

The Representation of Elephants in Eastern Culture

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Abstract

This research is aimed at creating a body of work that communicates, in digital and video imagery, key issues around the representation of elephants. To develop this work I will investigate the changing role of the elephant in Thai culture both in historic and contemporary terms and explore the impact of imported ideas on the process of change. A significant corollary interest in this research is the problem of representation and simulation in contemporary life and the impact it has on perception. My art work is a fabricated simulation created from material images. The animal images are transformed into illusions and explore how humans experience nature through simulation. In this way I engage with different kinds of representation for their specific forms and effects.

Keywords : representation, elephants, and contemporary images.

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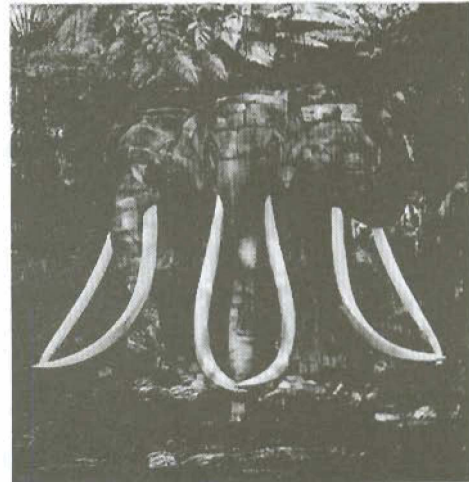


Figure 1. Rattapol Chaiyarat, *Living Monument No.3 (The Ultimate Power)*. 2007. Digital image printed on inkjet silk fabric, L20 x 120cm.

The image *Living Monument No.3 (The Ultimate Power)* is inspired by Erawan, the heavenly elephant, mount of Indra, the king of the gods. In Hindu mythology, Erawan is sometimes shown as a three or thirty-three headed elephant, with enormous body, one of the most powerful and complex creatures in the world of myths (figure 1).

The three tusks are shown standing close together, with their trunks in different positions from curled back, to rising up high. All of the elephants have exceptionally long tusks, and they point in different directions.

The presence of these three pairs of identical huge tusks side by side create the impression of a super powerful animal. Yet, unlike Erawan, these animals do not have the protection of the gods and so the ivory would in fact make them very vulnerable in a world that values ivory more than the elephant



themselves. Ironically, the ultimate value always comes after the death of the animals. Tusks represent physical power, leadership, wisdom, and long life but as ivory they represent luxury and refinement. Ivory is only possible through the taking of animal life.

The subtitle for the work, *The Ultimate Power* stems from the idea that these powerful creatures have been restrained by human culture; the ultimate power in spite of their might and majesty rests with the humans. These elephants have no other choice but to live with us, in the end only humans can overpower them, their bodies are tied up with human way of life; but in this very ownership, the elephant asserts a paradoxical symbolic power, which is the dense fabric of myths, religion, tradition, and culture. It is as if the creatures cannot help themselves to escape. They are struggling defencelessly in the complex human world.

To develop this work I will investigate the changing role of the elephant in Thai culture both in historic and contemporary terms and explore the impact of imported ideas on the process of change. A significant corollary interest in this research is the problem of representation and simulation in contemporary life and the impact it has on perception.

1. Thai Domesticated Elephants

The Asian elephant is, of course, part of the animal kingdom limited by nature, but it is also a wonderful symbol of power, charisma and status (figure 2). Asian elephants have participated in Thai culture and played an important role for a very long time. In Thailand, this animal, now domesticated, is considered as a very important animal and a symbol of the nation. Elephants hold a revered place in Thai society, because of their symbolic importance to monarchs, religion, and the nation as a whole. This

complexity both in physical and symbolic terms is key to my research into contemporary



Figure 2. Thai domesticated elephants, 2008.

representation and therefore it is necessary here to explore the historical background and significance to the current understanding of the elephant.

In the past elephants were a key to military success - both in mass battles, and in the elephant fight. Today, however, with the rapid pace of change in society, and the rapid decrease of the Thai elephant population, the strong bond between the Thai people and elephants has started to crumble.

The earliest record detailing the significance of elephants is a Sukhothai stone inscription (Sukhothai period, 1238-1438).¹ According to the inscription, King Ramkhamhang the Great (1277-1298) duelled with his enemy while riding on an elephant back. The elephants were heavily armoured vehicles on the battlefield and played a significant role in the victory over Khun Sam Chon (King of Chod).² Elephants also

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand.

<<http://www.mfa.go.th/web/106.php>> 6/03/2008

² *A New Hope for Elephant Conservation*. The National Elephant Institute, (Forest Industry Organization, Thailand, 2002), 25.



had very important roles to play during peacetime. The king would occasionally ride through the city for ceremonial events on his decorated white elephant. The inscription on the stone tells us that,

On the day of the new moon and on that full moon the King caparisoned the white elephant, called Ruchasri, with straps and tassels and, naturally, with gold for its ... right tusks. King Ramkhamhang mounted it and rode it to worship Phra ... at Aranyik and then back.³

The same stone records the fact that there was an important trade in Elephants. The inscription includes information about people in the cities trading freely in elephants, horses, silver and gold, in both battlefield and in peace, elephants, as illustrated by this Sukhothai stone were symbols of power and wealth and that this singular position accorded to an animal invested them with charisma that has been part of their status ever since.

In the Ayutthaya Period (1350-1767) when Ayutthaya was the capital, records suggest that in Siam and throughout Southeast Asia regions, elephants were regarded as considerably more important than all other animals.⁴ This is demonstrated by the tradition of offering elephants with a unique appearance to the king. The Grand Palace, which still stands today, has a great number of elephant stalls as testament to the fact that these animals played a key role in Palace life. Sometimes the king would mount a white elephant and receive his people, or to proceed

to religious ceremonies.⁵

During the reign of Phra Thianracha (1529-1552), seventeenth king of Siam, there were seven white elephants belonging to the Imperial court.⁶ This was widely known across many regions of Asia and greatly enhanced the reputation of the King. King Hongswadee (the King of Pegu, 1531-1550) knew about these elephants and requested that the King of Siam give two or three of these very special white elephants. Without hesitation Phra Thianracha refused the royal request. King Hongswadee considered this as sufficient justification to declare war on Siam.⁷ The two kingdoms did in fact go to war and Phra Thianracha lost his beloved wife Queen Suriyothai, who died protecting her husband in the battlefield while riding on the back of an elephant.

The high status of white elephants in these regions is clearly indicated by this event and is reinforced by the imagery, which undoubtedly shows them as extremely powerful and desirable. There were several reasons surrounding these circumstances. King Ramkhamhang of Sukhothai described the white elephant as:

An elephant of beautiful colour: hair, nails, and eyes are white...the colour of skin is that of tatus..Acquired as property by the power of the king for his

³ H.R.H. Prince Wan Waithayakon Krommun Naradhip Bongsprabandh, translated ANCIENT STONE INSCRIPTIONS OF SUKHOTHAI, 1891-1976<<http://www.usmta.com/history-3.htm>>06/03/2008

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand. <<http://www.mfa.go.th/web/106.php>> 6/03/2008

⁵ *A New Hope for Elephant Conservation*. The National Elephant Institute. (Forest Industry Organization, Thailand), 26

⁶ Jeremias van Vliet, 1602-1663, *The short history of the kings of Siam* / translated by Leonard Andaya from a transcription by Miriam J. Verkuil-van den Berg ; edited by David K. Wyatt. (Bangkok : Siam Society, 1975), 72.

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica Article, Tabinshwehti <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9070835/Tabinshwehti>>23/03/08



service...A source of power of attraction
of rain...⁸

This idea that the white elephant was also associated with good rainfall was highly valued because of the Siam's reliance on its agriculture. More rain meant more productivity, which therefore attracted wealth, prosperity, strength and authority to the kingdom.

During this Ayutthaya period there was a centralization of the king's political power through symbolic and ideological concepts. The structure was influenced by Khmer-Hindu beliefs about the god-king even though Siam was a Buddhist kingdom like those of Sukhothai and kingdom of Pegu in southern Myanmar.⁹ The white elephants provided the perfect symbol of power for the king because it symbolized the power of god that attracted rain.

There is a "highly specialized systems of classification" evident in the manuscripts which illustrate the classification of royal elephants.¹⁰ Diverse types of elephants are described extensively and drawings detail the specific characteristics of royal elephants. In general, these manuscripts are called *Gaja-Laksana*. A particularly line example was made in 1748 in the reign of Phra Chao Yu Hua Boromgot (1732-58) in the late Ayutthaya period (1350-1767). It is now in the collection of the National Library of Thailand in Bangkok. It was translated and published

by the Library in 2003.¹¹ This elephant manual describes and illustrates the actual types of elephant divided into four families. Each family is associated and named after a god who is credited with creating them, so the families are called Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, and Agni.

Each family is then divided into various groups. This particular manual contains seventy-three groups of sacred royal elephants and auspicious elephants including thirty-eight groups which have undesirable characteristics. According to the legend, a god creates each particular auspicious elephant, therefore the elephant will bring fortune to the person (and the country) who possesses the elephant. For example, an Elephant from *Brahma* [will] "bring wealth and knowledge to the king," *Shiva's* bestow "royal properties and power," *Vishnu's* give rain. "fertility the nature* and victory over enemies. Those from Agni grant "fertility in animals" and prevent "war and inauspicious events."¹²

The manuscript describes how one particular type of elephant called *Nopasuban*, comes from the family of the god Agni and has all nine significant body parts touching the ground; feet, trunk, tusks, tail, and genitals (figure 3). It is considered to be an auspicious elephant.

Another example from a Thai manuscript written in 1816 describes one particular type of elephant that was suitable to use in war. There are three kinds of elephants called *Chang Niam* (figure

⁸ Pamela York Taylor, *Beasts, birds, and blossoms in Thai art*, (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 48.

⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica Article, *The Ayutthayan period, 1351-1767* Thailand Page 61 of 76 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52675/Thailand>>23/03/08

¹⁰ Philip Anthony Stott, *Nature and Man in South East Asia*. (Published by London : School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1978), 136.

¹¹ Pimpran Pibulwongcharoen, *Gaja-Laksana*, (The fine Arts Department. 2003), 8.

¹² Eric Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant, The Ties that Bind Elephants and Humans*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2006), 99.



4), in this group, there is the Hatsadin. The manuscript text then goes on to explain that one of this group is named *Manicakraracha*. It is short in all relevant parts of the body. The tusks are white, their length being two finger joints, not extending beyond the lower corner of the mouth. It is a bold fighter and will give victory whenever used in royal warfare.¹³

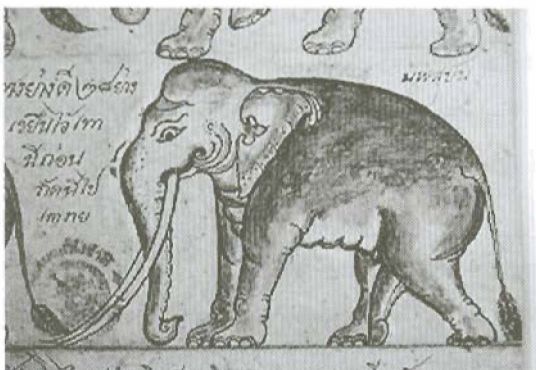


Figure 3. *Nopasuban, Phra Samud Tamra Gaja Laksana. The National Library of Thailand.*

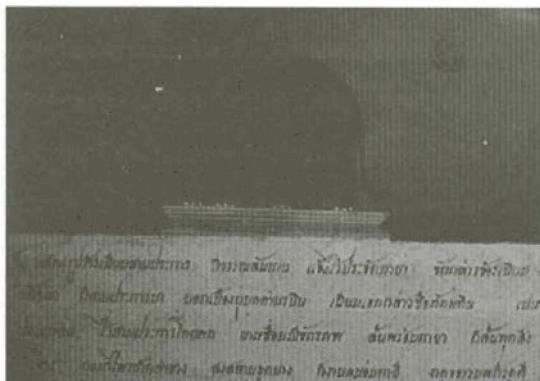


Figure 4. *Manicakraracha from Chang Ton Sat mongkol heng Phra Chakraspat, Fine Art Department, Thailand, 1996.*

The descriptions and illustrations from the manuscripts suggest that the appearance and behaviour of the elephants have been observed,

studied, and classified according to cultural and social circumstances. The information and knowledge about elephants became very significant. The elephants were not only employed to strengthen symbolic power of the kingdom but they were also used to serve the military's physical power. Due to the fact that some elephants had to be used in the royal warfare, they were involved in very serious situations. The animals, which were suitable for war and thought to ensure victory, needed to be clearly identified to distinguish them from their peers. Elephant battles probably originated in India thousands of years ago and the tradition grew throughout the Southeast Asian regions. The knowledge contained in the manuscripts may have originated there too.

Even though Indian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) can be found throughout Sri Lanka, mainland India, Bangladesh, Indochina and parts of Indonesia those in Thailand appear to be slightly different from their counterparts in India which are taller and thinner." The original elephant manuscripts from India might not match the appearance of the elephants of the Siam kingdom. Its neighbouring kingdoms such as Burma, Lam and Cambodia also have their own elephant manuscripts. Centuries ago the Siamese elephant population was very healthy, and so it is possible that elephant manuscripts developed independently in Siam to classify the elephants for religious, economic and political purposes. One particular type of elephant became extremely desirable and was reserved exclusively for royalty. The animal symbolically enhanced the king's political power and wealth. Once an elephant

¹³ Stott, *Nature and Man in South East Asia*, 137

¹⁴ Richard Liar, *A Golden Souvenir of The Elephant in Thai Life*, (Hong Kong: Pacific Rim, 2003), 13.



achieved this status, which had to be confirmed after careful examination by an expert, it was then given the royal title *Cho Fa* which is equal to a prince or princess and was treated as if it too were royal.

It had been estimated that in the 18th century, there were more than 200,000 elephants in Siam.¹⁶ The elephants had been captured and carefully selected, some because of their distinctive appearance were offered to the king as mount elephants, war elephants, *Chang Samkhan* or *Chang Pheuak* including the albino elephant. In general *Chang Thon*, the white elephants or *Chang Pheuak* were the most highly valued as has been discussed above in relation to the manuscript *Gaja-Laksana*. The lower grade elephants were often trained as working elephants and then exported to neighbouring countries. Some elephants were kept and used for transportation, and the rest were released back to the wild.

Modern Thai tradition informs the images of elephants ensuring they are not only highly respected but also appreciated aesthetically. Thai tradition, as has been demonstrated above, granted them high status ensuring that the elephants were end remain to this day, culturally significant. Most significant of all, certainly, is the white elephant, because it is a rare animal judged fit only for "royal duties."¹⁶



Figure 5. The red flag with a white elephant.

From 1817 the white elephant was the featured symbol of the national flag of Siam, the flag had strengthen Siam's reputation as *The Land of The White Elephant* (figure 5).¹⁷ Siam's flag was changed to the tri-colour stripe flag in early 20th century.

2. Elephants and Religions

In Hindu and Buddhist mythology there are many stories connecting white elephants with good rainfalls. The king of the gods, Indra, is the god of rain and thunder and a god of war, a symbol of bravery and strength.

The 'king's clouds', or white elephants, guarantee rain for the kingdom. The most important function of the white elephants is therefore to 'attract their celestial relatives, the clouds, the heavenly elephants. Kings kept white elephants for the welfare of their subjects, to ensure the rains necessary prosperity.'¹⁸

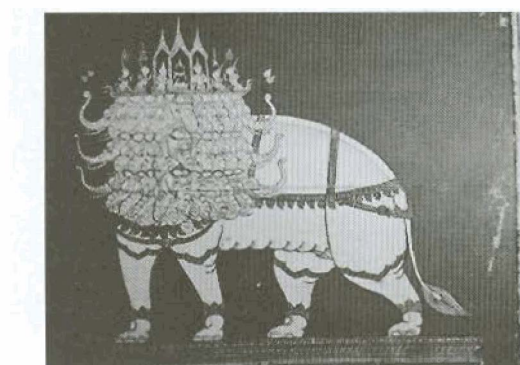


Figure 6. Erawan, In Hindu mythology, Erawan is sometimes shown as a three or thirty-three headed elephant.

¹⁷ Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant*, 98-113.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Beasts, birds, and blossoms in Thai art*, 49.



According to a Hindu creation myth called 'Churning the sea of milk' a white elephant emerges as one of the special treasures:

The gods and the demons organized to work together in an effort to produce *amrita* which grants Immortality, they wrapped the mystical serpent *Vasuki*, also called *Ananta* (endless one) around *Mount Meru*. They took turns, pulling an opposite ends of the great serpent, the gods at the tail and the demons at the head, created giant waves from which many incredible treasures arose. *Surabhi*, the cow of plenty, *Uchchaisravas* the white horse, a poison, *Dhanwantari*, the physician of the gods, the *Amrita*, *Erawan*, a beautiful white elephant.¹⁹

The god of rain, *Indra* saw *Erawan*, and chose the white elephant for his mount. When *Indra* was riding *Erawan*, he resides on a throne of storm clouds. Like *Indra* his master, *Erawan* has the ability to cause rain. *Airavata* is the Sanskrit name for *Erawan*, but it also means a rainbow and a type of lightning. Both are demonstrations of thunderstorms and rain.²⁰ Legend has it that *Erawan* assists in the process of making rain (figure 6).

He stretches his trunk back down to the watery underworld, sucks up its water, and sprays them into the clouds so then *Indra* can make them fall as rain. Thus the great sea elephant joins heaven and hell, or rather turn the latter into the former, and make life possible on the earth that lies between them.²¹

Similarly in Buddhist mythology, *Vessantara*, a prince, gave away the most precious ownership of

the kingdom, the white elephant, "to relieve a drought-plagued neighbour."²² One of the fundamental practices of Buddhism is giving and so the story of *Vessantara's* donation is used to promote the virtue of generosity. In granting his neighbour the white elephant, *Vessantara* also symbolically gives away the wealth and prosperity of the kingdom.

According to Buddhist history, *Manjusri* is a Bodhisattva and a god of wisdom. The term Bodhisattva is derived from *Bodhi*, meaning "intelligence," and *Sattva*, meaning 'reality, vigour, and goodness,' hence it is used for a disciple who has adopted Buddhist doctrine with great vigour.²³ Bodhisattvas are believed to be incarnations of Buddha who appeared to earth in different forms and the six-tusked white elephant is one of Buddha's animal incarnations.

With six tusk the elephant displays its power.

For thousand of years it is loyal to its master.

LI CH'IAO, *T'ang dynasty*.²⁴

A six tusked elephant often appeared in Buddhist paintings and sculptures, sometimes this magnificent animal has three heads with a white body. The six incredible tusks are symbols of the six temptations, which are the five mortal senses, and the human will. There are several stories regarding the origin of the fabulous animal, all related to the lord

¹⁹ *Churning of the milky ocean*, Encyclopedia Britannica Article < <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9082582/churning-of-the-milky-ocean> > 18/03/08

²⁰ Taylor, *Beasts, birds, and blossoms in Thai art*, 50.

²¹ Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant*, 80

²² Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant*, 100.

²³ Katherine M. Ball, *Decorative motives of Oriental art*. (New York : Hacker Art Books, 1969), 77.

²⁴ Ball, *Decorative motives of Oriental art*, 77.



Buddha; one story believed that Buddha came to earth six times in the form of a white elephant. Another story said that before the birth of Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha-to-be, his mother Queen Maya dreamt of a divine Bodhisattva in the form of a white elephant with six tusks entering her side, she then became pregnant.

in *Chhadanta Jataka*, the principal legend regarding the six tusked elephant, the Buddha is incarnated in the form of the six tusked white elephant, which is the leader of a herd of eight thousand royal elephants. By chance he mistreated one of his elephant wives who vows and prays that in her next life she might be reborn to a higher position that would grant her authority to punish her husband the lord elephant.

Her wish came true, she was reborn as the Queen of Benares. She selected the most cruel and relentless of hunters and sent him out to kill the white elephant, and bring the incredible tusks back to her. The hunter found the elephant and shot him with a poisoned arrow. The animal was suffering, however, he found that the hunter was actually a priest so the great elephant asked the hunter the reason for the attack. The hunter told him the truth, the white elephant then realized the significance of the cause. He voluntarily offered his tusk, however, the hunter was unable to cut off the tusks, and the elephant himself pulled out his tusks and gave them to the hunter by saying:

*The tusks of wisdom are a hundred
times more dear to me than these. May
this loss bring me omniscience?*

He then departed. The hunter brought the magnificent tusks back to the Queen. She held them while she listened to the hunter telling the story. The Queen then recognized her former life and the tusks that belonged to her lord. She was overwhelmed with terror and guilt, and died that very day.

When *Siddhattha Gotama* (the Buddha before enlightenment) achieved enlightenment, the Buddha was occupied in his greatest teaching mission. The Queen of Benares was reborn as a nun, listening to his doctrine. She suddenly remembered her miserable former lives, and cried, The Buddha saw her crying and kindly smiled to convince her of his great mission. He then told the stories about the six tusked elephant which related his sermon to his listeners. They were encouraged to believe the truth of his philosophy. The six tusked elephant, as a result is credited with sympathy, love, gentleness and kindness, which were purified by the Buddha incarnations. Buddhism often tells the stories of the incarnations of Buddha and how these are related to his doctrine.

The elephants in Buddhist stories are not necessarily noble beasts. They have a wide range of characteristics from the incredible to the violent. Mara, the Buddhist demon, had desired to assassinate Buddha, and so sent a wild and savage elephant to defeat him, The Buddha, however, infused the elephant with a sense of love and forgiveness. The elephant then retreated.

*Son of Parvati, re-created by
Shiva, blessed by Brahma,
Cherished by Vishnu, your
Elephant head a gift from Indra...*

²⁵ Ball, *Decorative motives of Oriental art*, 80.

Beloved of the gods, you are all

Things to all men

- ancient Sanskrit prayer 26

There are important stories involving elephants in Hindu mythology too. *Ganesha* is one of the most popular and widely worshipped of the Hindu gods. He is the god of wisdom and prudence. Statues and images of *Ganesha* can be found everywhere throughout India. The story of *Ganesha's* origin has been told in several versions. In the most familiar story of his origin, *Shiva's* spouse, goddess *Parvati* creates a beautiful child while bathing and assigns him to guard her bath. *Shiva* returns and finds *Ganesha* is blocking his way preventing him getting access to the goddess. They fight with each other; *Shiva* strikes off his stepson's head in anger. *Parvati* comes out from her bath only to find that her son is dead. *Shiva* wants to undo the harm but cannot find the child's head. He assigns the bull *Nandi*, his primary vehicle, to bring back the first head they find. *Nandi* brings back a head of a baby elephant. *Shiva* then reassembles *Ganesha* with an elephant head. There are other stories explaining *Ganesha's* origin. An elephant calf in India is often named after the god *Ganesha*, therefore people have respect for the elephant.

In Indian culture generally, mythical creatures are very common. One such creature is a *gaja-simha* – literally 'elephant-lion,' and is shown in an ivory carving from the 13th century (figure 7).²⁷ It is highly detailed and shows the creature using its sharp

claws to grab at a human figure hanging from its trunk. Ivory has been used as carving material in India for a long time and has not only economic value but also symbolic significance. It is believed that ivory has mysterious powers of protection and is considered to be an auspicious object, bringing good luck and good fortune to the possessors. This is distinct from its use in Western Europe where the emphasis is on the economic value of the material. The demands for ivory in India were much greater than the supply, thus increasing its value.



Figure 7. Ivory Throne Leg, 13th century Eastern Ganga dynasty, Ivory H: 35.0 W: 15.6 D: 13.1 cm, Orissa, India, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁶ Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant*, 88.

²⁷ Ivory Throne Leg, 13th century Eastern Ganga dynasty, Orissa, India, Smithsonian Institution.

<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=3222>

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Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism allows advocates for the killing of animals and so ivory was most frequently imported from Africa. India and China have been trading ivory with African countries since



the 4th-5th centuries after the Romans lost their power In Western Europe and Mediterranean Sea.

African traders relied on the Indian and Chinese demand for Ivory. However, the high prices and demand for ivory also supported a Mack market fed by local poachers. Fortunately perhaps for the Asian elephants of India and Sri Lanka, only the mates grow tusks with less than 60 percent of the male population having tusks. Therefore the hunting was fairly limited and unable to reach the mass commercial quantity.

There is another painting of *gaja-simha* from a *Book of Dreams* written In the eighteenth-century (figure 8).²⁸ In this work, just as In the sculpture, the artist Mends the uniqueness of two different animals harmoniously. The combination of the muscular head of an elephant and the majestic figure of a lion creates a symbolic significance, the metaphoric power of the two combine to become the ultimate authority symbol. These creatures though are endowed with a cheerful characteristic. T h y have two sets of delicate, almost translucent wings, that seem to lift the animals up in the air effortlessly. There is the brief text at the fop of the illustration which reads:



²⁸ B. N. Goswamy, *Domains of wonder : selected masterworks of Indian painting*. (Publisher: San Diego : San Diego Museum of Art ; [Seattle] : Distributed by University of Washington Press, c2005), 92.

Figure 8. Fabled Beasts in a landscape. Folio from a *Book of Dreams*. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper. Rajasthan, from a Mewar workshop; ca. 1720. 25.7 x 21.2 cm 1990.

Success In all things undertaken;
participation In royal or religious assemblies;
gaining a wife; coming into money: these are
indicated by (seeing in a dream) a lion form.
(No.) 12. Auspicious.²⁹

3. Thai Domesticated Elephants and Modernization

Thai people have a unique way of projecting ideological concepts onto elephants. The animals are not only associated with myths and religion but also embedded in the Thai way of life. This is perhaps why the process of economic and social change in late 19th century to 20th centuries created controversial Issues deeply affecting the life and conservation of Thai elephants.

A century ago the population of elephants native to Thailand was estimated to be around 200,000.³⁰ Today however, there are approximately 2,700 domesticated and 2,000 wild elephants which is "a very high domesticated-to-wild elephant ratio land] strongly suggests very high rate of capture in the past."³¹

²⁹ Goswamy, *Domains of wonder : selected masterworks of Indian painting*, 92.

³⁰ Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant*, 104.

³¹ Richard C. Lair, *Gone Astray - The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation (FAO) Forestry Department, Rome, Italya nd. Forestry Department Group, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (RAP)

<<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/AC774E/AC774E00.HTM>>



The roles of elephants over the centuries has been discussed above but substantial changes occurred during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, 1868-1910). In 1872 a British enterprise called the Borneo Company was granted permission to start a logging operation in Thailand.³² The company brought in machines and equipment to cut timber, and many elephants were used to pull logs out of the forests where the heavy machines could not reach.

When the British company finished their contract with the Thai government, many domesticated elephant owners had to change their careers, or cut trees on their own. Elephants had already been used in logging for more than a hundred years. The Forest Industry Organization (FIO) was to serve as a coordinator for hired private operators. Later the Thai government issued a decree cancelling concessions all over the country by order of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives on January 17, 1989, many private elephants were out of a job.

Illegal logging increased, carried out by unemployed logging elephants numbering between 2,000 and 2,500. There was little concern for the animal welfare at that time. There were so many working elephants that had to work for long hours, some were given amphetamines so they could work through the night and get away from detection. However, many of them got caught, and the elephant would then return to their owners after the trial.

Less often, the court would confiscate the elephants, and they became property of the kingdom. The condition

of elephants entrusted to the FIO tended to be very bad. Some were crippled with broken backs, legs, blindness or deep, festering wounds. Conditions such as these prompted the founding of the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang province, North of Thailand.³³

The elephant hospital at the centre was founded in 1991, and each year many injured elephants were sent from places all around the country. The development of farm machinery and limits on logging has lowered the demand for elephant labourers, forcing the individual owners to find other ways of making a living. Today, elephants are mostly found in the tourist sector in a variety of roles. Their presence on the streets of Bangkok and other big cities in Thailand is a significant reflection of economic forces in Thai society. Asian elephants in urban centres are becoming a common and worrying sight. While some of the animals are popular tourist attractions, with trainers selling bananas or bags of food for a few cents to passers-by, many are considered unpleasant sometimes intimidating pedestrians and causing traffic congestion and soiling the streets.

The elephant owners, however, say they do not have much choice but to bring their elephants to the big city, they claim they now have no other way to make a living.

Elephants with their mahouts (keepers) have taken to begging in the streets of major cities. Actually, the keepers and elephants have to be

³² *A New Hope for Elephant Conservation*, The National Elephant Institute, (Forest Industry Organization Thailand), 45.

³³ *A New Hope for Elephant Conservation*, The National Elephant Institute, (Forest Industry Organization Thailand), 47.



together at all times. If the keeper survives in the city then the animal will survive too, because the keepers will provide the elephants' food. But even this attempt at survival has proved problematic.

Many so-called tourist cities are being forced by their *City Councils* to establish formal "Elephant Camps", away from the city centres. Today, the numbers of the animals in the tourist industry is increasing. In rural areas, elephants are also working in the tourist industry either for riding on trips to view forests and wilderness, or in elephant shows. Many baby elephants are rented to hotels and resorts because their cuteness attracts the tourists, ready to spend their money for a first-hand experience.

In 2006, the government started the "Bring Elephants Home" project, offering to pay mahouts if they agreed to live in a specially designated area. However, the creation of a Stray Elephant Task Force still could not keep the elephants and their mahouts off the Bangkok streets. One of the reasons was that a street elephant and its mahout could earn more money on the city streets than in the government controlled camps.

Certainly, elephants cannot walk around a large city without attracting the notice of tourists. In fact they got a lot of attention because of their majestic charm. However, the audiences can also become confused and do not know how to react to the elephant in front of them. While some will enjoy the scene without hesitation, some even trying to play with the elephant or buy food for them others find their presence offensive.

There are many activities that tourists can observe in elephant camps, the elephant shows for example, recreating battle scenes or elephant war, short tracking in the forest, bathing in the river and

responding to commands. Mahout training is one of the most popular programs for tourists and elephant lovers (figure 9). Recently elephants in many camps around Thailand have been trained to paint and particularly at The Thai Elephant Conservation Center, the world's first and only elephant orchestra.³⁴ In Thailand, tourists are able to see, touch and interact with elephants at elephant camps around the country. It is another form of the relationship between human and animals.



Figure 9. Mahout training program at Thai Elephant Conservation Center, 2007.

Thailand's elephants pretty much like the Thai people, live in a perplexing mix of old and new. Many aspects of many elephants' lives remain the same as the past, but omnipresent modern influences have resulted in elephants being trucked in to a megalopolis to wander the streets and elephants

³⁴ Ljar, *A Golden Souvenir of The Elephant in Thai Life*, 61.



weaned at six months so as to greet guest at luxury hotels.³⁵

Most Thai domesticated elephants are working closely with human mahouts outside the enclosure. Their figures look enormous compared with spectators, they move quietly through the crowd who are normally willing to keep themselves away from the elephant's pathway. It seems that there is no fence, bars, or fabricated material in between men and animals. In fact the domesticated elephants were treated as family members, villagers in the North-eastern region of Thailand often call a captive born elephant calf "nong"³⁶ (a little brother or sister in Thai) followed by the given name.

However a domesticated elephant always comes with its mahout, the only person that both the animal and the tourists have to rely on (Figure 10). Tourists are able to make a direct contact with the elephants by feeding them, photographing them, touching them or riding them. It seems friendly, however they are always under watchful eyes of their mahouts.



Figure 10. Elephants and Mahouts, Thai Elephant Conservation Center, 2007.

The mahout communicates with his elephant by using simple verbal commands or in physical terms by applying pressure with his feet and legs at the back of the elephant's ears, and using a hook stick. It is the mahout's responsibility to look after his elephant and ensure the safety of the visitors. Therefore tourists see and experience the domesticated elephants under mahout's supervision.

Such places as the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre are very important as there is now very little natural habitat left which could support and protect elephants in the wild. The animal has been trapped between the collapsing of the two worlds. Thai domesticated elephants are products of a complicated society.



Figure 11. Rattapol Chaiyarat, An eye of a domesticated elephant, Ayutthaya, Thailand, 2006.

The fundamental structure of elephant imagery is built upon mythology and religion, and upon political, and economic aspects of the Thai way of life. At the same time, with the changing society, we find ourselves caught in our own complex world. Thai elephants have been working with people for

³⁵ W. R. G. Astray, *The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity*.

<<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/AC774E/AC774E00.HTM>>

³⁶ A New Hope for Elephant Conservation, The National Elephant Institute, (Forest Industry Organization Thailand), 31.



centuries. They still have been commanded to do the same things over and over again.

In the present day the domesticated elephants perform in shows doing the same things that their ancestors had done before. They are professionally scripted to go to war and fight every weekend. They perform tricks and move timber. Large crowds of spectators loaded with all kind of digital devices try to capture these moments of fabricated history. The powerful images of the elephants continue to make indelible impressions.

This overview of the history of elephants, their role in society and their symbolic significance is a key to understanding the relationship between Asian domesticated elephants and people in the region. In Thai culture especially elephants have shaped the society and the country.

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