

Mourning a Late King through Portraiture: Articulations of the Sacred and Profane in the Primate City of Bangkok

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Abstract

This article employs an urban sociological reading to examine mourning portraiture in the primate city of Bangkok, Thailand, following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX). The article argues that Bangkok's mourning portraiture constructs a reified notion of the Thai nation acceptable to Bangkok's elites. Through a narrative that sacralizes the late king's historical exploits for the Thai people, Bangkok's elites have harnessed the affluent shopping district of Pathum Wan as an aesthetic and political canvas for showcasing the transcendent and virtuous nature of their late monarch. With mourning portraiture as *figure* and Bangkok's Pathum Wan as *background*, the nationalist implications of the imagery as they render sacred the late monarch are considered. The article concludes that the capital city's sacralization of a deceased king is but an attempt by pro-royalist banking families to reinforce their class linkages to the Thai aristocracy by 'working towards the monarchy,' a trajectory illuminated by Serhat Ünalı, one which I hope to make visible in the post-death context of mourning Rama IX.

Keywords

Bangkok, Thailand, primate city, portraiture, urban, Rama IX, monarchy, Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thaksinomics, sufficiency economy

Introduction

In December of 2016, your author returned to Bangkok, Thailand, his childhood home, to 'read' a city engaged in mourning of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (or Rama IX) who died on 13 October 2016 (born 1927; reigned 1946–2016). With the vast majority of the city's residents donning black or at the very least displaying a black ribbon, Bangkok's urban ecology remained frenetic as street vendors continued their selling, passengers lined up for the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) and passengers rushed to their buses. Underlying this lifeworld, Bangkok, or *Krung Thep* to local Thais (the latter of which refers to the city as the 'City of Angels'), has seen its fair share of military coups – some bloody, others peaceful – along with economic upheavals, student uprisings, and grassroots protests.

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This article examines how Bangkok's status as primate city and national capital allows it to express impressive agency in providing politicizing and sacralizing narratives through mourning portraiture of Rama IX. The portraits, part of the Thai elite's post-death reconfiguration of their proximity toward their late monarch and his *barami* – the Thai Buddhist notion of virtue – were seen in and on buildings in Bangkok's affluent district of Pathum Wan. In Pathum Wan conspicuous consumption, or the purchase of expensive material goods for the sake of displaying high social status according to sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1934), is promoted through the district's massive malls and retail centers such as Siam Paragon, MBK Center, Siam Center, Siam Square, and Central World Plaza, to name but a few.

My article forwards the view that Bangkok's expression of reverence through Pathum Wan's mourning iconography is but a hyper-romanticized nationalist narrative, one set into motion by Bangkok's elites to diffuse anxieties and discontents as its citizenry, the city, and the country continue their march through what Klima describes as the 'emotional predicaments of globalization' (Klima, 2004: 445). As a process, such displays of reverence are a form of elite merit making where morality can be practiced within 'the history of the political economy in which it took shape' (Bowie, 1998). Bangkok's role was thus based on enabling a royal transcendence in the libidinal materialism of the area, set off not by monks, but ironically by its venues of conspicuous consumption. Thus, in a dreamscape where a surfeit of goods signifies the good life, the presence of mourning portraits honoring Rama IX makes it fertile ground for the population to conceptualize materiality, morality, and mortality together through what Thongchai Winichakul describes as 'royal visualsapes' (cited in Üaldi, 2014: 380). To illuminate such a process requires us to view the city of Bangkok as a protagonist and subject. Such an orientation was most effectively realized in the important work by Blau and Platzer (1999) and their examination of how central European cities exerted their agency during *fin de siècle* Vienna, Budapest, and Prague.

Blau and Platzer gave pride of place to city architecture as agent, one that as protagonist is engaged in reimagining city aesthetics in the period of the post-Hapsburg Empire. For Blau and Platzer, the city can be a protagonist because it is 'not only formed by history, but was the privileged place of history – the place where history had been and could be made' (Blau and Platzer, 1999:15). My work almost enters the same context, with the exception that I examine the iconography of mourning portraiture, unfettered from Bangkok's architectural forms. In this manner, portraiture *as figure* can thus be discerned from the city and its dynamism *as background*. For *fin de siècle* architect Otto Wagner, to 'read' the city as protagonist requires a 'perceptual understanding... which accommodates...the constantly shifting vantage point of the urban viewer,' one that nonetheless perceives the citizen and its urban context 'as figure and ground' (cited in Blau and Platzer, 1999: 18). Inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's reflections conveyed in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782/1992), I too immersed myself in the city of Bangkok between December 2016 and 2017, with walks that sought out iconographic cues and cautious extrapolations about how a city in liminality employs mourning royal visualsapes.

Such a rendering of the city is not necessarily idealistic given Bangkok's primate city status, a geographic reference to an exponentially large city that is made to administer the entire country (Jefferson, 1939). Yet by functioning as the country's exponentially largest city and national capital, a great deal of urban expression in Bangkok's public life is amplified by cultural and political forces. After all, every major headquarters of the Thai state, that is, its military, news organizations, electricity, top educational institutions, etc., is located in Bangkok. Thus, a surfeit of mourning portraiture in the national capital honoring the legacy of Rama IX is, for pro-royal Thais, justified: at the time of his death Rama IX was the world's longest reigning constitutional monarch, having been on the throne for over seventy years. In his capacity as king and philanthropist for the rural poor, as the royal narratives expound, Rama IX witnessed Thailand's development and almost two

dozen constitutional changes over many decades, along with intra-state military crises that intermittently erupted during the long chronology of his rule. Furthermore, he witnessed the country's return to civilian rule in the early 21st century, along with the paroxysms of periodic grassroots protests that spanned the period. Yet this narrative is made possible by the powerful pro-royal classes of Thai society 'working towards the monarchy,' a process where re-enchantments of the monarchy's 'sacred charisma' are in turn 'rewarded with social distinction and material benefits' (Ünaldi, 2014: 382). As a heuristic device, the notion of working toward the monarchy allows observers a larger panorama of royalist maneuverings that bring 'broader structures into focus...beyond clear-cut networks and the immediate royal circle as units of analysis' (Ünaldi, 2014: 383).

For Ünaldi, working towards the monarchy is a process by which Bangkok's elites legitimize their class accumulation of material, cultural, and social capital, but only to the extent that the monarchy's 'sacred charisma can be efficiently reproduced' in ways that validate their class stratum (Ünaldi, 2014: 382). This perspective follows from Fong's (2009) illumination of a parallel process set into motion decades earlier under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who during the late 1950s and 1960s orchestrated the exodus of the king from his palace into the hinterland of the country, an activity deliberately curtailed under the previous ruler, the anti-royal Field Marshal Phibun Songkram. The long chronology and hagiography in the celebration of the monarchy's legacy is thus highly functional, so much so that even today 'public actions undertaken without reference to the monarchy lack legitimacy, and will be obstructed...if they stand in opposition to the interests of individuals or groups...working towards the monarchy' (Ünaldi, 2014: 382). The process by which Thai and military elites have been working towards the monarchy is further amplified by what McCargo (2005) terms the 'network monarchy,' a powerful coterie of Bangkok royalists that monopolizes the construction and romanticization of a homogeneous and reified Thai identity. The process continues under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the current military junta that seized power in 2014 and fielded its current prime minister, former Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army, Prayuth Chan-o-cha.

The Thai elites' sloganeering of Rama IX and monarchy in a post-death context would uncritically and with much alacrity accept the distinctions set forth by French *fin-de-siècle* sociologist Emile Durkheim. Durkheim notes how the *sacred* conveyed by the moral belief systems of a community – its symbols and symbolic representations – exists separately yet in symbiosis with the *profane*, a world of calculability, materialism, and corporeal concerns. Because the sacralizing narratives of Rama IX are conveyed through mourning portraiture located in a wealthy part of the city, the unassailable staying power of Thailand's classism is destabilized, if momentarily, for the city to introduce the sacred into the profane, a distinction made in Durkheim's important work the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/2008), a distinction that underscores how sacred symbolism and the profane serve as twin pillars for religion. For Durkheim such a dichotomy should not be seen normatively since notions of the sacred and profane are understood for their objective content. Both function through god and society, respectively, yet 'god and society are only one' (Durkheim, 1912/2008: 206). The profane world thus offers religion its *raison d'être*. In Thailand, however, capitalism, religiosity, and monarchism are not so neatly demarcated in practice. Those in opposition to Thai royalism have visited this theme during the populist – and to his supporters, democratic – government of the iconic Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's prime minister who was popularly elected in 2001 yet ousted in a coup in 2006, with subsequent political ousters meted against his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra (prime minister between 2011 and 2014), her government, and her political supporters.

Those Thais discontented with royalism and the military's revanchist policies against democratic forces have articulated their anger and angst through protest, both peaceful and violent, and

through anti-government graffiti that condemned past systemic atrocities committed against the people in the 1970s, the 1990s, and the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts uprising that took place in Bangkok between April and May 2010, one that resulted in a bloody crackdown against the movement (Fong, 2013; Sopranzetti, 2018; Únaldi, 2014). Never mind the prevalence of anti-government graffiti that for Chaffee (1993) expressed sentiments and symbolisms of discontent by a population excluded from the political process (and by a government they perceive as totalitarian), the reinvigoration of royal sacrality in the mourning period of Rama IX embodied a process that Winichakul (2001) would interpret as reconstructing the Thai nation in a manner where it was redeemed and returned to the elite's dyadic imagination of nation, one that is anti-colonial *and* royalist. Yet for those whose political sensibilities are still sympathetic to the Red Shirts there is a determined effort to not let Bangkok's elite expunge lower class indignations from political and cultural memories (King, 2017: 13). Their lives and sense of agency are currently more constrained under the NCPO – the sycophantic institution promoting royalism – primarily because Thaksin's legacy of promoting entrepreneurial prosperity in the rural hinterland has been relegated under the reinvigorated notion of a sufficiency economy (*sethakit pho phiang*), an ethos promoted during Rama IX's rule that advocated Thais to 'rein in aspiration for self-transformation via capital accumulation and to maintain goals appropriate to their station' (Funahashi, 2016: 113). Such an ethos expounded how Thais should be 'mindful of what one has in everyday life' so as to counter Thaksin's desire to run the country as – and in the former prime minister's own words – a 'CEO Prime Minister' (Funahashi, 2016: 113).¹

Other activities that cheapen the ostensibly holy context of all matters royal and nationalistic are those activities that conflate Buddhism with capitalism on the ground, so to speak. The practice whereby the grassroots conflate the metaphysical with the corporeal has a long chronology, one that predates even Thaksin. The practice frequently surfaces to reassure a disempowered populace about their sociological anxieties related to life struggle, public safety, the state of the nation and one's fate entangled with the aforementioned. The trade in amulets promoting different monks in late 20th century Thailand (see Jackson, 1999), the funeral gambling and monetized rites of exchange for the dead after the bloody coup of 1992 (see Klima, 2002), the 'moral overreach of profit-minded politicians,' and the migration of Thais to Bangkok to pursue 'profit-oriented actions destructive to their health and to the environment in general,' along with 'religious practices associated with lottery playing' are but some examples of unbridled pursuits of wealth (Funahashi, 2016: 119). These harsh sentiments were conveyed to counter Thaksin's advocacy of rural entrepreneurialism for the poor, one that royalists were quick to deem as eroding Thai 'local wisdom' (Sopranzetti, 2018: 158) while promoting 'Thailand, Inc.' (Funahashi, 2016). Thaksin, or anyone who had the acumen to be a successful and ambitious entrepreneur, was thus framed as harboring an ethos that is a 'moral corruptor of pristine villagers, feeding their greed in order to buy their electoral support' (Sopranzetti, 2018: 158).

By appropriating the process of honoring a dead monarch to reify and unify Thais as one, Bangkok's elites had to rely on Durkheim's distinction of the sacred and profane, with elites taking charge of the narrative generation of Rama IX through hagiographic civic portraits that honored his legacy. My article thus examines such portraits (as figure) displayed in the Pathum Wan district (as background), the affluent retail district in metropolitan Bangkok described by Ross King's *Reading Bangkok* (2011) as essential to the city's 'libidinal 'landscape, one amplified by what Ara Wilson (2004) describes as 'intimate economies' underpinned by department stores, its services, and the tourist sex trade. This article thus considers how Pathum Wan's iconography of the late Rama IX is compiled and articulated for the public in a variety of iterations that can be used to theorize Thai modernity. Such a process of cautiously extrapolating from portraits is derived from Roberts'

(2013) excellent use of the method to theorize Chinese modernity by examining portraits of China's 19th century Empress Dowager Cixi.

The portraiture's embeddedness and densification in Bangkok's Pathum Wan evinces how the sacralization of Rama IX is being generated in a part of the city that exhibits the greatest expression of conspicuous consumption. Such large ornate portraits, although seen outside Bangkok proper, do not appear as frequently, with the exception of the infrequent but large highway billboard signs that honor the monarch intermittently as one drives away from the city center. Those working towards the monarchy through Pathum Wan after Rama IX's death – the powerful Sino–Thai entrepreneurs and families – are not concerned about such a discrepancy. Seeking to acquire his *barami* to ensure the continued legitimization of their class while the country is in a liminal state, the spatial context of Pathum Wan – containing land owned by the royal family and the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), a quasi-governmental agency that manages royal property – along with its display of mourning portraiture, moralizes this section of Bangkok's geography so that the portraitures can flow 'magically from deity to worshipper, from the king to his subjects...from leaders to followers' (Gray, 1986:432). Üaldi is more forthright, however: actions taken by those working towards the monarchy in Pathum Wan district (which encompasses Sra Pathum Palace) allow accompanying attributes of a virtuous king, for example, *bun-wasna* (merit), and *itthiphon* (influence) (Gray, 1986: 432), to rub off 'on the companies inside Siam Tower, on the shopping malls and on lower spaces such as the slum area whose identity and...status differentiation is tied up with a charismatic monarchy' (Üaldi, 2014: 390). The primate city of Bangkok as protagonist has enabled elite class actions not unlike what was seen in the 1990s when celebrities and politicians flocked to an 'aged abbot of a remote rural monastery,' Luang Phor Khoon, for blessings and good luck (Jackson, 1999: 5). This should remind us about how Thai Buddhism's close embrace of renunciation is matched paradoxically by its role as a 'prosperity religion' (Roberts, 1995: 2).

The symbiosis of royalist magic and the lifeworld in Thai society, according to Winichakul, means that 'magic will never go away' in the country (Winichakul cited in Üaldi, 2014: 380). Its power in a society where the natural and supernatural are blurred behooves the power elites in Bangkok to ensure that their former monarch is not forgotten or relegated away from the lifeworld even in death. Such a strategy is perhaps meant to counter an earlier snub in history: Gray (1986) notes how in 1957, the Thai populace took umbrage to strongman Phibun's attempts to shun Rama IX by minimizing his role in ceremonial rituals that honored Buddha's *parinibbana*, an anniversary that celebrated Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death. The event should have involved Rama IX at the time but instead saw Phibun coveting the publicity by not welcoming the king's participation. In this capacity, he promoted the 'strong connection between Thai nationalism and Buddhism,' not between the throne and Buddhism (Gray, 1986: 412). Along with what the populace perceived as a rigged election and a severe drought in *Isan*, Thailand's informal moniker for the rural and poor northeast, the royal snub by Phibun precipitated his downfall, with the pro-royalist Sarit seizing power in October 1957.

To further elaborate my findings, the article sections first discuss the role of politicized portraiture of monarchs in *fin-de-siècle* and early 20th century Asia, including Siam (the previous moniker for Thailand²), followed by a discussion of the power the primate city possesses in constructing sacrality and nation as it elevates Rama IX toward the same divine status as King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), a much beloved 19th century Thai monarch (born 1853; reigned 1868–1910). My article notes how the sacralization of Rama IX through mourning imagery has added to the pantheon of Thai kings another powerful paternalistic figurehead, one which was made possible by powerful Sino–Thai corporatists and beneficiaries that have demonstrated their support for Rama IX through Cold War politics, coups, constitutional crises and economic crises. W. J. T. Mitchell notes in *What*

Do Pictures Want? how such imagery serves a transcending function: ‘The potency of these images doesn’t reside merely in their presentness or topical currency but in the status as enigmas and omens, harbingers of uncertain futures’ (Mitchell, 2005:12).

The power of political portraiture in life and death (as figure)

East and Southeast Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed, among other developments, the embrace of photography by monarchistic China, Korea, and Japan as their monarchs and aristocrats employed the new medium to project their power. China’s Empress Dowager Cixi (born 1835; reigned 1861–1908) lavished in photography, allowing her portrait to be captured in a *mise-en-scène* of tremendous diversity. Sometimes seen with her court in the Forbidden City, in other instances seen outside in the palace courtyard, while still in other instances seen with Western women who had come as emissaries of goodwill, photography and the sacralization of the Cixi was further enhanced when employed to capture important cultural events such as birthdays (Roberts, 2013) since these promoted ‘the incumbent rulers’ and projected ‘a positive image of the country, particularly at times of turmoil and unrest’ (Roberts, 2013:177). The Empress Dowager (figure) must thus be seen in a context (background) where China’s monarchic system was dying at a time when the country was slowly being carved up by colonial powers in major urban centers of the eastern seaboard.

During this same period, specifically between 1910 and 1945, Korea was occupied by imperial Japan. To promote the legitimacy of its rule over indigenous Koreans, Japan embarked on promoting Korea’s Prince Yōng through photography. In hopes of portraying the affinity between the two nations, photographic portraiture of Prince Yōng was presented ‘to shift the backdrop of royal photography from the peninsula to the imperial metropole’ (Kim, 2013: 100). Photographic portraiture may be seen as an iteration of ‘official nationalism’ as noted by Benedict Anderson in the classic *Imagined Communities* (1991), one designed, in the case of Prince Yōng’s Korea, to ‘provide a valuable resource for understanding Korea’s place within the Japanese empire’ (Kim, 2013: 97). The prince was rendered as a worthy ally that recognized the ‘Japanese empire’s role in replacing China as the center of East Asian civilization and modernity’ (Kim, 2013: 100). Yet the construction process was not entirely skewed as in recent years many exhibitions featured ‘forgotten’ royal portraits that captured the Korean prince ‘shrouded in an air of melancholy’ as he sought to ‘provide a narrative that emphasizes the perfidy of the Japanese empire and the way it used royal subjects for its own propaganda’ (Kim, 2013: 105). A few decades earlier across the Sea of Japan, the elevation of the Meiji emperor had already become embedded in Japan’s material culture when the monarch had been rendered through photography to become an ‘object of collective reverence,’ one that needs to be treated like ‘a living Shinto spirit (*kami*)’ (Fukuoka, 2013: 110). For Fukuoka, Japanese nativists and its aristocrats effectively closed the distance between the emperor and his subjects through photographic portraiture. Regardless of what culture and nation employed photographic portraiture, what must be emphasized is how photographic portraiture entered the visual universe of the court at a time when ‘court painting...was in decline’ (Gu, 2013: 132).

The Thai nation is no stranger to such strategies. Even in Siam, before the country’s label of Thailand was promulgated in 1939 and 1948, the Ayutthaya Empire (1350–1767) offered formulaic cues on how murals can close the gap between the king and its peoples. For Gordon and Sirisambhand (2002) who examined a variety of murals in temples and other structures from the Ayutthaya period, three strata in the murals are employed to blur the physical and metaphysical. They note how ‘the pictures of deities are...at the top, royals in the middle, and common people at the bottom’ (Gordon and Sirisambhand, 2002: 263). Thus, all strata mediated with one another in an idealized sense, as seen in a mural where ‘the middle and lowest portions...merge as in the case

of the preparation of Buddha's last meal on earth before achieving nirvana' (Gordon and Sirisambhand, 2002:263). The demotic interplay of women and men living their lifeworlds are explicitly conveyed as well. Yet it was the top tier that served religion and sacrality. At Wat Rakhang Khositaram, an Ayutthaya period temple located on the western bank of Bangkok bisected by the Chao Phraya River, angels and celestial beings hover over the landscape of the lifeworld while lower rank angels descend to terra firma. At Bangkok's Grand Palace, murals reveal how the king – although still human – had the power to summon the power of different deities to fight evil, a role derived from the Thai rendering of the Indian epic poem the *Ramayana*. An analog can be seen in alternative contexts such as during the annual royal *kathin* ceremonies where monks are offered robes and gifts for preserving the faith:

The king 'descends' from the palace and the capital, symbolic of the Buddhist heavens, to the countryside, symbolic of men who are 'entangled' in worldly attachments, to survey the 'happiness and suffering' of his subjects. He passes through their midst...performs ritual duties inside the temple...then returns to the celestial realms, to Bangkok, the City of Angels. (Gray, 1992: 451)

By the time painting was replaced by photography as a medium for presenting portraiture in much of the world, King Mongkut, or Rama IV (born 1804; reigned 1851–1868), began the trend of exchanging photographic portraits as a gesture of international diplomacy. Daguerreotypes 'were delivered by Siamese embassies to Queen Victoria in 1857 and to Pope Pius IX and Emperor Napoleon III in 1861' (Peleggi, 2013: 85). Photographic portraiture was embraced by Thai elites during the late 19th century because earlier renderings of monarchs through paintings did not rely on accuracy, but more on an 'Eastern concept of perfection' that was based on an 'ideal beauty' (Poshyananda, 1992: 7). In Apinan Poshyananda's 1992 classic *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, the author notes that Thai elites' enthusiastic embrace of the photographic medium was due to how royal paintings failed to capture the 'likeness or physiognomy of the individual' (Poshyananda, 1992: 8).

Portrait painting...posed many problems for Siamese painters because they were not equipped with the technique of copying reality... The disregard for shading, foreshortening, and perspective in tradition Siamese art made it difficult for painters to portray convexity and roundness. The indigenous art technique of Siam could not possibly reproduce reality in the Western sense...the modelling of the features indicates a lack of mastery in anatomical skill. (Poshyananda, 1992: 11)

Moreover, by the time Rama V traveled to Europe in 1897 and 1907 to commiserate with European monarchs, his entourage had been exposed to and intoxicated by the camera. Furthermore, when the camera was bestowed upon the Thai kingdom as a diplomatic and 'priceless gift' from Europeans who visited the kingdom, Thai elites ultimately embraced photography's ability to provide 'quick results' (Poshyananda, 1992: 10). For Poshyananda, Western patrons to the kingdom thus introduced 'new ideas and techniques to Siamese artists who had hitherto been restricted to traditional methods of representation' (Poshyananda, 1992: 12). Not surprisingly, after Rama V's ascension to the throne he employed photographic imagery of himself in domestic environments where his 'sacral aura' was 'cropped to fit the photograph's demotic representational space' (Peleggi, 2013: 88). This had the effect of presenting Rama V as a 'civilized Asian monarch and an affectionate father' (Peleggi, 2013: 87). Both Rama IV and V thus successfully employed a 'regime of images' (Jackson, 2004) to 'convey to potential colonisers Siam's high level of cultural achievement' (Prapon, 2010: 6). As Rama IX continued to find traction as a constitutional monarch during the 1960s, photography was also employed to promote the 'reenchantment of the monarchy, as evidenced by the iconic status attributed to the king's portrait' (Peleggi, 2013: 83) often seen in

ornate frames positioned on many streets throughout the city. Moreover, through photography the king's iconography included imagery of his magnanimous activities exemplified by his visitation to sites that promoted public projects. In this period, the throne and Buddhism became intertwined and worshipped as one amalgamation by a devoted public, one that could now witness his efforts on visual media if not in person.

Thai royal portraiture had also found another purpose: to promote devotional sentiments toward deceased Thai monarchs (Peleggi, 2013). For Peleggi, the sacralization of past kings was also augmented through mourning portraiture because such imagery could now be accessible by more Thais. This new purpose would bode well for glorifying Rama IX after his death, when he would be revered at the level of *saksit*, a state where one possesses mystical power (*sak*) and might (*sit*). Such a sacralization also created the essence of *barami* (Nidhi, 2003, translated by Chris Baker; see also Fong, 2009). For Nidhi (2003), this is how traditional Thais view power: as natural and indivisible, with the king ideally embodying all facets of *barami*. Moreover, Peleggi notes how, 'in a country where Buddhism and the throne are closely intertwined,' photography became 'critical to the construction, rather than the mere projection, of the Thai royalty's modern or "civilized," image' (Peleggi, 2013: 83). The end result reinforced a 'Hindu-Buddhist view of the king as the apex of society,' where the veneration for the royal images appears as a 'continuation of the reverence the Thais have always had for their kings and the monarchy in general' (Stengs, 2012: 54).

Other key cultural events ensured the continuation of Rama IX's heroification. His long reign allowed Bangkok during the 1980s to witness 'the bicentennial of the establishment of the Chakri dynasty' from which Bhumibol Adulyadej hails (Stengs, 2012: 55). Moreover, both king and city partook in:

...the celebration of Bangkok as the Thai capital in 1982; the celebration of King Bhumibol's sixtieth birthday in 1987; and in 1988, the celebration of The Record of the Longest Reign. In that year King Bhumibol broke the record set by Rama V, King Chulalongkorn, who had been on the throne for forty-two years and twenty-three days. (Stengs, 2012: 55)

This process continued during the mourning period of Rama IX as his sacred status was elevated above the profane and conspicuous consumption environment of Pathum Wan District. However, to appreciate such an undertaking requires us to understand the capacity of the primate city to generate powerful nationalist narratives, especially if such a city also serves as the country's national capital.

The primate city of Bangkok (as background)

The primate city, alternatively known as a primacy city is for Mark Jefferson (1939), the progenitor of the term, a city that is a 'supereminent' city not only in terms of size, but in national influence as well. It is the background to our figure, the latter of which is embodied by mourning portraiture. Echoing Jefferson's view, Ayal notes how the primate city dominates 'over all others' (Ayal, 1992: 355) while Ginsburg asserts that the primate city is frequently 'many times the population of the next largest city' (Ginsburg, 1955: 455). Notable primate cities exist all over the world: in Africa, Cairo and Addis Ababa are examples; in Europe, Paris has often been cited as a primate city, as has London. Mexico City is a prominent primate city as well, while Jakarta and Seoul are other noteworthy examples.

By the early 20th century, Bangkok attained this distinction. Goldstein notes how 'Bangkok's urban primacy is among the most striking in the world' (Goldstein, 1971: 209) while Sternstein describes it as the 'world's pre-eminent primate city' (Sternstein, 1984: 43). For Ginsburg Bangkok

is a 'true primate city' that fulfills a 'multiplicity of functions and attractions' that allow it to function as the heart of Thailand (Ginsburg, 1955: 455). During the 2010 census, Thailand's National Statistics Office recorded over 8 million inhabitants in the city, with a population of 14,000 people per square mile (National Statistics Office, 2010). The population figure jumps close to over 14 million if one includes five smaller adjacent provinces that ring the city, constituting the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR): Nakhon Pathom; Pathum Thani; Nonthaburi; Samut Prakan; and Samut Sakhon. Currently encompassing approximately 605 square miles, Ayal notes in his timeless work how Bangkok is 'an extreme case of primacy,' one that 'cannot be found in any other country at a similar level of per capita income' (Ayal, 1992: 355). Yet even as far back as 1865, a member of the Board of Foreign Missions noted how Bangkok was 'at once the seat of government, of religion, of foreign commerce, in short of nearly all public life in the kingdom' and that 'Bangkok is more to Siam than Paris to France' (Sternstein, 1984: 49). Indeed, by 1947 the City of Angels exceeded Thailand's second largest city of Chiang Mai by twenty-one times; in 1960 Bangkok was twenty-seven times larger and by 1967 thirty-two times (Goldstein, 1971: 209). By the mid-1990s, Bangkok was fifty-one times larger than Chiang Mai's 117,000 residents (Schwab, 2005: 66). Data for such consistent increases in Bangkok's primacy city index was presaged by Jefferson's observations from over seven decades ago that Bangkok already 'was a well-marked primate city of Siam' (Jefferson, 1939: 231).

Bangkok found its urban footing first as a land-oriented agrarian unit. It had to emphasize its productive capacities off its land resources because its harbor, nested in the Gulf of Siam, was too shallow and distant from major shipping routes of the South China Sea (Ginsburg, 1955). Nonetheless, by the 1950s, a national bourgeoisie based on banking, industry, and finance enhanced the city's already established role as an import-export hub, further developing its industrial base (Brown, 1994; Hewison, 1989). During the post-World War II period, Bangkok's growth was due to how it nested the vast majority of Thailand's newest factories, nationalized utilities, subsidized public transportation, financial services, educational, cultural and entertainment facilities, as well as military institutions (Ayal, 1992: 358).

Further spurring economic growth, Bangkok collected many of its migrants in ways that allowed the majority to be absorbed into the employment stream (Fong, 2009, 2013). The vast majority of migrants to Bangkok benefitted from enhanced informal networks that allowed many migrants to find temporary employment in the city 'very soon after or even before their move' (Ayal, 1992: 358). By the onset of globalization in the 1990s, the city's promulgation of Suvarnabhumi International Airport further transitioned Bangkok toward the status of being an important hub in Southeast Asia. Indeed, it was because of Bangkok that Thailand evolved into a gatekeeper state that situated itself in the neoliberal world system 'with relative alacrity' (Lynch, 2004: 341). Evidence can be seen in the level of Thailand's regional development, second only to Indonesia in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations of which Thailand is a member (International Monetary Fund, 2017: 64).

A primate city like Bangkok is not without its issues, however. Henderson (2002), Tolley et al. (1979) and Ginsburg (1955) suggest how the primate city may inhibit the growth of lesser cities due to the demands of the former for public investments and expenditures. Moomaw and Alwosabi agree, noting that a large city 'reduces economic welfare' of smaller urban centers while collecting all of the country's political institutions to control such centers (Moomaw and Alwosabi, 2004: 149). The Thai language *Thailand – Is It Bangkok?* published by Thammasat University's Faculty of Economics, reinforces such a view, highlighting how public policy 'biases' favor 'Bangkok over the rest of the country' (cited in Ayal, 1992: 358) and deny 'hinterland locations necessary transport and communication infrastructure benefits,' which then protect the urban polity from competition by hinterland producers (Henderson, 2002: 97). When these forces combine with the chronically

low quality of life in many rural areas, migrants flocked to the 'relative security of the city,' exacerbating Bangkok's population growth (Ginsburg, 1955: 457–458). Compounding the complexity of poverty in Bangkok is how its 'ultra poor' migrants have higher incidences of 'widows as heads of households...and [a] greater burden of chronically ill and disabled persons in the family' (Krongkaew, 2002: 128). Medhi Krongkaew remarks that 'surprisingly, despite the Thai government's large number of social assistance schemes, very few of the ultra poor report receiving any assistance' (Krongkaew, 2002: 128). Krongkaew's pessimism was conveyed at a time when Thaksin had just become prime minister and the author could not foresee positive changes to come as Thaksinomics gradually found traction as a means to generate national wealth.

Some scholars are optimistic about a city's primate status and criticize the use of an oversimplified dichotomy based on an urban/rural divide, a dichotomy that views the primate city in a predator–prey relationship with other smaller cities. Ayal criticizes those who view Bangkok as parasitic for oversimplifying the 'world as...a zero-sum game' (Ayal 1992: 360). For Ayal, an equal distribution of power in Thai society and culture has 'never happened' in Bangkok or Thailand, noting 'what is missing in such presentations' is how 'decisions made by those who hold power, whatever their motivations, have tremendously increased the size of Thailand's national pie' (Ayal, 1992: 360). That all major commercial Thai banks are headquartered in Bangkok reflects 'the capital's dominance in modern Thai economic history' (Kawaura, 2003–2004: 69). London echoes Ayal's sentiments, noting how a parasitic primate city has 'been overstated' (London, 1977: 51). Bangkok, like all primate cities serving as national capitals, is the 'front office' of the country as 'equally Paris is the front office of France' (Jefferson, 1939: 229). Nonetheless for Jefferson, Bangkok expresses 'the nation's mind and soul' more completely than any other city in the country, 'an earmark' of its 'intense nationalism' even though – and for better or worse – Bangkok has always been a city that welcomed the exploits of aristocrats and of the bourgeois, not its laborers (Jefferson, 1939: 229).

Bangkok and its absolute monarchs ushered in dramatic changes for the entire Siamese nation. When the Chakri Dynasty was promulgated in 1782 through King Yodfa Chulaloke (Rama I), Bangkok as the national capital of then Siam would further modernize through two scions mentioned at the outset of this manuscript: Rama IV; and Rama V (Thananithichot, 2011). Rama IV was credited with laying the foundations of modernization while Rama V succeeded in warding off British and French colonialism, meeting European monarchs in Europe, as well as abolishing slavery (Terwiel, 2005; Thananithichot, 2011). By the 1930s, the network monarchy in Bangkok included junior and senior princes, along with nobles, privy councilors, and personal staff. Connors, echoing McCargo (2005) notes how the saint-like status of Bhumibol was 'something he and hundreds in the palace and other agencies have contrived to create' (Connors, 2007: 128). Aided by Sarit Thanarat in the late 1950s, a revival in sacralizing Thai royalism by honoring King Bhumibol followed as Rama IX exhibited his agency by traveling to the hinterland to work with rural communities (Fong, 2009). It is this glorified agency in the long chronology of Rama IX's rule that solidified his legacy, one that for elites who benefitted from their alliance to the monarchic system, served as a political lubricant for working towards the *new* monarchy under Vajiralongkorn (Rama X). Bangkok elites thus appropriated the amalgamation of royalist, Buddhist, and nationalist narratives in a post-death context to construct a nation based on their perceived essence of what it means to be Thai (Fong, 2013). Lynch (2004) thus appropriately reminds us to be mindful of an economic view of the city that ignores the authority possessed by an elite class' grip on traditional cultural representations as it synchronizes with or contests modernity. For Ross King, Bangkok exhibits a variety of urban energies that do position the new to overwhelm the old, a process that behooves us to consider how mourning portraiture employed by Thai elites is designed to allow Bangkokians to transcend the profane clutter of the city's modernity and development, one



Figure 2. Mourning portraits inside the Mahboonkrong Center (left) and at the entrance (right) (photographs by author).

Siam BTS station. It is often visited by tourists and wealthy Thais and contains numerous outlets for high-end fashion, décor, and even automobiles. Indeed, one can actually take an escalator to higher floors to buy a Lamborghini, Lotus, or Rolls Royce, some of the few marques displayed in large glass units for automotive gawkers to view. For King, Siam Paragon was designed to amalgamate global “culture” and “commerce” together, yet the presence of these large portraits during the city’s mourning period temporarily overshadowed the mall’s *raison d’être* of ensuring that visitors’ part with their money to acquire its globalized goods. The colonization of what King describes as Bangkok’s landscape of consumption had an earlier and bloodier iteration when during 2010 the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts contesting perceived government machinations had occupied the area with their supporters, ultimately leading to a bloody government crackdown against them during May 2010 (Fong, 2013). Nonetheless, during the mourning period after Rama IX’s death, political discontents were muted as large portraits of Rama IX adorn the façade of Pathum Wan’s malls in a way that amplified a paternal presence upon the populace.

Figure 2 reveals a collage of two mourning portraits within and without another iconic Pathum Wan mall, Mahboonkrong Center, more popularly referred to as MBK by locals. The left-hand image in Figure 2’s collage shows a large mourning portrait hung inside MBK from its fourth floor, made visible to all patrons crossing the mall’s inner veranda that contain a myriad of escalators allowing patrons access to other levels of the mall. One can get a sense of scale by noting the patron with his back leaning on the handrail. Similarly, the right-hand image in Figure 2 shows a large diorama outside MBK, near its entrance, strategically positioned for passengers disembarking the BTS to view.

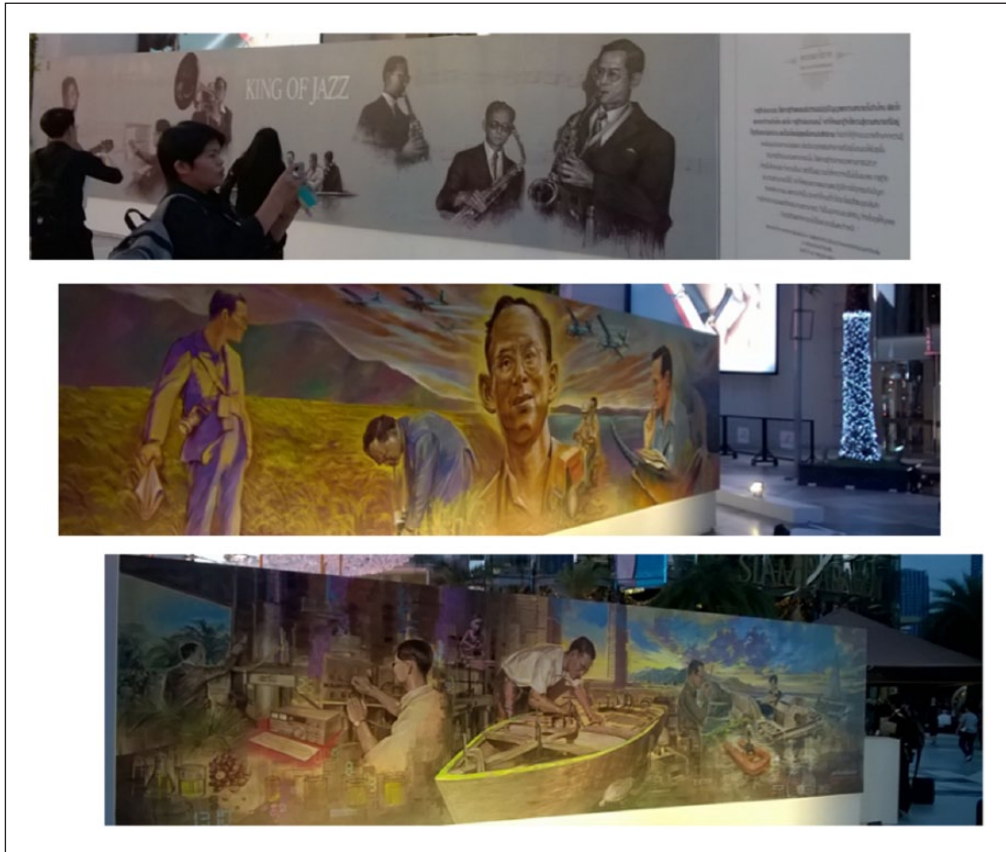


Figure 3. Honoring Rama IX at the quad between Siam Center and Paragon (photographs by author).

As another large mall less than 500 meters away from Siam Paragon as the crow flies, it is a popular attraction, frequently visited by tourists and locals, although it would be the local sellers – configured in their respective stalls to sell goods in a more market-like environment – that accent the MBK environment. Because of MBK’s allowance of raw bartering between seller and buyer, the environment exhibits less hubris for its foreign and local clientele. Built during the early 1980s when a banking crisis affected the country, its owners transformed its focus from developing high-end retail to where the ‘decision to go downmarket’ resulted in the selling of ‘small units to ordinary vendors and shopkeepers’ (King, 2011: 96). This strategy in no way discouraged wealthy patrons, especially those from abroad, from visiting. Indeed, MBK has developed its own inner-market aura that draws many of those who likely visited Paragon and other expensive retail areas such as Siam Center to its environment. For King:

MBK Centre is always crowded and immensely popular. Compared with the clean, clear layouts of Siam Centre and Siam Discovery Centre, MBK Centre is chaotic and muddled – more like the chaos of Siam Square and the sidewalks. Perhaps more ‘Thai’. (King, 2011: 96)

In Figure 3 we see paintings on the quad between the high-end malls of Siam Center and Siam Paragon. These are positioned in a manner reminiscent of character displays seen in the Ayutthayan murals discussed by Gordon and Sirisambhand (2002). The humanity of Rama IX is conveyed at



Figure 4. (Left) A large portrait on the façade of Novotel Hotel; (top right) honoring Rama IX outside the Police Hospital facing Central World; and (bottom right) mourning portrait wrapping around the corner of the Siam Center building (photographs by author).

the level of pedestrian traffic where the populace is at eye level with renderings of Rama IX as a Renaissance man. Indeed, the Thai people are reminded of his worldly talents as a jazz saxophonist (top of Figure 3), as well as being an accomplished sailor and boat-builder (bottom of Figure 3). Perhaps most significantly, Rama IX is seen as the father of the Thai nation. In the central montage of Figure 3 he is depicted overseeing the land and poring over a map, while cloud-seeding airplanes he promoted to end drought conditions in Thailand fly overhead. That the attributes of mourning portraiture conveyed about the late king include a demotic presentation of Rama IX is significant: the vast majority of Thais have been taught to envision Rama IX as the people's king and not merely a figurehead that exists passively in a nation's repository of epithets and symbols.

In Figure 4, we see on the left-hand section a large mourning portrait eleven stories tall on the façade of Bangkok's Novotel Hotel adjacent to the Central World mall. On the top right-hand side, a mourning portrait outside a state-run hospital in Pathum Wan, the Police Hospital can be seen, with the queen's portrait on a smaller scale to the right. Arguably the most unique configuration of Rama IX's portrait can be seen in the bottom right-hand section of Figure 4. Placed on the façade of Siam Center, the portrait wraps around the corner of the building, allowing it to exhibit its presence at different viewing trajectories for a large section of the pedestrian population.

Siam Center, adjacent to Siam Square, the latter of which once housed a variety of shophouses, now offering expensive after-school tutoring centers along with retail and restaurants, is itself always transforming to compete with MBK. However, Siam Center has a much longer history in that it was one of the first shopping venues that engaged in the 'transformation of local patterns' (King, 2011: 141). In a view that is less than charitable, King notes how these aforementioned malls and hotels 'represent a form of cultural erosion,' (King, 2011: 141), a process that

was perhaps obfuscated – if ever so briefly – for the sacralization of Rama IX. Yet lest we forget, members of the royal family are ‘major shareholders of...Siam Piwat which operates the Siam shopping malls on Princess Sirindhorn’s land’ and are thus important facilitators for those working toward monarchy to imagine nation to first emanate from king and faith (Ünaldi, 2014: 385). The Sino–Thai merchants are thus fully aware of the significance in aligning their ethos of capital accumulation as they work toward the monarchy. In what Paul Handley (2006) criticizes as a ‘magic circle of merit,’ these elites seek to acquire *barami* for their future acquisitions of capital, for they are privy to how the former king held:

...180,000 shares in Siam Piwat and the princess holds 4.32 million shares, most of them acquired from the Ministry of Finance and...CIMB Thai Bank...in 2003 and 2005, respectively. This makes the royal family the second biggest shareholder of Siam Piwat. The family thus earns twice: from leasing out land to Siam Piwat and from their shares in the company. (Ünaldi, 2014: 385)

Yet, as can be seen through the ubiquity of portraits in the area, themes of transcendence and reverential immortality dominated the entire mise-en-scène that is Pathum Wan. Rama IX’s death is momentarily circumvented through mourning portraiture and imagery that is not only ‘re-presentation’ but ‘ultimately resurrection’ (Mitchell, 2005: 9), themes that in no way allude to economism of the Pathum Wan.

In the iconography of Pathum Wan after Rama IX’s passing, we see key poses celebrated by Bangkok’s pro-royalists to promote the dynamism of their beloved monarch: ‘the camera, either held in the hands or hanging from the neck’ (Figure 2 and bottom right of Figure 4); and the king ‘poring over the topographical map of the area being visited’ with a ‘bead of sweat on an eyebrow or the tip of the nose’ (left-hand photograph in Figure 4) (Peleggi, 2013: 91). Again, Mitchell’s incisive observation of the power of photography is helpful in that it serves to make images ‘like living organisms; living organisms that have desires (for example, appetites, needs, demands, and drives)’ (Mitchell, 2005: 11). The prevalence of mourning portraiture in the wake of Rama IX’s death, through primarily photography, but paintings as well, suggests that such iconography serves additional functions of sacralizing the former monarch: it creates motifs for a benevolent and sacred nationalism, as discussed by Fong (2009). With some chronological distance from the bloody political 2010 year combined with the expected solemnity befitting a period of mourning, royalists and those working towards the monarchy find cultural safety in the re-legitimation of elite notions of material progress, but as discerned by Ünaldi, ‘only in urban areas through the free market, not through nationwide political interventions and welfare programmes’ (Ünaldi, 2014: 387). As for the rural population, the subtext is that citizens of this class should content themselves with ‘royal charity projects as examples of the monarchy’s philosophy of so-called sufficiency economy’ (Ünaldi, 2014: 387). Such a prescription counters the excitement of being one’s own economic agent in life, a view promoted by supporters of Thaksin and Thaksinomics. Indeed, Thaksin – no fan of the sufficiency economy – preferred to apply ‘socialism in the lower economy, and capitalism in the upper economy’ (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 342). Claudio Soprannetti elaborates upon the aforementioned view: ‘The idea was quite simple: the Thai economy would operate on a dual track, the upper one would follow market liberalization, the lower...would be heavily supported by state interventions’ through the ‘expansion of the welfare state’ (Soprannetti, 2018: 123).

Conclusion

With Bangkok as Thailand’s only major urban center that is exponentially larger and more influential than other cities in the country, the presence of mourning portraiture honoring Rama IX serves

to subdue, if only temporarily, the city's anti-royalist energies where they might exist. With its venues of consumption promoting hyper-materialism throughout the city, but especially in Pathum Wan, mourning portraiture checks on these social forces by resurrecting political iconography to remind Bangkokians that another chapter in Thailand's political history is underway. With cues from the ubiquity of mourning portraiture seen after Rama IX's death, one can indeed theorize about ethnicity (Stengs, 2012) in ways that suggest how Thainess is a cultural construction by elites that amplify nationalism with the sacrality of a monarch that, even in death, was harnessed to teach the people about transcending the detritus of the profane. With such themes carefully contrived and carefully exhibited by the city's Sino-Thai banking class through soft power – which for Gray (1991) is a highly effective means of social control – we begin to see the theoretical weakness of Durkheim's juxtaposition of the sacred and profane as distinct spheres of social life. Like those Thai scholars that have critiqued classical sociologist Max Weber's (1978) erroneous notion that we move in a linear manner from traditional authority based on heritage and the blurring of the natural and supernatural, to rational-legal authority that is secular and bureaucratized (Jackson, 1999: 48; Johnson, 2013: 300; Üaldi, 2014: 380), a parallel critique can be employed against Durkheim's view that the sacred and profane are distinct modes of the lifeworld. Whereas Weber erroneously partitioned history into a dichotomy, Durkheim erroneously divided the social world into two coexisting compartments. Although it is understood that both spheres acknowledged and informed each other, Durkheim's neat dichotomy of the sacred and profane in the period after Rama IX's passing obfuscates economic and financial power plays and public relations by the Sino-Thai elites of the area to protect and legitimate their class interests, with royalist sycophants in the military ensuring the process proceeds smoothly. Thus, mourning portraiture *as figure* inserted into the primate city, the latter of which functions as a political background because of its urban omnipotence, 'becomes a tool for fashioning a "modern, demotic public image"' in ways that re-enchants the 'royal aura' (Peleggi, 2013: 83), and for promoting 'feelings of stability in times of political turbulence and unrest' (Roberts, 2013: 192).

The machinations of Bangkok's Pathum Wan elites aside, the strategy of preserving their class interests through the myriad of mourning portraiture suggests that Durkheim's theory of religiosity can still be salvaged through his view that nationalism and sacrality can be harnessed as 'totems' – objects where people can express and reflect their spiritual beliefs. Rising above the populace, the mourning portraiture presents a mystical asceticism whose purpose 'is to root out from man all the attachment for the profane world that remains in him' (Durkheim, 1912/2008: 40). By uplifting Rama IX into the realm of the sacred, a key Durkheimian condition for beginning the process of supernatural personification and transcendence thus takes place.

Bangkok's Pathum Wan District and its employment of Rama IX's mourning portraiture was able to simultaneously humanize the monarch as well as create a grand narrative of saintliness and holiness in the king in spite of the city's discontents expressed by those who are hostile to monarchy. Although Bangkok emphasizes a benevolent and sacred nationalism, the fact remains that the Thai nation envisioned by Bangkok's elites has yet to remove the 'social placements' of social classes due to the obfuscation of the economism involved in the mourning process (Gordon and Sirisambhand, 2002; Kim, 2013; Reyes, 2003–2004). By providing images for collective reverence *through* death, Bangkok's sacralization of Rama IX has temporarily given pride of place to themes of vulnerability and transcendence, themes that find their analogs in a city that has experience of figurative death and rebirth through 19 military coups, along with economic crises, since absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932. In this regard, Bangkok's reverence of the country's late monarch – for better or worse – found its purpose in Pathum Wan since mourning iconography, as suggested by Mitchell (2005), may not die nor be killed, a wish that finds its analog in

hopes that the new monarch, the primate city of Bangkok, and the country of Thailand will exhibit the same tenacity.

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Notes

1. For Andrew Johnson, this process is contradicted by the practice of the elites themselves, who during the 20th century amalgamated Buddhism, monarchy, and national development to proselytize to Thais 'the inevitable, supernaturally powered, and moral nature of increasing wealth and prosperity, especially for the middle class' (Johnson, 2013: 302).
2. Siam was renamed Thailand on 24 June 1939. It returned to its previous moniker of Siam between 1946 and 1948 before returning to the employment of the Kingdom of Thailand to refer to the Thai state.

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