

Thai Studies and the monarchy

Wednesday 23 January 2008, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2008).

In early January, some four hundred scholars from around the world met in Bangkok for the tenth International Conference on Thai Studies. This academic jamboree takes place every three years. All the usual subjects were on the agenda – Buddhism, weaving, democracy, the history of Ayutthaya, agrarian relations, and Thai arts. But there was also something new and different. Three panels were devoted to discussion of the monarchy. Another two focused on the Sufficiency Economy. And more papers on monarchical topics were scattered around other sessions. Never before has this subject attracted such attention.

Of course, it is odd to have any serious discussion of Thailand past and present without factoring in the monarchy. At previous conferences, the matter has been treated gingerly out of a mixture of deference and fear of legal complications. But the public presence of the monarchy in the life of the nation has expanded steadily over past decades. This is partly the result of the current long and remarkable reign, as reflected in the two massive celebrations of the 60th jubilee and 80th birthday over recent months. It is partly because the idea of the Sufficiency Economy has been placed in the public domain and vigorously promoted as a guide for policy-making that will affect everybody. And it is partly because some figures closely associated with the monarchic institution have had prominent roles in the tense political conflict of the past two years. More and more, the monarchy has become a subject that is impossible to leave out.

But this is still a delicate matter, especially for a meeting held inside Thailand. The organizers came under some pressure over the issue. To their credit, the host institution, Thammasat University, went ahead on grounds that these were legitimate subjects for academic discussion. Still, Special Branch officers attended the sessions (at one point, a floor speaker suggested they should be thanked for their presence), and one chief organizer was interviewed by police until late at night.

The first monarchy panel analysed some things which have created the special character of the current reign. One panelist looked at the unique popular image of the monarch as a Buddhist king, a source of progress and well-being, and as a guide in the difficult and dangerous transition to modernity. A second panelist told how the financial foundations of the monarchy were laid a century ago, and how these investments had a rocky ride in the 1997 financial crisis but had ultimately emerged stronger through careful restructuring. A third panelist traced the development of the Privy Council over sixty years. This advisory body began as a group of mainly royal family members, but expanded into a mixture of security experts, development technocrats, and jurists, reflecting the breadth of the institution's interests. A related paper in another panel examined how the Royal Projects had helped to mould a "mass consciousness" about the nature of the monarchy, and to influence the direction of some national policies.

A second panel focused on the lese majeste law. A legal expert traced the history of the law, showing how its scope had widened over time. A journalist demonstrated how the media played safe and practiced self-censorship, resulting in much more restrictive coverage than that required by law.

In the panels on the Sufficiency Economy, speakers wondered whether the thinking was relevant given the extent to which livelihoods had changed over the past generation, and given the evident enthusiasm for embracing capitalism at all levels of the society.

Collectively, these various contributions demonstrated the immense complexity of the institution. In image, the monarchy is both a traditional Buddhist kingship and a pioneer of modernity. Through its investments, the crown is at the centre of Thailand's growing capitalist economy, while royal theories on development seem designed to shield ordinary people from the same process. The developments over sixty years in law, public image, and institutions like the Privy Council reflect major changes in the meaning of monarchy.

By laying out this complexity, the conference panels quietly made a case for the need to understand the institution better. And through the conduct of the panels, this was shown to be possible. There was no shallow opinionation, no grinding of axes, no flashy posturing. Most of the papers displayed weighty research, balanced argument, and subtle use of language.

At the last of the panels, four very distinguished scholars offered their reactions to Paul Handley's, *The King Never Smiles*. The room was packed, with people standing in every available space, and more in three overflow rooms. The panel was almost buried by the sweaty, airless crush. Even without a word spoken, the atmosphere told of the importance of this moment.

The first speaker said that the role of the monarchy had evidently changed from 1973 onwards, and the book was simply one attempt to catch up with the reality. The second thought the title was silly and the writer's assumptions often too American, but in the end it was a good book that could have been better. The third lamented that Handley seemed to think ritual and symbolism was "a silly idea," but welcomed that the book "challenges the agreement to silence, or the agreement not to disagree." The trouble with repression is that "when silence is enforced for a long time, noise – when it comes – is deafening."

The fourth speaker asked the simple question, "What is all the fuss about?" There were many Thais discussing and analyzing the monarchy, as the conference sessions had shown. Possibly, the panic over the book arose because the author was a foreign journalist, rather than an academic. Banning had been ineffective. Chapters were available in translation on the web. When asked if they had read the book, many Thais present raised their hands. What would happen, the speaker asked, if the book was translated and published in Thai? Possibly, people would find the content so familiar and unremarkable, it would be dismissed as "Nothing new. Ordinary stuff."

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/thaistudies10.htm>