

# Bangkok Kingship: The Role of Sukhothai

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The subject of Sukhothai in Thai consciousness, 1800 to 2000, is vast and complicated.<sup>1</sup> Certain parts of the story have already been told well by others, and there is a good deal that is beyond my competence to deal with. This lecture presents bits and pieces, souvenirs from months of unsystematic research, rather than a distillation of one section of a comprehensive study. There is a limited amount of art and architecture—despite my background—but a fair amount about texts, including an extended discussion of the Ten Royal Virtues, although the virtues are, in fact, only a small part of the total picture. Among the themes I shall touch on as well are the importance of paternalism and of royal lineage.

## King Rama I

In 1808, according to the memoirs of Princess Narintharathewi, not long before the death of King Rama I in 1809, there was a royal order that a monastery be built right in the middle of the city, as tall as Wat Phanan Choeng in Ayutthaya.<sup>2</sup> This was to become Wat Suthat. Phra Phirenthonthep was sent to bring down a big image (*phra yai*) from Sukhothai. This is usually thought to have been the principal image at Wat Mahathat in the center of the city, and is sometimes identified with the image founded by King Li Thai in 1361, according to inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> The most treacherous part of the trip must have been the very first portion, overland. Surely, in 1808, Wat Mahathat at Sukhothai was as nearly overrun with vegetation as it was at the end of the century. The image arrived in Bangkok intact, it seems, for King Chulalongkorn relates that it was too big to fit through the river gate, which was then torn down and subsequently reconstructed. Along the route to its new site, offerings were displayed in front of the palaces, houses, and shops, and the king, then quite

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<sup>1</sup> This was an address to the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Committee, Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, 28 March 2009. I thank Justin McDaniel for the invitation to give this talk, which is presented annually by a senior scholar. In preparing the text for publication, minimal changes have been made (aside from the loss of illustrations).

<sup>2</sup> *Chotmai het khwam song cham khong Kromma Luang Narintharathewi* (Bangkok, 1973), p. 26 and p. 306 (with commentary by King Chulalongkorn).

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1967), p. 58.

ill, followed. Once installed and restored, it was dedicated and given the name Śrī Sākyamuni. Narintharathewi describes a stone inscription attached to it that says, “in the future, the uncle will be loyal to the nephew, the junior will become the senior (the *phu yai*), and the senior the junior.” King Chulalongkorn speculated that the author was the army commander, Prince Mahasak Phonlasep, addressing King Rama II. An indication of the continuing importance of the image is that the ashes of King Ananda were installed in the pedestal.<sup>4</sup>

Of course it was not really necessary for the kings of Bangkok to transport a large image all the way from Sukhothai. Large images could be found in Ayutthaya, and for that matter it was possible to cast a new image. The largest intact Ayutthaya image in Bangkok is the Phra Lokkanat, brought to Wat Pho from Wat Phra Si Sanphet. Not just large images were brought to Bangkok. According to the Wat Pho inscriptions, during the reign of King Rama I, a total of 1,248 images were brought from Phitsanulok, Sawankhalok (today we would call this Si Satchanalai, Sukhothai’s twin city), Sukhothai, Lopburi, and the Old Capital.<sup>5</sup> Most of these were installed in galleries at Wat Pho and Wat Saket. They must have come from monasteries with galleries, given their uniform size, and therefore most are unlikely to have come from Sukhothai itself. Their faces were “made beautiful,” that is, covered with plaster to make them look new, like the new gallery images at Wat Suthat. They have been uncovered in modern times, beginning in the 1950s.

Sukhothai, for the people of Ayutthaya, was not a place of historic origins. Ayutthayans traced their roots to the place from which Prince U Thong came, prior to the founding of the city in 1351. Maybe this was a site in the Suphanburi region, maybe it was Phetchaburi, but it was never Sukhothai, even after there was an intermarrying of the descendants of the Sukhothai royalty with the kings of Ayutthaya. After Sukhothai was abandoned, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was still no interest in bringing Sukhothai Buddha images to Ayutthaya. On the other hand, Dvaravati-style images in Nakhon Pathom were taken to the capital, as were bronze sculptures from Angkor, and one report states that in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an especially sacred image in Chiang Mai, the Sihing Buddha, was seized and carried to Ayutthaya.

The bringing of so many images to Bangkok, and in the case of the Śrī Sākyamuni image at Wat Suthat, the purposeful quest for an image from Sukhothai, resulted in a concentration of sacred power, of course, but it was a sacred power that had a somewhat different shape from that seen at Ayutthaya. I can think of two reasons. One is that the administrative relationship between the capital and Phitsanulok (Siam’s second city in Ayutthaya times) had changed. The other is one to which the writings of King Mongkut provide a clue: King Rama I’s father had

<sup>4</sup> *Sinlapa watthanatham thai lem 1* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1982), pp. 226-29.

<sup>5</sup> *Prachum charuek Wat Phra Chettuphon*, 2 vols. (Bangkok, 1930), vol. 1, p. 3; also Hiram W. Woodward, Jr. et al., *Sacred Sculpture of Thailand* (Baltimore and Bangkok, 1997), n. 46, p. 300.

been an official in Phitsanulok at the time of the Burmese invasion in 1767, and his safety was secured by the presence of the Chinnarat Buddha and by his worship of this image.<sup>6</sup> We do not know the extent to which Mongkut's grandfather, King Rama I, had the same opinion, but it is certainly possible. Therefore, the family lineage could be traced back to north-central Siam and to the Buddha images that helped protect it during the Burmese wars.

### The Phaisanthaksin Throne Hall and the King's Coronation

Turning away from Sukhothai, it is possible to get a sense of the king's spatial position in the early Bangkok period by studying the layout of the primary audience hall. Most of what follows comes from an article published in 1985.<sup>7</sup> The Emerald Buddha, the Phra Kaeo, had almost no connections with Ayutthaya or Sukhothai. True, before it became manifest in Chiang Rai in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it had resided, according to its history, at Angkor, Ayutthaya, and Kamphaeng Phet, but it is possible that the people of Ayutthaya had very little consciousness of it. It was seized in 1779 in Vientiane by the future King Rama I, who came to the throne in 1782. In 1784 it was installed in the royal chapel. In Lao texts, the Emerald Buddha is called the *khwan*—the soul, or butterfly soul—of the *mueang*, the principality. But I have not seen this term used in a Bangkok text. Therefore, I think it would be fair to say, the significance of the image is more dynastic than territorial. Again, the writings of King Mongkut may provide a clue. If the Lao had more assiduously worshipped the Emerald Buddha, he might have said, his grandfather would not have been able to defeat them militarily.<sup>8</sup>

The primary audience hall, the Amarinwinitchai, forms the northernmost part of the complex known as the Mahamonthian. The king, in audience, faces north. Behind him, however, is a longitudinal hall with an east-west axis; east-west, that is, like the Chapel of the Emerald Buddha nearby. From the outside, as well as in the plan, the throne hall on the northern side, the Amarinwinitchai, seems to flow seamlessly into the longitudinal east-west hall behind. This east-west hall, the Phaisanthaksin Throne Hall, is crucial because it is here that the coronation takes place. Furthermore, two adjoining chapels add yet another layer of significance. The one on the western side is called the Ho Phra That Monthian, and the other chapel of the same type (the Ho Phra Suralaiphiman) extends symmetrically on the east. The plane of the northern

<sup>6</sup> In his history of the Chinnarat Buddha, cited Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., "Monastery, Palace, and City Plans: Ayutthaya and Bangkok," *Crossroads* 2 (1985), p. 50 (23-60).

<sup>7</sup> Woodward, "Monastery, Palace, and City Plans," pp. 23-60.

<sup>8</sup> What King Mongkut said in his history of the Emerald Buddha was that King Taksin had not paid sufficient devotion to the image, hence he was deposed. Cited Woodward, "The Emerald and Sihing Buddhas," in *Living a Life in Accord with Dhamma*, ed. Natasha Eilenberg et al. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1997), p. 506; for *khwan*, the same page.

façades of the two chapels bisects the longitudinal Phaisanthaksin Hall. Therefore the king, when he sits facing north on the raised throne at the southern end of the Amarinwinitchai Hall, has behind him the coronation throne hall as well as the two chapels.

The coronation consists essentially of two procedures. For his lustration the king sits on an octagonal platform in the southeast corner, facing one of the eight



The octagonal throne at the coronation of King Prajadhipok, 25 February 1926: "The Ceremony on the Octagonal Throne" (State Railways Department photograph, after Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, pl. VIII).

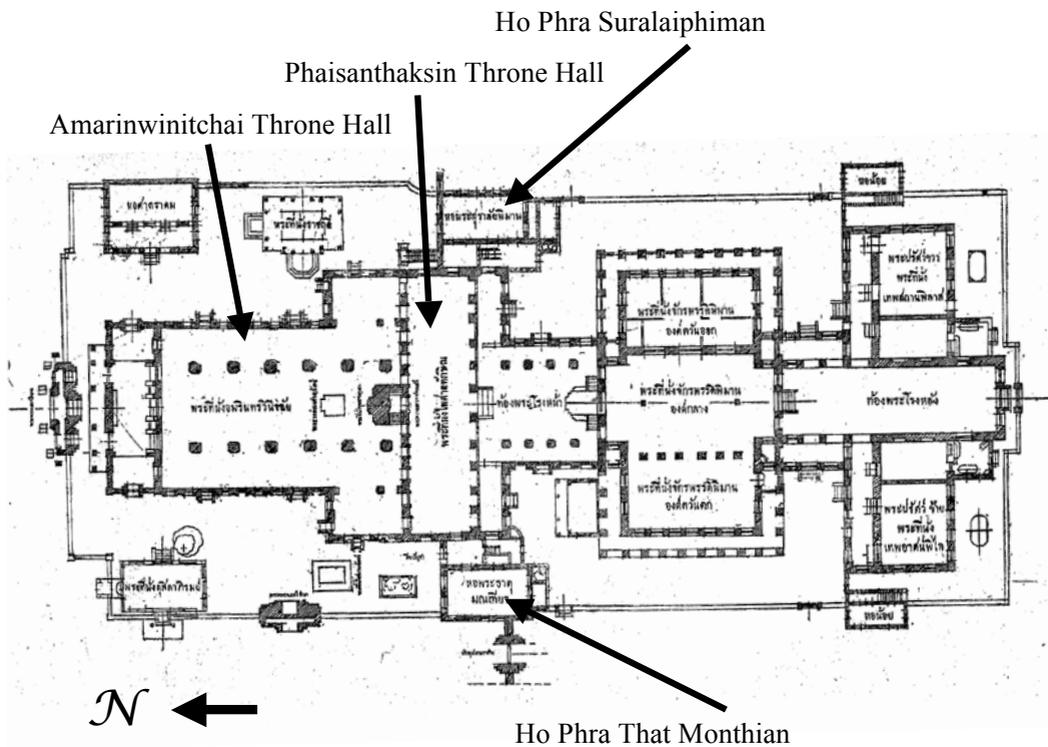
directions, then another. Later the king puts on his crown and takes formal control of the other regalia. He does so on the opposite side of the room, in the southwest corner.<sup>9</sup> The position of both thrones lies in the southern half of the hall, that is, south of the imaginary plane created by the façades of the paired chapels.

Analogous structural relations can be seen in Thai image halls. Many *bot* or *wihan* have murals with a cosmological scene behind the main image. Directly behind the image appears the summit of Mt. Meru, site of Indra's heaven, flanked left and right by the peaks of the mountain ranges surrounding Mt. Meru. On the opposite, east wall is painted the Buddha at the time of enlightenment, when Nang Thorani, the Earth Goddess, brings forth a flood of waters that sweeps away the army of the demons. We could say that the two procedures in the throne hall are structurally parallel: the donning of the crown being like Indra's palace, and the lustration like Nang Thorani's flood.

But what, now, about the two chapels? The Ho Phra That Monthian is (or was) a columbarium containing urns with the ashes of the father of King Rama I, of Rama I himself, King Rama II, King Rama III, their queens, and high-ranking princes. It was sometimes referred to as the Ho Phra Athi, or chamber for cinerary remains. It stood in relation to the Ho Phra Suralaiphiman as the dead stand to the living. King Rama III (r. 1824-1851) had three sets of "birthday" images cast, consisting of small

<sup>9</sup> H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies* (London, 1931), pp. 77-87.

Buddha images. The two sets honoring his predecessors were installed in a glass case in the Ho Phra That Monthian, joining the urns. His own set, however, was installed in the Ho Phra Suralaiphiman. In the following reign, King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) had his own set of birthday images cast. He placed these in the Ho Phra Suralaiphiman, taking Rama III's set and moving it to the Ho Phra That Monthian.



The Mahamonthian, Grand Palace, Bangkok. Photo above from *The Grand Palace and Old Bangkok* by Paisarn Piemmettawat, River Books, Bangkok, 2013, p. 120. Ground plan from *Sing anuson ratchakan thi 2 nai phra borom maharatchawang*, ed. Lamom Otchaka, Bangkok, 1969, opp. p. 4.

Therefore we could say that there is a kind of field of force running between the two chapels, a current between the living and the dead. And so when the king sat in the Amarinwinitchai Hall, he had at his back a pair of poles exchanging energies, with overlapping associations: the two parts of the coronation; the east and west ends of an image hall; and, in the chapels, the living and the dead, with the dead being his own royal ancestors.

### Nang Nopphamat

The book *Nang Nopphamat* purports to be the memoirs and treatise of a royal consort of the Sukhothai period. Already, in his preface to its publication in 1914, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab associated it with the reign of King Rama III, in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the notion that it is somehow connected with Sukhothai has persisted. It is not now quite as obscure a text as it once was. In recent decades the name Nang Nopphamat has been appropriated as the title of a beauty contest occurring at the same time as the annual Loi Krathong festival, thanks to the text's description of Loi Krathong floating lanterns. And scholars know the 2005 English translation of the essay by Nidhi Eoseewong, originally published in 1982, "The World of Lady Nopphamat."<sup>10</sup> Dr. Nidhi dated the text to between 1817 and 1835. Its function is still not clear. Most Western utopian treatises are veiled critiques of the current situation, and that may be the case with Nang Nopphamat, though Dr. Nidhi considered it primarily a book of etiquette.

In an extended passage, the first-person author praises the king of Sukhothai, called Somdet Phra Ruang Chao Yu Hua. Phra Ruang was a legendary name of the Sukhothai monarch. It may originally have been a dynastic title, meaning a member of the Solar Dynasty, applicable both to the 13<sup>th</sup>-century winner of independence, Sri Indraditya, and to subsequent kings. The king is said to have displayed more goodness of heart to the populace than can be told; he embodies the Ten Royal Virtues (I'll return to these in a moment), loving kindness, and wisdom in affairs of state. He penetrates the joys and sufferings of the people throughout his kingdom. He does not levy excessive taxes; he supports military officers and the governors of first-, second-, third-, and fourth-class towns, producing officials in every ministry who possess skill and thoughtfulness. If one displays merit, he will be appropriately rewarded, and the punishment of those who do wrong will be mitigated. He cares for the royal sons and daughters and the entire royal family, seeing that they prosper with possessions and servants, as well as for the queens and concubines, bestowing upon them jewelry and accoutrements according to their rank, and never neglecting them. Moreover he dispenses clothes and money to all regular servants, according

<sup>10</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 2005), pp. 229-54.

to custom. Finally, he displays benevolence in his instructions to all royal officials, inside and outside the palace, not permitting the deceitful behavior that results in greed, which would oppress the people and anger them.<sup>11</sup>

As a guide to statecraft, the passage makes smooth transitions, from the king's personal qualities to the nature of good governance in general, and then to keeping the inner court satisfied. Nothing is said about protection from external enemies because *Nang Nopphamat* elsewhere claims there are none. Nor is anything specifically said about the monarch being like a father, but arguably that can be taken for granted, with peace in the family being akin to peace in the kingdom.

If it is accepted that *Nang Nopphamat* is a utopian treatise, maybe the Sukhothai setting can be understood negatively. It cannot have been set in Bangkok, and too much was known about Ayutthaya for it to have been the locus. Angkor, which presumably would have been called Indapat, was too distant. That leaves Sukhothai. The main source of knowledge about Sukhothai would have been the *Phongsawadan Nuea*, the "History of the North," a compilation of legends dating from 1807. It is unlikely that the author was aware of the existence of Sukhothai inscriptions, and even less likely that the content of any was known. Nevertheless, Prince Mongkut traveled to Sukhothai in 1833 and returned with two inscriptions: number I, the Ram Khamhaeng inscription, and number 4, the Khmer inscription of King Li Thai. It is also possible that there were already others who knew about Sukhothai inscriptions and had made an effort to decipher them. For instance, in his travel memoir *Sadet praphat ton*, King Chulalongkorn wrote that the abbot of Wat Rakhang in Bangkok visited Kamphaeng Phet in 1849 and successfully read an inscription there.<sup>12</sup>

## The Ten Royal Virtues

The Ten Royal Virtues mentioned in *Nang Nopphamat* are listed in a birth story of the Buddha, the *Nandiyamiga Jātaka* (no. 385), the story of a deer in a royal park who stood fearlessly as the king was about to shoot him with an arrow, and then proclaimed the virtues after the king put down his bow. The future Buddha is the deer, who instructs the king concerning the virtues. They appear in a verse, but unlike most of the *Jātaka* verses, it is not considered canonical.<sup>13</sup> Peter Skilling has written, "The history of the ten royal virtues remains to be investigated. Could the list have been drawn up in South India, in Lanka, or in South-East Asia?"<sup>14</sup> This uncertain pedigree helps explain

<sup>11</sup> *Nang Nopphamat* (Bangkok, 1960), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Bunnak Phayakkhadet, ed., *Phra Barommarachathibai khong ratchakan thi 5* (Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya, 1963), pp. 162-63.

<sup>13</sup> Inferred from its absence in the online Pali canon, where the previous and following verses do appear.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Skilling, "King, Saṅgha, and Brahmins: Ideology, ritual, and power in pre-modern Siam," in Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London and New York, 2007), p. 195. An important study of the Ten Royal Virtues in Burma was not known to me in 2009: Aurore Candier,

why little can be found about the virtues in books on Buddhism.

To explicate the Ten Royal Virtues, I will jump to the sermon given by Kromma Luang Vajirayanavangsa, the Supreme Patriarch and abbot at Wat Bovornives, on the occasion of King Bhumibol's coronation in 1950. Vajirayanavangsa was then 78 years old. He was a royal, having been born a *mom ratchawong* in the Nopphawong family. This is the stanza:

Dānaṃ sīlaṃ pariccāgaṃ ajjavaṃ maddavaṃ tapaṃ  
akkodhaṃ avihiṃsā ca khantī ca avirodhanāṃ

And these are Vajirayanavangsa's explanations, some of them differing somewhat from what one might read in a Pali dictionary:

*Dāna* "giving"

*Sīla* "guarding body and speech from blemish"

*pariccāga* "renunciation"

*ajjava* "uprightness"

*maddava* "gentleness"

*tapa* "rejection of indolence and wickedness"

*akkodha* "absence of anger"

*avihiṃsa* "not molesting other creatures, including animals, to the point of suffering"

*khanti* "bearing those things which ought to be born"

*avirodhana* "not departing from the straight and narrow, controlling oneself and remaining unaffected by power, enjoyment, or displeasure"<sup>15</sup>

Vajirayanavangsa went on to state that the Ten Royal Virtues ought to be cultivated by all, not just kings. And for him, patriarchy was part of the natural order of things; the head of state follows the same principles as the head of the household. Vajirayanavangsa's sermon was published in 1973, on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Somdet Phra Yanasangwon, who had become the abbot of Wat Bovorn in 1961 and was named Supreme Patriarch in 1989. It is through the proselytizing of Somdet Phra Yanasangwon that the Ten Royal Virtues have become a significant element in contemporary discourse, as can be discovered by undertaking a search of *Thotsaphit ratchatham* in Thai letters on the Internet.

Did the author of *Nang Nopphamat* necessarily know what the Ten Royal Virtues were, or was she (or he) merely repeating a formulaic expression? We cannot say for sure. Let us look at some of the other instances in the early Bangkok period. One is the Three Seals Code, the law code assembled in 1805, in which a myth is related in the

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"A Norm of Buddhist Kingship? The Concept of *Raza-dhamma* through Five Konbaung Period Texts," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 11 (2007): 5-48.

<sup>15</sup> Wachirayanawong, *Thotsaphit ratchatham lae lak phra phutthasatsana* (Bangkok, 1973), p. 17.

opening portion. According to this legend, two generations of a family of hermits were concerned that the king be endowed with the Ten Royal Virtues. The hermit Manosara flew to the outermost wall of the cosmos, where he saw the Pali-language text of the *Thammasat*, the divine law, incised. He memorized it and on his return to earth wrote it down.<sup>16</sup> The text, when taught to the king, was the means by which the monarch would become endowed with the Virtues and other key Buddhist qualities as well.

The second instance I take from the translation by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit of the long narrative poem *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. A Lao king has sent a flattering letter to the King of Ayutthaya:

In the missive, the king of Wiang, ruler over the royal wealth of the city of Si Sattana, upholder of truth and religion, pays respect to the King of Ayutthaya, the great, who resides under a tiered white umbrella higher than that of any monarch in all directions. He begs to present tribute of gold to the king of the capital of Si Ayutthaya, who has such renown that every country quails and submits, who protects the mass of the populace and soldiery so they are joyful, who upholds the Ten Royal Virtues, who governs with justice and honesty (หนึ่งพระองค์นั้นทรงทศพิศ ครอบงมสรรพจิตเป็นใหญ่).<sup>17</sup>

Here I would add that the word *ทรง* (*song*) need not be understood exactly as “uphold.” *Uphold* suggests that the virtues are somehow distinct from the king, whereas *ทรง* can imply that the king and the virtues are one and the same. Something similar can be said about a stanza in a long poem by Phraya Trang, written in praise of King Rama II in 1818. There it is the bodhisattva, Maitreya, the future Buddha, now residing in heaven, who possesses (or *ทรง*) the Ten Royal Virtues.<sup>18</sup>

The Ten Royal Virtues do appear briefly in the two Thai cosmologies, the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, attributed to the 14th-century King Li Thai of Sukhothai, and the Bangkok cosmology compiled in 1802.<sup>19</sup> In the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, in the section on humankind, there is a description of the *cakravartin*, the ideal king. Here it is not a question of being an embodiment of the virtues; instead, the emperor exhorts lesser kings to live up to them:

<sup>16</sup> *Rueang kotmai tra sam duang* (Bangkok, 1978), pp. 6-8; *The Ayutthaya Palace Law and Thammasat*, Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, trans., to appear. I am grateful to Chris Baker for sharing his translation with me.

<sup>17</sup> *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2 vols. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 505-6. In 2009, I used the slightly different translation posted on Pasuk Phongpaichit's Chulalongkorn University web site. For the Thai text, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Bangkok, 1962), p. 508.

<sup>18</sup> Phraya Trang, *Khlong dan chalaem phra kiat* (Bangkok, 1969), stanza 311, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> For the latter, see David K. Wyatt, “The ‘Subtle Revolution’ of King Rama I of Siam,” in *Moral Order and the Question of Change*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), p. 25. I cannot find it in the Thai text.

At that time the great Cakkavatti king teaches the rulers to live according to the Dhamma. He then speaks as follows: “Let the rulers and kings observe the ten dhammic rules for kings, and do so without ever ceasing. Love your princes and your courtiers, the holders of successively lower ranks, and the common people, the slaves and the free men. Do not choose certain ones to love and certain ones to hate—love them all equally.”<sup>20</sup>

The passage continues, and in fact, enough texts have been cited to observe a general pattern. The Ten Royal Virtues are mentioned at the beginning of these passages, followed by the recitation of qualities that are considered by the writers to exemplify the virtues.

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| <p><i>Inscription 5 (22 September 1361)</i></p> <p>I.14f. He rules in conformity with the Dasabiddharājadharma (= Pali <i>dasabidharājadhamma</i> “ten-fold royal dharma,” the Ten Royal Virtues). He is merciful to all his subjects (<i>phrai fā khā thai</i>). When he sees someone’s rice he does not covet it, when he sees someone’s wealth he does not get angry. When a father dies [his estate] is left to the son, when an elder brother dies it is left to the younger. When anyone quarrels with him about large matters or small, [the King] does not put him to death or injure him. When he captures enemy warriors, he does not kill or beat them, but looks after them well so that they may not die. When he catches people who cheated or betrayed him, or people who tried to poison him, he does not kill or beat them. Those who have done him harm he has set free so many times that they cannot be counted. The reason why he shows such forbearance in cases is because he has resolved ... to become a Buddha and to take all living creatures beyond these miseries of transmigration....</p> | <p><i>Inscription 3 (23 June 1357)</i></p> <p>II.26 [He wields] the royal power in accordance with the Dasabiddharājadharma....</p> <p>II.43f. When commoners (<i>phrai fā khā thai</i>) or men of rank (<i>lūk ċhao lūk khun</i>) [die]... he must not seize their estates; when a father dies, (the estate) must be left [to the sons; when an elder brother dies, it must be left to] the younger. Any ruler who acts in accordance with these principles (<i>tham, dharma</i>) ... will rule this Muang for a very long time; any (ruler) who acts in violation of them will not last long at all.</p> |
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<sup>20</sup> Frank E. and Mani B. Reynolds, trans., *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (Berkeley, Asian Humanities Press, 1982), pp. 147-48. Thai text, *Trai phum phra ruang khong phraya Li Thai* (Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya, 1966), p. 110.

King Li Thai of Sukhothai, credited with composing the *Trai Phum*, came to the throne in 1347. Inscriptions 3, 4 (which is in Khmer), and 5 contain parallel passages, and some of the sentences (but not the mention of the Ten Royal Virtues) are found also in Inscription I, the inscription of Ram Khamhaeng, Li Thai's grandfather. This, if it does not date from 1292, as once thought, still dates from Ram Khamhaeng's lifetime.<sup>21</sup>

In inscription 5, in the left hand column, let us notice the initial attribution of the Ten Royal Virtues, and then jump past the list of good qualities and actions to the last sentence, "The reason why he shows such forbearance in cases is because he has resolved ... to become a Buddha and to take all living creatures beyond these miseries of transmigration." The king, that is, aspires to the status of a bodhisattva. In Inscription 3, there are more missing sections. But let us notice the last sentence here. "Any ruler who acts in accordance with these principles ... will rule this Muang for a very long time; any (ruler) who acts in violation of them will not last long at all." What did King Li Thai think was the mechanism for the departure or demise of a despotic or inept ruler? Maybe it was in line with the kind of political thought that helps explain the *phu mi bun*, the holy man, or possessor of merit, as found in the Ayutthaya chronicles.<sup>22</sup> That is, the ruler finds that he has already received the fruits of his good karma, and now the bad fruits await him. A rival with more merit than his appears on the scene and is acclaimed by the people. That is not the only possible explanation, however.

### Sukhothai inscriptions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Once the Sukhothai inscriptions were deciphered and published, intellectuals who wished to define the nature of the state or the character of the Thai people did not need to create a mythical Sukhothai, such as we see in *Nang Nopphamat*. They could turn directly to the inscriptions. I will now jump considerably forward in time, first to a lecture by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, delivered in 1927, and second to a talk by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj in 1960.

Prince Damrong's lecture of 1927, titled "The Characteristics of the Governance of Siam since Ancient Times," was given during the reign of King Prajadhipok,

<sup>21</sup> A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Epigraphy of Mahādharmaṛājā I of Sukhodaya, Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 11 Part I, *JSS* 61, pt. 1 (Jan. 1973), pp. 71-178 (Inscr. 3, pp. 108, 110; Inscr. 5, pp. 154-56). For the date of Inscription I, see Hans Pentz, "Difficulties with Inscription I," in James R. Chamberlain, ed., *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy: Collected Papers* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991), p. 545.

<sup>22</sup> *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, trans. Richard D. Cushman (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2000), p. 8 (the birth of a *phū mī bun*, from the legends that introduce the British Museum but not other editions of the Ayutthaya chronicles) and p. 300 (during the reign of King Narai, his successor Phra Phet Racha is recognized as a *phū mī bun*). For "already received the fruits of his good karma," I am indebted to a conversation with Prof. Paul Mus at Yale in 1967 or 1968.

twelve years after Damrong's resignation as Minister of the Interior in 1915.<sup>23</sup> At the time he was president of the Royal Institute. In general, certain types of behavior that have seemed so far to be reflections of Buddhist ideals were treated by Prince Damrong, instead, as native characteristics of the Thai people. He described the Thai as tolerant, willing to extend charity to all religions and to embrace people of different ethnicities, such as the Chinese, who are assimilated in two or three generations, and the ancient Khmer, whom he called Khom, and who he believed populated Siam in considerable numbers in the Sukhothai period. His emphasis on tolerance and assimilation seems in part to have been a reaction to the strident nationalism of King Vajiravudh, monarch from 1910 to 1925. In Vajiravudh's 1917 drama *Pr'a Ruang*, which is based on a legend found in the *Phongsawadan Nuea*, Pr'a Ruang declaims:

Alas we are the subjects of the Khom king,  
Born Thai but enslaved in a dreadful fate<sup>24</sup>

This plays on the understanding that the word *Thai* also means “free.” (I quote from an English translation by Prince Prem Purachatra, made in 1979.) Prince Damrong was certainly a nationalist—a fundamental trait of the Thai people, he says in the lecture, is their love of freedom, and this is why, in early times, they departed from China—but he was, in contrast to King Vajiravudh, a subtle one.

Prince Damrong's concept of the nation—Prathet Sayam, he called it—was as a realm in which people of different ethnicities could be embraced. It was also a concept that could be projected into the past. Sukhothai, for him, was the first capital of Siam. Inscription I, the Ram Khamhaeng inscription, is the only one he mentions. According to the prince, in this inscription the king is presented as the father of the people. And this belief, for Prince Damrong, is rooted in indigenous Thai social structure, starting with the “father of the kitchen” and then progressing to “the father of the village,” and moving upward from there. “The father rules the child,” he says—that's the Thai way.

Just how prominent in the inscription is the concept of patriarchal kingship? It is surely present, in the section near the beginning, for instance, in which the king speaks of his service to his father. It is also present in the king's title Pho Khun, though this is not without ambiguity. Khun is a title for the head of a *mueang* or town, and so Pho Khun can be taken to mean either “Father and Khun” or merely “Presiding Khun.”

As an example of patriarchal kingship, Prince Damrong pointed to the passage

<sup>23</sup> “Rueang laksana kan pok khong prathet sayam tæ boran,” somewhat abbreviated text in P. Phibunsongkhram and La-iat Phibunsongkhram, eds., *Prawattisat Sukhothai (lem 1)* (Bangkok, 1955), pp. 119-32.

<sup>24</sup> Vajiravudh, *P'a Ruang: Drama in Verse*, trans. Prem Purachatra (Bangkok: King Vajiravudh's Centennial Committee, 1980), p. 1.



M. R. Kukrit lecturing at Wat Si Chum in Old Sukhothai, 31 March 1960 (after *Kham banyai samana borankhadi samai Sukhothai pho so 2503*, opp. p. 160).

about the ability of the people to ring a bell at the palace gate in order to petition the monarch. This can also be understood, however, as more a matter of the adoption of Buddhist ideals, and of the self-image of the king not only as embodiment of the personal qualities that comprise the Ten Royal Virtues, but as a future Buddha, such as indicated by inscriptions 3 and 5 of King Ram Khamhaeng's grandson, Li Thai. The sentence "When he [the king] sees someone's rice he does not covet it, when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry" appears both in the Ram Khamhaeng inscription and in Inscription 5.<sup>25</sup> Historically, such concepts can be traced back to the 11th-century Mon-language inscriptions of King Kyanzittha of Burma. They reached Sukhothai as a result of the documented intercourse between Mon-speaking lower Burma and Sukhothai in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. For Prince Damrong, on the other hand, the concept of king as bodhisattva was Khom or Khmer, and was part of a bundle of beliefs of a different lineage altogether, one that was bit by bit incorporated into the indigenous Thai belief system.

Now to the 1950s. Field Marshall Pibulsonggram, during his prime ministership of 1948 to 1957, established a Committee for the Collection of Sukhothai Period Historical Materials and named as chairman the distinguished author of books and articles about Thai customs, Phya Anuman Rajadhon. One volume of collected articles and excerpts from books was published in 1955, and it is in this volume that I have read Prince Damrong's 1927 lecture.

<sup>25</sup> 5.1.17-18; 1.1.27.

The Sarit regime began in 1957, and in 1960 the Fine Arts Department organized a seminar at the site of Sukhothai, with Phya Anuman presiding. By this time the energetic and sagacious Dhanit Yupho, whose prior career in the Fine Arts Department had been in the classical dance division, had become Director General of the Fine Arts Department. The proceedings of the 1960 seminar were published on the occasion of the opening of the Ram Khamhaeng Museum in 1964. This was the second provincial museum to be built, the first being the Chao Samphraya Museum in Ayutthaya. The modern era, with provincial museums created and staffed by the Fine Arts Department, had begun.

One of the speakers at the 1960 symposium was M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, publisher of the newspaper *Siam Rath* and writer of its “Problem of the Day.” His brief spell as prime minister in 1975-76 stood long in the future. In his paper “Governance in the Sukhothai Period,” Kukrit’s approach to the Ram Khamhaeng inscription resembles Prince Damrong’s—that is, he tells us, if not exactly who we are, who we should be.<sup>26</sup> Like Prince Damrong, he emphasizes patriarchal kingship. The family, he says, is the basis of governance. Otherwise, Kukrit, born in 1911, not 1862, and speaking at the time of the imposition of a military dictatorship, has different concerns on his mind. He finds in the inscriptions of Sukhothai an expression of rights he holds important.

One is equality under the law. His basis is Inscription I.1.25-27, “When commoners [*phrai fa*] or men of rank [*luk chao luk khun*] differ and disagree, [the King] examines the case to get at the truth and then settles it justly for them.” For Kukrit, the mention of commoners and men of rank together here indicates that one group is not treated differently from the other. Another right is freedom of speech, or something close to it. On festival days, according to Inscription I (1.2.19-20), “Whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so; whoever wants to sing, does so.”<sup>27</sup> Kukrit writes, “The right of the freedom of the people to laugh is one of the most fundamental. This right is one of the first an unjust ruler will dissolve, and when it is gone, loss of the others will surely follow.”

The third right is that of deposing an unjust ruler. Here the basis is the passage from Inscription 3 quoted above. “Any ruler who acts in accordance with these principles ... will rule this Muang for a very long time; any (ruler) who acts in violation of them will not last long at all.” Kukrit explains that “these principles” (*tham*, dharma) specifically refer to the Ten Royal Virtues mentioned a number of lines previously. When a ruler acts unjustly, citizens (he uses the anachronistic term *ratsadon*) have the right (*sit*, *siddhi*) to topple him and put a new king on the throne. So it is not a matter of the king just disappearing, as I suggested might have been the

<sup>26</sup> M.R. Khukrit Pramot, “Kan pok khrong samai Sukhothai,” in *Kham banyai samana borankhadi samai Sukhothai pho so 2503* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1964), pp. 161-71.

<sup>27</sup> A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “The Inscription of Rāma Gaṃhēn of Sukhodaya (1292 A. D.), Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 9” *JSS* 59 pt. 2 (July 1971), pp. 207, 210-11 (179-228).

understanding of King Li Thai, but the positive actions of an involved citizenry. As for the Ten Royal Virtues, there is no specific discussion of them, and, if Kukrit had been asked in 1960 to identify them, I cannot say for sure whether he would have been able to.

In 1988, an art historian, Dr. Piriya Krairiksh, gave a lecture at the Siam Society in which he questioned the authenticity of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription. In 1991, *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy*, edited by Jim Chamberlain, was published. It included contributions by Dr. Piriya, who presented his reasons for believing that the inscription was created between 1851 and 1855, during the reign of King Mongkut,<sup>28</sup> papers from a 1989 Association for Asian Studies panel, in which I participated, and contributions from other scholars, in particular, Michael Vickery, who questioned the date of the inscription without necessarily agreeing that it was carved in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, in 2004, a somewhat revised presentation of Dr. Piriya's theories appeared, with an introduction by Nidhi Eoseewong.<sup>29</sup> Dr. Nidhi did not go so far as to say that he agreed with Dr. Piriya—he thought readers would have to make up their own minds—but he maintained that at the least it is clear that there are problems with Inscription I, as demonstrated by the work of M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani and Michael Vickery. Dr. Piriya, he tells us, set himself a daunting twofold goal—not just raising questions but providing a positive thesis, that the inscription was composed and engraved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Dr. Piriya's integrity, says Dr. Nidhi, he has the highest regard.

Now if one art historian, Dr. Piriya, can dismiss the Ram Khamhaeng inscription, then another can surely embrace it. But I also wish to say something rather different. When I started putting together materials for this talk, I was intending to observe that the removal of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription from the realm of ordinary discourse, the fact that it is considered too hot to handle, represents, overall, a cultural loss. The best minds, whether they be those of historians or newspaper columnists, should be continuing to look at the inscription just as Prince Damrong and M.R. Kukrit did, as a text to draw on in the light of contemporary concerns. The inscription does not have a fixed meaning; to find words in it that resonate with what one believes today is a sign of civilized discourse. Now, more sadly I suppose, I question that. Perhaps, instead, at the present juncture, the search to define what a society is and ought to be is best carried out without regard to the burden of the past.

<sup>28</sup> Piriya Krairiksh, "The Date of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription," in *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy: Collected Papers*, ed. James R. Chamberlain (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991), p. 269.

<sup>29</sup> Phiriya Krairuek, *Charuek Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng* (Bangkok: Sinlapa Watthanatham, 2004).

