rulers and eventually became king. Again, Phra Ruang's victory over the Khmer was highly dependent on his unified and committed Siamese subjects, as illustrated by his final address in the play's closing scene:

Wherefore we pray you, who are Thai, to love  
And cherish, help and honour fellow Thai;  
Unite in one free brotherhood, a rock  
That will not crack before the tide of war.  
United we Thai may and must and shall  
Defend our land against the strongest foe,

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<sup>60</sup> As quoted in Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand* (1999). 161-162.

And drive him forth to desperate ruin!<sup>61</sup>

The last line of the play was given to the people, who reacted to his words with the rallying cry, “Chaiyo! Chaiyo! Chaiyo!” King Vajiravudh coined the term *chaiyo* in the first year of his reign to mean victory and to be used along the same lines as the English cheer “hooray” or “hurrah”. Given the period of the play, the crowd response to Phra Ruang’s address seems odd, since kings were mostly revered and seldom cheered. However, in replace of Buddhist expressions of joy, such as “ho hiw” used at temples, the king desired a secular term to conjure nationalistic and militaristic emotion and to conclude his patriotic addresses. He even went to great lengths to train wild tigers to synchronize the term’s delivery, emphasizing the syllables *chai—yo*.<sup>62</sup> The term was used at various events and parades organized around the corps, but its resonance is particularly strong in this context. One can only imagine the cast and audience coming together in the final scene to celebrate the king’s teachings on unity and nationalism in a collective expression of patriotic enthusiasm.

The Wild Tigers Corps itself was carefully crafted to be intimately tied to the Siamese past. The corps was modelled after the country’s forefathers who had supposedly guarded the frontiers of ancient Siam, and were known for their ruggedness and fearlessness in protecting the region from foreign invaders.<sup>63</sup> The former auxiliary troops were in charge of monitoring enemy movements and warning the Siamese army of potential threat. The king praised the “wild tigers” of the past for their ruggedness, expert

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<sup>61</sup> Vajiravudh, King of Siam. *Pra Ruang: Drama in Verse* (Bangkok: King Vajiravudh’s Centennial Commission, 1980). 43.

<sup>62</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 143.

<sup>63</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (2000). 98.

military knowledge, and loyalty, arguing that the wild tiger spirit complimented the actions of past monarchs and made the survival of the country possible. By drawing on the history of the former “wild tigers”, King Vajiravudh was able to imply continuity in martial readiness among the Siamese people. He developed the corps as part of a noble legacy; Siam had always been a country willing to adamantly defend its sovereignty and men were always willing to be on the front lines. The monarchy further held a transhistorical position in Siamese history, glorified for its ability to act strategically and maintain the country’s sovereignty. As Captain General of the corps, King Vajiravudh cast himself as a leader possessing exceptional military prowess. He portrayed his role as one critical to the country’s sovereignty, a modern day Naresuan or Phra Ruang.

Through employing nationalistic versions of Siamese history, King Vajiravudh used the corps to emphasize the continuity and uniqueness of Siamese kingship and argue for national unity among the Siamese people. Through the corps’ rituals, performances, and practices, the king sought to establish the identity of the dynasty and nation through a comradeship founded in the rhetoric of God, king, and nation. This was perhaps best exemplified in the corps’ initiation oath:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, who has complete devotion in the Three Gems of Buddhism and who has loyalty to His Majesty Rama VI, the one who directs the splendor of Siam, humbly request to take the oath of loyalty in the presence of the Wild Tigers. I will be steadfastly loyal to His Majesty the King. If there are ever any evil happenings to disturb his majesty I will defend him and drive away the enemy, whether he is inside or outside the country, to the best of my ability even if it means sacrificing my life.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “The Loyalty Oath” as quoted in Greene, *Absolute Dreams* (1999). 42.



Men were to be united disciplined soldiers under God, loyal to each other, the nation, and the king, and willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. The corps' motto, "Give up life rather than honor," encapsulated this message and was written on its flags, badges, and signs.<sup>65</sup> Officials, now Wild Tigers, were socialized and indoctrinated as creations of the state, serving as the personification of its majesty and power.

The Wild Tiger Corps had considerable implications for masculinities in Siam. It is through examining practices and rituals, Alfred W. McCoy suggests, that we can understand how military (or paramilitary) organizations became crucibles for recasting national forms of masculinity. McCoy, in his work on "militarized masculinities" in the Philippine Military Academy, demonstrates how gender "attaches itself to men, influences their collective behaviour, and implicates them in ... power."<sup>66</sup> The problems in the new bureaucracy led King Vajiravudh to manipulate gender relations between bureaucrats and construct new masculine ideals. Manliness was created through a process of physical hardening imposed through the callous lifestyle of the corps. Men were to adopt martial values and learn to defend themselves in the company of other men, in a physical sense and through demonstrating bravery. Military skills were promoted and rewards were attached to their attainment. A further attribute of manhood became valuing group objectives over individual goals. The corps brought divided men together and made the part less significant than the whole. Finally, the corps instilled a sense of loyalty and service to past and present monarchs and sought to carve out a place for the Chakri dynasty in the emerging nation. These attributes – embedded in the state's discourses,

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<sup>65</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978). 33.

<sup>66</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *Closer Than Brothers: Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). 11-12.

acts and codes, and practices – became desired masculine standards for Siamese men and effectively shaped all male behaviour, thinking, and action.

King Vajiravudh demanded complete commitment from members of the Wild Tigers Corps and required them, as defenders of the king and nation, to “behave differently from others ... [and] refrain from that type of behaviour evident in irresponsible people.”<sup>67</sup> No issue or incident was too trivial for his personal supervision. By focusing on the intersection between The Wild Tiger Corps and the Thai bureaucracy, we can understand how certain hegemonic forms of masculinity are produced, sustained, and celebrated by the state. Although the Wild Tiger Corps operated largely as a closed system, this paramilitary association must be understood as socially pervasive – its massive mobilization and supporting propaganda implicated the entire order of gender relations in the emerging nation. Through study and drill, the Wild Tigers Corps produced a military manhood; by parading before the masses and holding prestigious positions within the bureaucracy, Wild Tigers became role models for the population at large.

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<sup>67</sup> “A Word of Admonition” as quoted in Greene, *Absolute Dreams* (1999). 82.

## **Recasting Marriage**

Further state reforms, however, extended outside the bureaucracy and sought to create complimentary ideal roles for women and ideal relations between the sexes. This initiative targeted polygamy, and although part of the project was to prove Siam's "civilized" status to foreign powers, marriage reform also had a lot to do with what the king saw as a problematic relationship between polygamy and the bureaucracy. In advocating monogamy, King Vajiravudh saw his efforts as liberating men from demanding women and unstable domestic conditions and redirecting their attention towards building stronger relationships with other men and devoting their collective energies to the dynastic state.

Polygamy was a controversial issue in Siam in the early twentieth century and was at the forefront of the king's mind. He stopped short of introducing a monogamy law but took several other discursive measures to encourage officials to have monogamous heterosexual relationships with "appropriate" women. Loos correctly understands a shift in discourse from polygamy to monogamy as a product of Siam's precarious position between neighbouring colonial powers. Placing marriage law at the center of her narrative, she argues that state legal reforms were the critical sites where Siam negotiated its sovereignty. For Loos, the primary importance of revising marriage practices was to prove the nation's "civilized" status and overcome burdensome extraterritorial provisions.

Loos does, however, point to some equally compelling domestic concerns relating to monogamy. She suggests that the 1914 Palatine Law, the first law of its kind in Siam, forced male officials to register the name of only one spouse. She argues that through the

Palatine Law the state acquired legal authority over “appropriate” partners for men.<sup>68</sup> Primarily concerned with the effect this policy had on women, she suggests that a moral discourse was constructed about the constitution of proper women for marriage – those deemed inappropriate included prostitutes, harlots, and mistresses. Although this did not restrict men from having more than one wife, it did force them to distinguish a “legitimate” wife from their other wives for legal purposes.

Loos also suggests that the king used the issue of polygamy to reassert the centrality of the dynasty. Through his political writings, she argues, he propagated a discourse surrounding polygamy that targeted officials who supported a constitutional government.<sup>69</sup> His aggressive attempts to discredit and condemn men supporting antiabsolutist political beliefs argued that they engaged in polygamous, and therefore excessive, sexual practices. By attacking their “unprogressive” sexuality, he was able to undermine their “modern” political yearnings.

In addition to his political writings, King Vajiravudh was also using his fictitious writings to further develop his ideas on gender relations and construct “appropriate” roles for men and women. An analysis of King Vajiravudh’s didactic literary work reveals how his efforts to regulate gender relations were intimately tied to the sustainability of the state bureaucracy. Loos’s analysis misses this aspect of his pre-occupation with husband-wife relations.

In a letter to Maynard Willoughby Colchester-Wemyss, the King’s guardian while studying in Europe, The king discussed his frustration with “notorious women” in Siam, who “have been known to have dragged a good many promising young Siamese lads

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<sup>68</sup> Loos, *Subject Siam* (2006). 163-165.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* 155-159.

down to hell!”<sup>70</sup> By dragging young men to “hell”, the king meant keeping men distracted and away from upwardly-mobile bureaucratic careers and participation in fraternal organizations. This sentiment was most clearly expressed in his works of fiction. The king had a coherent understanding of how he envisaged relationships between Siamese men and women and his educational platform became his numerous plays. King Vajiravudh’s reign is considered by many scholars as the “golden age” of Thai drama. This is a direct result of the king’s own interests in writing and theatre production. The King wrote 180 plays, more than any single author in the history of Thai dramas. The king also introduced Siam to western theatre techniques in the areas of directing, acting, stage management, and costume design. The king was well aware of the overall persuasiveness of his plays and took many precautions to ensure that the story’s background information was provided and that the play’s message was considered at length. Before all productions, he published informative introductions to the play to be circulated among his peers and the literate public.<sup>71</sup> He further integrated his writings into the curriculum at educational institutions, many of which are still being used as textbooks in schools and universities today.

Mattani Moj dara Rutnin argues that theatre arts in Siam, as a direct result of King Vajiravudh’s efforts, transformed and took on a new education, social, and political role. During this period, Rutnin charts a clear transition in modern Thai drama from its role as a vehicle for religious teachings to its new function as a means to deal with emerging

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<sup>70</sup> King Vajiravudh Memorial Foundation, *My Dear Mr. Wemyss: Letters of King Vajiravudh* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 1997). 156.

<sup>71</sup> Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand* (1999). 159.

social and political pressures.<sup>72</sup> In drama, he argues, the king saw an opportunity to educate the masses and transform the socio-political development of the nation.

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* 157-158.

### *The Heart of a Young Man*

The king wrote not only dramas but also works of prose fiction. *The Heart of a Young Man* (*Hua-Jai Chai Num*) is a series of fictional letters the king wrote in 1920 under the pseudonym “Ram Chitti”, which translates as the “Wisdom of the King”.<sup>73</sup> The correspondence tells the story of Praphan, a western-educated Thai and his return to Siam after years studying abroad in England. His letters are addressed to his friend Prasoet, who remained behind in England to complete his studies. The story portrays the difficulties experienced by Praphan in readjusting to life in Siam – largely his thoughts on finding a career and a wife – and readers are to, in the king’s words, “sympathize with Praphan ... in his process towards self-awareness.”<sup>74</sup>

Upon arriving home Praphan is forced, largely due to pressure from his parents, to marry and choose a career. After failed attempts by his parents to arrange his marriage and career through familial ties, Praphan meets Urai, “a truly modern girl, who is not depressingly afraid of men.”<sup>75</sup> He is attracted to her outgoing personality, her expensive tastes, and her “western” ways. Against his parents’ wishes, Praphan marries Urai and begins living with her. Praphan also finds an entry-level position as a civil servant in the Department of Trade and Statistics. The story shifts when the same qualities that initially drew Praphan to Urai eventually create problems in their relationship. Praphan quickly finds it difficult to sustain his relationship with Urai:

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<sup>73</sup> Vajiravudh (King of Siam), *Hua-Jai Chai Num* (Translated from Thai and with a Forward by Ted Strehlow) (Melbourne, 1989). Although it is difficult to determine readership, Strehlow suggests that approximately forty-six percent of the Thai population were literate around publication. Moreover, the story was originally published in the royal periodical, *Dusit Samit*, a forum for many of the king’s popular plays, essays, and short stories.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* 1. See, the king’s forward.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* 9. Of interest is how the king treats Praphan’s search for a career. The inability of Praphan to secure a position through patronage is clearly indicative of new forms of meritocracy resulting from bureaucratic change. Praphan eventually finds an entry-level position and promotion is dependent on his personal achievement – a process all men would have to learn to accept.

All I should say is that everything I did was wrong. When I went to work at the Ministry she accused me of leaving her behind in a no man's land. If I went to visit my parents or friends that was wrong and if my friends came to visit me at home and I welcomed them that was wrong too. When I took her to a party somewhere she would complain that I did so to exhaust her and rob her of her sleep, but when I did not take her she would get jealous and say I did not want her to meet anyone ... returning home made me feel almost as I did as a child about going to school and I felt happy only when I was away from my own home.<sup>76</sup>

Eventually his inability to cater to her demands, as well as her lavish spending, destroys the relationship and Urai leaves Praphan for Phraya Traven-Nakorn, a notorious polygamist “who only enjoys the chase.”<sup>77</sup> At first, Praphan is heartbroken and embarrassed, but finds comfort and fulfillment when he devotes his energy to his work and joins The Wild Tigers Corps. Life becomes carefree when focusing on work and the corps. Eventually, Praphan meets a young woman who his parents approve of and the story ends on a high note.

In *The Heart of a Young Man*, the king reiterates his ideals for men and explicitly puts forth ideal models for women and gender relations. The ideal man is defined through Praphan and contrasted with Phraya Nakorn. On the one hand, Phraya Nakorn is portrayed as a “good-for-nothing bounder” who neglects work and cannot afford his lifestyle.<sup>78</sup> As Praphan sarcastically suggests in one of his letters, he “earns 700 baht a month, has two houses, 7 wives, 4 horses and is always playing sport. In addition he often entertains a crowd of friends. Pretty good, eh?”<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, Praphan is portrayed as an educated young man, devoted to his work, camaraderie, frugal spending, and a

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* 19.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* 23.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* 24.



stable monogamous relationship. Ultimately, his “self-awareness” is achieved when he devotes himself to a career path in the bureaucracy:

Let me tell you of my great happiness! On the 31<sup>st</sup> December I received the official title of Luang Boriban Baromasak. When my department head first told me I felt almost light-headed because I had never dreamed I would be honoured as quickly as this!<sup>80</sup>

His upward-oriented career is further stimulated by the martial values and masculine bonds celebrated in The Wild Tigers Corps. His participation in battle training is “surprisingly engrossing”; fraternizing with fellow civil servants provides him with “a chance to get to know their thoughts and views more broadly than usual, because when we are all in Bangkok the majority of us have office jobs and we all go our separate ways after work.”<sup>81</sup> Self-fulfillment, then, is attained through becoming a functioning member of the bureaucracy, united with fellow civil servants in the corps, and focused on the prosperity of the dynastic state.

The domestic realm was a critical site where the king negotiated marriage practices and constructed new roles for women and gender relations. Polygamy complicated the newly emerging bureaucratic culture. First, the expenses involved in supporting many wives and children did not coincide with salaried positions, as suggested by Phraya Nakorn’s living outside his means. Men needed affordable lifestyles to match their modest incomes. Second, polygamy created problems at home, distracted men, and hindered the ability of men to function at work. As one of Praphan’s letters suggests, when Phraya Nakorn “went out all seven women showed their true colours and

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* 25.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* 28.

accused him of not giving them what they deserved.”<sup>82</sup> He further describes home life in Siam:

“home” for us does not mean a quiet haven surrounded by wife and children. Our homes are usually the opposite of quiet for in a single house one may have several women all married to the same man and each woman will have her own children, who are forever at loggerheads and competing with one another. There is always some degree of jealousy too, so how could one find peace and quiet there?<sup>83</sup>

The king saw the home as directly linked to limitations on the bureaucracy. To him, polygamy created an undesirable home life in which a man must endlessly cater to the demands of women who are difficult to please. As an alternative, he saw a monogamous relationship with a properly humble wife (unlike Urai who wished to be ‘modern’ and ‘western’) as creating a quiet, nourishing environment in which men exerted little energy and could recuperate for the following day at work.

Rosemary Crompton argues that bureaucracies construct the idea of the dependent housewife. The male career in modern bureaucracies rests on the role of a “female servicer”, his wife, to complete domestic duties in order for him to devote more time and energy to completing his work.<sup>84</sup> In defining Urai’s undesirable qualities, an archetype for women, or “servicer”, emerges. Urai is characterized throughout the story as an extrovert, who is incapable of domestic work, difficult to please, overspends, and is disloyal to her husband. As Praphan writes, she believes “it is prestigious to get angry with her husband in public and make many people respect her for being a modern

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* 24.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 29.

<sup>84</sup> R. Crompton and M. Mann (Eds.), *Gender and Stratification* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986). 16.

woman, who is not in awe of her husband.”<sup>85</sup> In sharp contrast, the ideal woman emerges as reserved, frugal, loyal, and obedient to her husband; thus, her duties to the dynastic state are confined to the home, creating a comfortable environment to facilitate her husband and his role in the state bureaucracy.

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<sup>85</sup> Vajiravudh, *Hua-Jai Chai Num* (Melbourne, 1989).17.

## Legacies

The fourteen year stint of the Wild Tigers Corps eventually ended in 1925, when the group was disbanded by Vajiravudh's successor and brother, King Prajadhipok. Although the corps itself did not survive, the junior branch, The Tiger Cubs, remains the government-sponsored Boy Scouts and its teachings helped form the curriculum in the public school system.<sup>86</sup> Other scholars have also identified remnants of the corps in the right-wing organization, The Village Scouts, which aided in state repression throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>87</sup> The Village Scouts was one countrywide paramilitary organization funded by King Bhumibol Adulyadej that reached a membership of 2.5 million by the early 1970s.<sup>88</sup> King Vajiravudh's attempts to blur civil and military identities must be understood as unique to their specific historical context, but they can also be seen as influential to later initiatives that sought to promote nation-wide martial values. Hegemonic masculinities continued to be constructed on the basis of military knowledge, unity, and loyalty to the nation.

In 1932, seven years after King Vajiravudh's death, a coup carried out by military officers and citizens stormed the palace and ended the Chakri dynasty's absolute reign in Siam. His attempts to reposition the monarchy within the emerging nation-state had ultimately failed. The monarchy remained largely absent from Thai politics for almost a quarter century until it was revitalised in 1957 during Sarit Dhanarajata's dictatorship.

King Vajiravudh's attempts to manipulate gender relations had an enduring effect. Many of his didactic works of fiction became standard texts in schools and universities

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<sup>86</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (2000). 98.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>88</sup> Marjorie A. Muecke, "The Village Scouts of Thailand" *Asian Survey* 20 (4). 407.

and collections of his writings continue to be published by state-funded memorial foundations. The king never saw monogamy become the state-enforced norm in Siam, but his teachings successfully changed how gender relations functioned. As Crosby reported in 1920, “[p]olygamy is not forbidden under the Buddhist system; it is, however, now becoming usual with the younger and better-educated generation of Siamese for men to content themselves with one wife.”<sup>89</sup> The military officers behind the coup were to some extent products of his efforts to undermine polygamy. They enacted the 1935 Monogamy Law that banned polygamy.

This study has merged historiography on the Siamese bureaucracy and gender to suggest that gender is a fundamental component of the state and work life, present in its processes, practices, rituals, ideologies, and distributions of power. When King Vajiravudh ascended the throne, his chief objective was to overcome bureaucratic problems and better situate the Chakri dynasty within the nation-state. In the early years of his reign, he recast masculine and feminine ideals and tied gender identity to his state-building project. Two key vehicles were central to his campaign. The paramilitary organization, The Wild Tigers Corps, transformed masculinities in the service of militarism and state building. The teachings of the corps were implanted in bureaucratic processes and the education system. The king’s popular didactic work, *The Heart of a Young Man*, instructed men to engage in bureaucratic careers and the corps, while simultaneously advocating monogamy and a domestic role for women. The king’s writings were acted out, internalized, and taught in the corps, in the schools, and among the general public. In analyzing these initiatives, this essay has argued that changing conceptions of gender roles during the reign of King Vajiravudh were intimately linked

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<sup>89</sup> Crosby, *Siam* (1920). 13.

to the king's efforts to overcome problems caused by the new bureaucracy and encourage masculine values that emphasized unity, militarism, and loyalty to the dynastic state. It demonstrates how states produce mental structures and impose common principles in the national imaginary. In so doing, it reveals how gender norms are constructed and privileged in the formation of the nation-state.

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