

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAI NATIONALISM: 1910–1925

KOBKUA SUWANNATHAT-PIAN

### General Background

GENERALLY speaking, the development of nationalism in Southeast Asia began slowly after World War I, when it became evident that the colonial powers would not willingly and peacefully surrender the control of the country even to the well-educated native leaders – an attitude contrary to their own philosophy of education and the belief in the equality of man.<sup>1</sup> The economic hard-time which followed the War also accentuated hostile feelings against foreign Asiatics who became symbols of all the causes of economic ills and threats to communal culture and history. During the Second World War, most of these nascent nationalist movements gained much from the defeat of the colonial powers at the hand of the Japanese in term of morale and determination to become master of their own countries. It was only matter of time after the War that the Southeast Asian states, with the exception of Thailand, would regain their national sovereignty and independence.

At a glance, Thailand's case seems somewhat different from the general trend of Southeast Asian nationalist development because she was the only independent state in the region. Yet nationalism in Thailand during the reign of Rama VI (1910–1925) can also be described as a struggle for national sovereignty against Western imperialism. Historically, Thailand appeared different from other Southeast Asian states as she was the only country not being colonised by the West. However in reality Thai sovereignty suffered various encroachments, violations and limitations imposed upon her by the powerful Western nations as clearly shown in the articles of the 1855 Bowring Treaty.<sup>2</sup> From 1855 Thailand lost control of her sovereign rights to tax import and export goods at will in her trading transactions with Western countries. She also lost her judicial sovereignty after granting extra-territorial rights to the colonial powers. And it soon became clear that she was not really entitled to free choice in the handling of her foreign relations. The situation became a farce when by the close of the nineteenth century Britain and France proceeded to decide the fate of Thailand in their famous Anglo-French Treaty of 1897 without consulting Thai leaders. It can be said that by 1910 when the Great King Chulalongkorn passed away, Thailand had only successfully

---

<sup>1</sup> For some opinions on the development of nationalism in Southeast Asia see R. Emerson, L.A. Mills, and V. Thompson, *Government and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, IPR Inquiry Series, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1942; F.R. von der Mehden, *Religion, Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968; and John Bastin and Henry J. Beada, *A History of Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Decolonization*, K-L: Federal Publications, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> See Articles 2, 3 on judicial right; Article 8 on commerce in Sir John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, K-L: OUP, vol 2, 1977, pp. 215–216.

retained the form of her sovereignty while losing a great portion of its substance to the colonial powers.<sup>3</sup> Thailand was officially regarded as a second-rate nation in the international community and must accept the ruling of her "superiors" in the matters concerning foreign relations, economics, commercial and judicial affairs. She was free however to deal with all internal affairs concerning directly her subjects and national development, and relations with other non-Western states which were not parts of any of the Western empires.

So in practice, Thailand was only better off than her neighbours during the colonial time in so far as she was the master of her subjects politically, socially, and economically. This condition was by far falling short of any definition of an independent and sovereign nation. Not surprisingly. Thai anti-colonial sentiment was as strong and effective as other, Southeast Asian colonies during the height of nationalism.

Nationalism in Thailand has gone through 3 stages of development, all of which have left visible effects on modern Thai society. Since the slow awakening of nation-consciousness launched by Chulalongkorn, nationalism has distinctively assumed a leading role in building and strengthening Thailand intermittently from 1910 onwards. For a clear understanding, Thai nationalism can be categorised into 3 stages: the period of spiritual nationalism to unite the people from the lowest to the highest under umbrage of the absolute monarch, namely Rama VI or King Vajiravudh (1910–25); the period of aggressive nationalism and the grandeur of the Thai race under the leadership of Pibunsonggram (1938–45; 1948–57); and the period of crusade nationalism against the threats of communism/left-wingism and as a means to uphold Nation, Religion and King — the embodiment of Thailand's existence as a sovereign state under the paternal dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–62) and under almost all subsequent Thai governments.

This article deals only with the development of the first phase of Thai nationalism which is an attempt to strengthen Thailand and her political system to overcome threats from both within and without the country at the beginning of the 20th century.

### **Vajiravudh and Causes of Nationalism**

When Crown Prince Vajiravudh succeeded to the throne in 1910 he seems to have set his kingly mission on the improvement of the style and the structure of the

---

<sup>3</sup>After the signing of the 1907 Treaty with France, and the 1909 Treaty with England, whereby the two colonial powers conditionally agreed to the abrogation of the extraterritoriality and the commercial privileges after the Thai would have promulgated the Western-modelled legal codification for five years, it appeared that Siam was on par with her Western counterparts. But the process of getting these colonial powers to actually relinquish their privileges took another fifteen years, and a great deal of diplomatic manoeuvring. See B. Oblas, "Siam's Efforts to Revise the Unequal Treaty System in the Sixth Reign 1910–1925", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University Microfilm, Ann Arbor, 1974; and V. Koornpirochana, "Siam in British Foreign Policy 1855–1938: the Acquisition and the Relinquishment of British Extraterritorial Rights", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State Univ., 1972.

Government which, to him, had so far failed to create a national *esprit de corps* so necessary to the creation of a strong, modern, efficient, and respectable Thailand.<sup>4</sup> Vajiravudh believed that his father's reform had not achieved the purpose of national unity since the ruling clique and the common people shared no common physical and spiritual interests and aspirations. This in fact, according to Vajiravudh's analysis of the situation, was the weakness in the process of modernising Thailand. She had become a nation without a coherent spirit to bind all component parts strongly and closely together.

One may well say that Vajiravudh who ascended the throne and assumed the name Rama VI or King Mongkutklao Chao-u-hua, (not to be confused with Mongkut whose name in Thai was King Chomklao Chao-u-hua) adopted this approach mainly because of his hostility towards the administration of the older generation who had enjoyed his father's confidence and trust in the manner he himself could never have claimed. Some of Rama VI's undertakings renders this interpretation credit.<sup>5</sup> For example, in his effort to cultivate nationalist sentiment among his subjects, the King did not look for inspiration from the reign of his illustrious father but dug deeper into Thai history to the time of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279–1300), the time of King Naresuan (1590–1605), and such like for the essence of Thai nationalism. But it would truly be naive to deduce that Vajiravudh's policy of nationalism stemmed directly and solely from his grudges and discontent against Chulalongkorn's senior ministers and advisers.<sup>6</sup>

The roots of Vajiravudh's nationalism went deeper than his personal feelings against the "great age" of which he played no significant part. The King had sincerely come to the conclusion that Siam of 1910 had merely received physical reform such as a new system of administration, the construction of infrastructural amenities, the modernisation of the armed forces and etc., but she still lacked the spirit of co-operation and compassion, most evidently showed in the relationship between the officials and the common people. In such situation Thailand remained weak and ineffective to protect her national interests in the international community. The answer, as Rama VI saw it, lay in the reform of the spirit, that is to say, the cultivation of the true feeling of belonging, of pride in Thai cultural heritage, of readiness to defend national interests and honours if need be—in other words, the realisation of Thai nationalism.

---

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Greene, "King Wachirawut's Policy of Nationalism" in *JSS In Memoriam Phya Anuman Rajadhon*, Tej Bunnag and M. Smithies, eds., Bangkok: Siam Society, 1970, pp. 251–259.

<sup>5</sup>For example, the systematic way in which Rama VI achieved the resignation of the ministers he had inherited in 1910 at the death of Chulalongkorn. In 1910 he accepted the resignation of two ministers, in 1912 four more, 1913 one, 1915 one, and 1920 one. He replaced them with his own men. The resentment Rama VI bore against Prince Damrong, Rama V's most trusted and most powerful minister, as well as his subsequent treatment of the latter, also can be seen as another example in support of this interpretation. See Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam 1892–1915*, K–L: OUP, 1977, pp. 242–249; and Sulaks Sivaraks, *Life and Works of Somdetch Krom Phraya Damrong-rajabhab as Historical Evidence of the Development of Thai Intellect*, Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Thammasart Univ., B.E. 2523, pp. 16–20, (in Thai).

<sup>6</sup>Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, Honolulu: Univ. Press of Hawaii, 1978.

Nationalism also suited Rama VI's political philosophy. A conservative and authoritarian by upbringing, Rama VI saw in nationalism a sure means of strengthening and rationalising the *raison d'être* of the absolute monarchy in Siam, which gradually came under attack by the concepts of democracy brought back from Europe by Thai students.<sup>7</sup> Vajiravudh was a die-hard believer of absolute monarchy and took it upon himself to preserve and defend the system. If the weakness of the post-Chulalongkorn Siam was caused by the absence of spiritual guidance, then the monarchy would provide it in the form of nationalism, which, in turn, would create a real sense of national unity and patriotism among the people, regardless of their status, under the leadership of the reigning monarch. The monarchy could then play the constructive role of moral and patriotic leader, the symbol of the nation. Absolute monarchy would be updated as a coherent part of the modern state of Siam.

Apart from political philosophy of Rama VI, other significant factors which helped the ascendancy of nationalism could be summed up as follow: the disturbing influence of Chinese Nationalist Movement, the Kuo Min-tang, on the Chinese overseas in Siam and other Southeast Asian states; the policy to free Siam from the status of second-rate nation; and the internal situation in Siam before World War I, 1910–14.

Reaction to Chinese Nationalist sentiments: one event at the close of Chulalongkorn's reign which worried Thai leaders a great deal was the General Strike of the Chinese in Bangkok and some towns around it in June 1910.<sup>8</sup> The main reason for this was the new poll-tax imposed on the Chinese community which doubled the old rate and made the Chinese contribution equal to that of the Thai citizen. The Strike aroused a real sense of distrust towards the Chinese, even though it was put down with little difficulty. The effect on Vajiravudh, then the Crown Prince, was tremendous, as later confirmed by his literary works. He saw the Chinese as a threat to Thai security. The fact that this incident was followed hard upon by the rise of Chinese nationalism during the pre-World War years which spread quickly among Chinese overseas in Southeast Asian particularly in Thailand, intensified Rama VI's distrust and convinced him that to overcome this internal subversive element the Thai needed the same kind of nationalist conviction to unite them together as well as to prepare them in readiness for the defence of the nation and the monarchy against all foes.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Political philosophy of Rama VI can be gauged at mainly from his writings such as *The Royal Addresses of King Vajiravudh*, Bangkok: Bamrungnukul Press, B.E. 2470; Sri Ayudhya (Rama VI's nom de plume), "Seizing Power"; Aswabhahu (Rama VI's nom de plume), "Imitation without Thinking"; "Chaos in China"; "Chaos in Russia" and other such like (all works quoted are in Thai). All show the King's aversion and distrust of democracy and republicanism, at the same time as exolling the strong points of absolute monarchy and the necessity of the institution of kingship.

<sup>8</sup>See Pholkul Angkinanda, *The Role of the Chinese in Thailand in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, Bangkok: Prasarnmitr College Press, B.E. 2515, particularly chapter VIII. (in Thai).

<sup>9</sup>Rama VI expresses his distrust of the Chinese in the famous article, "The Jews of the East", which, among other things, portrays the Chinese as foreigners who "want the benefits of the citizen but .. most unwillingly comply with the responsibility of the citizen". It was therefore an urgent task for the Siamese to be united in defence of their national security and survival.

Nationalism among overseas Chinese resulted in Rama VI's departure from the traditional Thai policy concerning the "Chinese question" which had been famous for its stress on assimilation. In 1907 for instance, Chulalongkorn delivered a speech concerning the position of the Chinese in Siam.

"It has always been my policy that the Chinese in Siam should have the same opportunities for labour and profits as given to my own countrymen. I regard them not as foreigners, but ones of the component parts of the Kingdom, participating in its prosperity and advancement",<sup>10</sup>

But the situation had already undergone some changes. Nationalist waves monitored by Sun Yat-sen to overseas Chinese had effected their attitude towards their own country and their adopted home in Thailand. As had been observed, the Chinese in Siam became aggressive and arrogant of their origin while refused to be assimilated. Rama VI therefore found it justifiable to re-assess the Thai policy on Chinese immigrants and to counteract the power of Chinese nationalism with Thai nationalism.

Chinese economic preponderant position in Siam was likewise seen as a part of the Chinese effort to subvert Thai society. It is true that in the reign of Vajiravudh, Siam entered the time of economic hardship of the 1920's which affected world-wide economic structure. It is also true that the over-spending policy of Rama VI resulted in further hardship for Siam; for example, between 1913 and 1925 the expenditures of the country increased by 52.6% per annum while the annual income only increased by 23.6%<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the economic position of the Chinese was stressed as the main cause of economic depression in Siam since Chinese businessmen controlled most of the economic activities and were probably bent to destroy Siam for the glory of China. Consequently economic domination of the Chinese in Siam made it even more imperative for the Thai to become nationalistic and unitedly fight off dangers from the Chinese or others who similarly wanted to subvert and belittle the position of Siam.

Western imperialism and its effects played a significant part in influencing Rama VI of his belief in nationalism as saviour of the Thai nation. Vajiravudh inherited Siam fettered with extra-territorial rights granted to Western nations, and the limitations on her right to collect or fix import-export tariffs. To Vajiravudh who had been educated in the West and well-imbued with the idea of national honours and status, such conditions meant only one thing namely Western low

---

<sup>10</sup> *Chulalongkorn's Speeches B.E. 2417-2453*, Bangkok, B.E. 2510. (in Thai).

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin A. Batson, *Siam's Political Future: Documents from the End of the Absolute Monarchy*, Data Paper no. 96, Southeast Asia Programme, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell Univ. Press, 1974, pp. 1-6.

opinion of Siam as a "civilized" nation, while endurance of such impositions merely showed the Thai acceptance of their so-called barbarism.<sup>12</sup> The submissiveness of Siam to foreign domination must be overcome in order that Siam could regain her sovereignty. Nationalism alone could transfer Thai timidity to foreign powers to an awareness of national pride which would make the Siamese ready to defend as well as to fight for national honours while marking it hard and very costly for any "civilized" country wishing to humiliate Siam. Vajiravudh wished to be assured that the uncertainty of Thai fate as occurred before 1909 would never be repeated if Siam demonstrated to the world her readiness to fight both physically and mentally.

In fact, as we will later see, the preoccupation with external threats from the imperialist powers results in Rama VI adopting, as part of his new defence strategy of Siam, militaristic nationalism whereby the Thai would be trained to fight for their country, and be instilled with the appreciation for discipline, loyalty, and unity—all of which were values inculcated in the life of the military. This together with the updating of armed stockpile would make it costly indeed for any would-be aggressor against Siam.

The domestic factor which clearly frightened the King and hastened him to adopt the policy of nationalism was the abortive Revolution of 1911. The 1911 coup was originated by a group of young army officers led by Captain Laeng Srichandra, and consisted of 130 officers of the average age of 30 years old, who called themselves the Young Turks. The main reasons for this abortive coup stemmed from the dissatisfaction these officers had against the King personally plus their progressive ideas concerning the political system in Siam, a result from the modern education received after the introduction of Chulalongkorn's great reform. On personal level, this group of Young Turks bore grudges against the King since he was the Crown Prince, who in 1909 sided with a group of his pages against a group of soldiers in a quarrel which ended with a public whipping of certain army officers at the insistence of Vajiravudh. The ill-feeling was further nurtured by Vajiravudh's setting up of the Wild Tigers Corps, which was considered by the officers as rival institution to the army and preferred by the King to the army.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the King's system of favouritism caused much discontent among the young officers who concluded that Vajiravudh was incapable of understanding the

---

<sup>12</sup>Walter F. Vella, *Impact of the West on the Government in Thailand*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1955, p. 354; and *Vajiravudh of Thailand: Traditional Monarch and Modern Nationalist*, Bangkok: Thailand Information Centre, p. 14. The sending of Thai troops to fight in World War I on the side of the Alliance can also be seen as an effort to show the world the "civilized" state of Siam as well as an outlet of Vajiravudh's quest for national glory and his own nationalism.

<sup>13</sup>Lieut. Rian Srichandra, and Lieut. Netr Poonvivatana, *The Revolt of R.S. 130*, Bangkok: Charoenwidya Press, B.E. 2517, pp. 41–52, and Thamsook Numnonda, *Revive the Past*, Bangkok: Ruangsilpa Press, B.E. 2522, pp. 11–82.

problems besetting his people as he only surrounded himself with his favourites and put himself at a distance from his subjects.<sup>14</sup> His love for ceremony and theatre likewise was considered unrealistic and damaging to the running of the country. Perhaps most damaging in the eye of the Young Turks was Vajiravudh's excessive devotion to his officials of the Royal Household who, according to the Young Turks, "were eating up the Kingdom". This "courtier danger" was sucking the country dry and caused great suffering to the masses who were mostly farmers. According to one of the official explanations of the causes of the 1911 abortive coup, "... trade and agricultural products suffered because of economic hardships since the close of the last reign. People have been facing a lot of hardships. With the new reign, they have hoped that the King would see to all their sufferings and alleviate them. But until now, there have been no royal guidances on the problem. The King only enjoys himself with various kinds of entertainments".<sup>15</sup> To the Young Turks, at least, Rama VI had fallen short of his royal duties, and time had come for a change for the better.

On the political philosophy, the Young Turks were of the conviction that the absolute monarchy in Thailand was an anachronism, though they themselves were not quite clear as to the best political system to replace it. The majority among them tended to favour a constitutional monarchy with one of the King's younger brothers as king. But again there seemed to be no preparation for the installation of such a system. The Young Turks were ironically ardent nationalists who had no patience for Vajiravudh's "amateur" method of strengthening the nation. This is a clear evidence of the lack of communication between the two groups of leaders who shared similar aspiration for their country. In Rama VI's own words, "The Old Clique regards me too progressive and too haughty to listen to the advices of the elders. The Young Clique thinks I am too old or do not possess sufficient forcefulness."<sup>16</sup>

The decision to stage a coup derived partly from the conviction to safeguard the nation from internal dangers as confirmed by the Young Turks' motto of "give up life for the country."

The attempt to topple the absolute monarchy by the Young Turks under Capt. Dr. Laeng Srichandra, though was nibbed in time when one of the conspirators reported to Prince Pitsanulok, the King's younger brother and the heir-presumptive, on March 1, 1911, had a great repercussion upon the authority.<sup>17</sup> Because the plan was to replace the absolute monarchy with one of the two alternatives: a constitutional monarchy with either Prince Pitsanulok or Prince Boripat as king; or a republic with Prince Rabi as President; Rama VI deeply felt the danger threatening

---

<sup>14</sup>For example see "Lord of the Chamber of King Vajiravudh" in Lawan Chotamara, *Rama VI's First Love*, Bangkok: Duangkamol Press, B.E. 2523.

<sup>15</sup>Phraya Wisudhsuriyasakdi, *senabodi* of the Ministry of Education to Rama VI, March 4, 1911.

<sup>16</sup>Rama VI to Phraya Thep-orajun, Phraya Uthaimontri, and Phraya Dharmasukraj, June 6, 1912.

<sup>17</sup>Thamsook Numnonda, *op. cit.* pp. 18–21.

the throne and the political system he so strongly wished to perpetuate, at least during his lifetime. Apart from his literary works against the constitutional and republic (socialist) rule, the King launched his nationalist programme to counteract the spreading of these "devious" political systems which went against Thai traditions and customs. Nationalism under the absolute monarchy alone would save the nation and strengthen Siam physically and mentally.

Moreover, to pacify the army discontent and unify the country under the nationalist theme. Vajiravudh launched a programme in support of the forces through the formation of a voluntary association to promote the army of Siam, which concentrated on the raising of funds to buy heavy artillery, man-of-war, etc. for the forces. The King also expanded the forces by setting up the Ministry of Marine, and an army aviation corps. The forces were fast drawn into the King's programme of nationalism under the absolute monarch, and their attention was diverted from the political social, and economic problems which the Palace had failed to solve and focussed on the problems of national survival as a respectable and dignified country.

#### **Methods used to achieve the objectives**

Throughout the 15 years of his reign, Vajiravudh pursued the course of nationalism relentlessly. Embodied in his programme of upgrading Siam physically and spiritually were various projects. Important among them were the Wild Tigers Corps; the Boy Scouts; the literary propaganda on the biggest scale so far engaged by the Government; the strengthening of the forces while making them loyal to the Crown; and other minor means to instill nationalism into the life of the people such as nationalistic slogans, the use of surname, and the cultivation of consciousness of an ordinary man concerning his "chati-nation" etc.

All these projects were planned to achieve a kind of nationalism which would strengthen the position of the Crown – the absolute monarchy – namely the militaristic nationalism under the active leadership of the King. To Vajiravudh, only the military discipline and preparedness could move the whole nation against threats from within and without, while nationalism itself provided the guiding spirit as to the righteousness of their cause. Every Thai must learn to behave like a soldier-citizen i.e. loyal to the monarch, the symbol of the national sovereignty, brave and ready to fight in defence of valuable national heritage at all times obedient to order without question, and united against all foes in upholding their "nation, religion, King".

**The Wild Tigers Corps (Sua Pa) and the Boy Scouts Movements:** both were launched as instruments through which Vajiravudh would reach the civilian sector of his subjects and recruit them into these para-military organisations, so that they would be trained to be soldiers-citizens. Through the bond of *esprit de corps* and devotion to the King and country, Thai subjects would be united under a nationalist king, and thus bridge the big gap left in the great reform of King Chulalongkorn.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>,"Sua Pa-Luk Sua or the People's Army of Rama VI" in Lawan Chotamara, op. cit. pp. 99–110; and Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, op. cit. pp. 27–36.



The Wild Tigers Corps was set up in May 1, 1911. The name was so selected because it connoted the historical meaning of the former-day frontiersmen who kept watch over the safety of the state along the border. The new Sua Pa would invoke this nationalist spirit among the civilians who had joined the Movement, and spurred them on to cooperate with the military to ensure the welfare of the country. Vajiravudh also harboured desire to stamp his personal rule over the senior ministers and royal members who had exerted tremendous prestige under Chulalongkorn, such as Prince Damrong, and bring them under his own authority. The Wild Tigers Corps was indirectly the young monarch's way of establishing his own authority above well-known and capable personalities over whom probably under the existing system Vajiravudh might not otherwise have a chance to overshadow. The Wild Tigers Corps acted as both an instrument of implementing the King's policy of nationalism as the logical conclusion to Chulalongkorn's reform in order to uphold the absolute monarchy in Siam, and as an evidence of the Young King's frustration against his political inheritance from his illustrious father.

The Boy Scout Movement was set up in July 1911 as a branch of the Wild Tigers Corps. Its main function was to instill the sense of nationalism pride, loyalty to and readiness in making sacrifices for King and Country among Thai youths so they would understand their responsibilities and grow to become patriotic. The international theme of the Boy Scouts Movement of performing good and helpful deeds in a member's daily life was only maintained as a second theme. The Movement was well-organised and popular among youths of schooling age so much so that even after the reign of Rama VI, it was allowed to continue and eventually was absorbed into the secondary school extra-curriculum for the practical training of Thai youths to become responsible members of society.<sup>19</sup>

**Programmes building up militaristic nationalism:** though Rama VI could not claim a credit for launching the military into the political world, he must be credited for introducing militaristic nationalism into the Thai society and make it the symbol of Thai national pride. Related closely to militaristic nationalism was the King's ardent desire to safeguard the supreme position of the absolute monarchy. Like his father before him, Vajiravudh realised the effectiveness of the military in defence of the Crown against internal and external foes. A nationalist monarch needed the absolute loyalty and readiness of the forces to protect his position and to ensure the survival of the nation. So to Vajiravudh national survival and nationalist absolute monarch were one and interchangeable. The King thus concluded that only the nationalist force which was well-equipped and with credibility of its fighting ability could perform this heavy duty. Having created a para-military organisation imbued with nationalistic sense of duty to its King and Country, Vajiravudh now concentrated on creating a nationalist army to uphold national survival and the system of absolute monarchy, through various royal-sponsored programmes such as the undertaking to equip Thai forces with modern weapons during 1912–20. As result, by 1925, even though Thai economic position was seriously threatened through the overspending budgets of Rama VI, Siam could boast its possession of the relatively well-equipped army, navy, and a flying unit of the army, as well as herself being "one of the finest aviations camps in the world".

---

<sup>19</sup>Vella, *ibid*, pp. 50–52.

It seems doubtful however whether Vajiravudh was successful in creating nationalist spirit through military virtues of discipline, loyalty and unity. What appears certain was the emergence of the military as national saviour ready to act as champions of the nation in time of political "hardships", and to run the country in the name of national survival, exclusive of others' claims to share this privilege.<sup>20</sup> Vajiravudh's military nationalism made certain the ascendancy of the military to the governing of the country. Since nationalism and the military could not be separated, the latter automatically assumed the monopoly of being the real source of political power, once the absolute monarchy had been overthrown. Needless to say, such claim has become detrimental to the development of democracy in Siam.

**Nationalistic Literature:** Vajiravudh made use of his literary talent in propagating nationalism to the masses, while attacking and condemning other political systems that threatened the position of the absolute monarch as "anti-nationalist", "traitor" or "unpatriotic". The King was a prolific writer who devoted his talent and time promoting nationalism, particularly after the 1911 abortive coup. Some of his works are for example books on *Chaos in China*, *Chaos in Russia*, *Copy-catism*, *The Jews of the East*, and *True Nationalism*; or articles on "Thailand Wake Up", "Mud on the Wheel". In sum his political literature emphasizes the evil of other political systems, in particular the parliamentary system, and the republic or socialist system with vivid evidences from the experience of China under the Kuo Min-tang, Turkey under the Young Turks, and Russia under the Bolsheviks. Vajiravudh stressed that the parliamentary system went against Thai customs and tradition which revered the elders and the wise, while regarding advertisement of one's virtues a great sin. The King also was convinced that the absolute monarchy was best for Siam as it had been engraved and accepted by the people as part of national heritage. According to Vajiravudh's argument, the king was the primary strength of the nation, the symbol of national sovereignty which must be revered, loved and defended at all cost.

It stands as a great credit to Vajiravudh that nearly all his nationalistic literature and slogans are still playing leading propaganda role in the drive to keep alive the mass commitment to nationalism in Thailand today.

Outstanding among Vajiravudh's literary works was the use of history as an effective method of cultivating the sense of national pride and belonging among the people. The King went back into the early history of the glorious times of the legendary Phra Ruang, who later became the first king of Sukhothai in the early thirteenth century, and King Naresuan, the Liberator of Siam from Burmese suzerainty in the 16th century, for the nationalistic inspiration for the modern Siam. Several of Vajiravudh's writings emphasized the great achievements of such periods, and the fine fighting spirit of the Thai in time of hardship and great danger, as models to be followed by the twentieth century Thai.

The King also coined up the proper slogan of "Chati, Sasana, and Phra Maha Kasatriya" which summed up Thai most valued institutions. "Chati" means the nation with the emphasis on the people who live in it and thus signifies the well-

---

<sup>20</sup>See the various complaints of those participating in the abortive coup of R.S. 130 in *Revolt of the R.S. 130*, op. cit., pp. 50-78.

being of all which must be preserved; "Sasana" means religion i.e. the Hinayana Buddhism which provided the spiritual guidance and resilience in face of all hardships through the strong bond of faith and compassion; this strong bond of faith became heightened when it was stressed that Siam was the last stronghold of the Hinayana Buddhism, its destruction in Siam would also mean the end of the faith, a happening which any devout follower in Siam could never accept; "Phra Maha Kasatriya" is the king who represents the sovereignty of the country, the heart of the nation without which the nation would crumble and disappear. Vajiravudh's political slogan was for the total loyalty of the people to the king, the embodiment of themselves, who would protect "chati", "sasana" and the institution of kingship.

There were literary campaigns against the anti-nationalist movements, e.g. the Chinese in Siam and the progressives. The campaigns aimed at eliminating the dangers which threatened the absolute monarchy, while arousing the Thai to live up to their national obligations. In this, the campaigns were fruitful. The Thai became aware of the danger from the Chinese, the mistrust of the Chinese was later capitalised by Pibun with great success. Educated Thai likewise supported the King in his efforts to get rid of Siam's second-rate status. For the common people, even of the present-day Thailand, criticism of the Crown amounted to a case of *lese-majeste* and those who dared to question the wisdom of the king were but traitors and foreign agents.

In addition to the literary campaigns was the popularisation of the old ceremonies and customs such as the coronation, the Loy Kratong, and the Songgran festivals. Modern symbols of a nation were likewise introduced such as the use of the national flag, the Trairong with the five stripes of red, white, and blue which signify Chati, Sasana, and Phra Maha Kasatriya; the use of family name, so a man can be traced through his ancestral lineage and strive to live up to the illustrious name or better it by his/her achievement. Vajiravudh created a sense of pride into the use of family name by taking upon himself to bestow surnames to a great number of families whose ancestors had served the Crown one way or the other. There were also announcements on public and patriotic holidays such as the Chakkri Day, the Chulalongkorn Day, the Reigning King's Birthday etc. Coupled with this were the establishment of the Department of Fine Arts, and the setting up of the School of Arts and Crafts in Wat Ratchaburana, for the awakening of the sense of national heritage and appreciation of the nation's high culture.

## Assessment

It can be clearly said that Vajiravudh's efforts to set-up a nationalist Siam as an answer to the widening spiritual gap left by Chulalongkorn's modernisation reform between the officials and the people on the one hand, and between military officers and the civil servants on the other, failed miserably to attain its immediate goal. After the King passed away in 1925, his main programmes for instilling nationalism e.g. the Wild Tigers Corps were abolished by his successor, Prajadhipok or Rama VII, together with other departments in charge of traditional and modern dramas, dances and entertainments.<sup>21</sup> This was done without any protest from the

---

<sup>21</sup> One of the main reasons for the abolition of these departments, apart from political expediency, is the necessity of the economic hardship. See Chai-Anant Samutvanich, Sethaporn Kusripitaksa, and Sawaeng Ratanamongkolmas, eds., *Political Animal*, Bangkok: Thai Wattana-panich, B.E. 2514, pp. 8–11 (in Thai).

supporters of Vajiravudh, one explanation for the failure of the King's nationalist campaigns to achieve his immediate objectives lies with the King himself. It was evident that Vajiravudh's reign was regarded by his contemporaries as a sham. Prince Damrong described the state of the throne as a "deplorable inheritance".<sup>22</sup> Many foreign experts likewise reported similar sentiments. For example, Sir Edward Cook, the Financial Adviser, reported the near bankruptcy state of Siam. The King's inefficiency in administration and finance led to the royal expenditures and military spending at all time high, in spite of the worldwide economic crisis.<sup>23</sup> Compared with the royal expenditures of Japan, Netherlands, Norway which were around 0.13% to 0.33% of the national budget, Siam in Vajiravudh's time spent 10.7% on royal expenditures and, according to Rama VII, "too much on the Defence Forces". It is understandable why the programmes to arouse nationalism on the whole failed to bridge the mental gap among various groups of people. To most it seemed the King did not care for their welfare as much as he did for his "toys", at the expense of the rest. The Wild Tigers Corps, the Boy Scouts and the forces as instruments to instill nationalism failed completely because they were only associated with the favoured sections of the Thai community during Rama VI's time, and were remote from the life of the common people. Even among these favoured sections, there existed rivalries, distrust, and disunity, e.g. between the courtiers and the rest of the civil servants; between the Wild Tigers Corps and the forces; between the King's favourites and the rest. The army which always regarded the Tiger Corps as a threat to its power and position was delighted to see it abolished. The Wild Tigers themselves who were politically compelled to join the Corps were likewise glad to be out of it. In this situation, the instillation of nationalism could not but fail.

Nevertheless, it is obvious also that Vajiravudh was rather successful in arousing the nationalist sentiment among his people, even though it did not reach the level he had so desired, which creates a long-lasting effect on the Thai as a whole. Through his literary works Vajiravudh's idea of nationalism was slowly absorbed by his subjects after his death. This dormant consciousness of nationalism was effectively awoken by Pibun and his associates in the 30's and 40's. Together with Vajiravudh's symbols of national honour, pride, and sense of belonging such as the national flag, historical plays, surname, etc. they keep alive nationalism until the present, a nationalism which does not really concentrate on loyalty to an absolute monarch, but to "Nation, Religion, and King" as upheld by the Thai Forces to-day.

When all is said and done, Vajiravudh's place in Thai history as the pioneer and the cultivator of Thai nationalism cannot be denied. When a modern Thai thinks of Thai nationalism, he cannot fail to think of Rama VI's immortal poem of the "Sayammanusati", the essence of Vajiravudh's idea on nationalism.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Batson, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>23</sup>National Archives, Paper of Prince Damrong, 37/35; and Report of the Financial Adviser on the Budget of the Kingdom of Siam for the Year B.E. 2469.

<sup>24</sup>The essence of the poem can be here summarised: as long as Siam staunchly stands, the Thai people will that long exist; but if ever Siam is ruined, how can the Thai survive? We will all be perished, and so will the Thai race.

\*\*This article has been presented at the department seminar in October, 1981.