

# The Aesthetic of Power: A Critical Study on the Politics of Representations at Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok

สุนทรียภาพแห่งอำนาจ: การศึกษาเชิงวิพากษ์เรื่องการสื่อสัญลักษณ์ทางการเมืองผ่านงานสถาปัตยกรรม ณ วัดเบญจมบพิตรและวัดพระศรีมหาธาตุบางเขน

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## Abstract

Despite the decline of theocratic regimes in the modern age, religious structures have continued to serve the state as a grand symbolic device through associations with divine authorities and spiritual devotions, as evident from the designs of exquisite churches, mosques, and temples, commissioned by the ruling elites around the globe. For Siam and Thailand, the practice of erecting such “sacred-cum-secular” architecture is illustrated by the constructions of Wat Benchama Bophit during King Rama V’s absolutist reign and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok after the 1932-democratic revolution. Via discourse and iconographical analyses, this research presents a critical inquiry on the aforementioned Buddhist temples in Bangkok regarding their roles in: 1) providing a means of power meditation for the governments; 2) representing a material embodiment for the creations of national and cultural identities known as Thainess or khwampenthai; and 3) serving as a strategic tool to implement social policies as well as to prescribe political ideologies for the populaces. The study also examines the ways in which each building functioned in its socio-political contexts for the Thais to engage the West and modernity, by utilizing Thainess as a mode of problematization. The upcoming comparative discussions on both temples aim to further self-reflexive dialogues among power, ideology, Thai identity, and the built environment, particularly on the formations and revisions of architectural meanings.

## บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่าระบอบการปกครองโดยศาสนจักรได้เสื่อมถอยลงไป เมื่อโลกได้ก้าวเข้าสู่ความทันสมัยแล้วก็ตาม ทว่าศาสนสถานยังดำรงความสำคัญสำหรับรัฐ ในฐานะที่เป็นเครื่องมือแห่งการสื่อความหมายทางการเมืองในเชิงสัญลักษณ์ผ่านความเชื่อในเรื่องความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ คำสอน และการอุทิศตนตามหลักศาสนา อันพึงสังเกตได้จากรูปแบบทางสถาปัตยกรรมที่งดงามของโบสถ์ วิหาร และสุเหร่า ซึ่งถูกสร้างขึ้นโดยชนชั้นปกครองจากทั่วทุกมุมโลก ทั้งนี้ การสร้างสรรค์งานสถาปัตยกรรมในลักษณะดังกล่าวในประเทศไทย สามารถเห็นได้จากการก่อสร้างวัดเบญจมบพิตรในช่วงปลายรัชสมัยพระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว และวัดพระศรีมหาธาตุบางเขนซึ่งสร้างขึ้นหลังการปฏิวัติเปลี่ยนแปลงการปกครองปี พ.ศ. 2475 จากระบอบสมบูรณาญาสิทธิราชย์เป็นระบอบประชาธิปไตย งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้ทำการศึกษาศาสนสถานดังกล่าวมาข้างต้น โดยอาศัยทฤษฎีวาทกรรมวิพากษ์และการวิเคราะห์เชิงสัญลักษณ์ที่คำนึงถึงบทบาทของอาคารทั้งสองในด้าน 1) การเป็นสื่อแสดงอำนาจรัฐ 2) การแสดงออกถึงอัตลักษณ์ อันพึงปรารถนาของชนชั้นปกครองซึ่งได้ถูกนำไปใช้ในการสร้างเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมแห่งชาติ ที่รู้จักกันในนามของความเป็นไทย และ 3) การทำหน้าที่เป็นเครื่องมือสำหรับรัฐในการดำเนินนโยบายทางสังคมและอุดมการณ์ทางการเมืองให้ประชาชนได้ตระหนัก สาระของงานวิจัยได้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาคารแต่ละหลังกับบริบททางสังคมและการเมืองในแต่ละยุค รวมทั้งกรรมวิธีในการเผชิญหน้ากับโลกตะวันตกและความทันสมัย โดยที่การวิเคราะห์เชิงเปรียบเทียบระหว่างอาคารทั้งสองผ่านการตั้งคำถามเกี่ยวกับนิยามของความเป็นไทย มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อส่งเสริมการค้นคว้าและแลกเปลี่ยนความคิดเห็นในมุมมองกว้างเกี่ยวกับความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอำนาจรัฐ อุดมการณ์ทางการเมือง ความเป็นไทย และสถาปัตยกรรม โดยเฉพาะการสร้างและการเปลี่ยนแปลงความหมายเชิงสัญลักษณ์สำหรับงานสถาปัตยกรรม

## Keywords

Thai Architecture (สถาปัตยกรรมไทย)

Culture and Politics in Architecture and Design (การเมืองและวัฒนธรรมกับงานสถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบ)

History and Theories in Architecture (ประวัติศาสตร์และทฤษฎีสถาปัตยกรรม)

Locational and Cultural Identity in Architecture and Design (เอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมในงานสถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบ)

## 1. Introduction

This research presents a critical inquiry on Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat Voramahavitharn—commonly known as Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok—in Bangkok, Thailand. Via discourse and iconographical analyses, the study argues that aside from acting as a means of power mediation for the governments, both buildings: 1) represent a material embodiment for the creations of national and cultural identities known as Thainess or *khwampenthai*; and 2) perform as a strategic tool to implement social policies as well as to prescribe political ideologies for the populace.

In spite of the fact that the architect of Wat Benchama Bophit was the mentor of the architect of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok, the two religious structures were diverse from one another in many ways. Closely identified with the politics of representations in their respective periods, the designs of both temples exhibited dissimilar efforts by the ruling authorities to negotiate contemporary architectural trends at the time that were emerging with regards to building materials and construction technology. Serving first and foremost in the capacity of religious monuments whereas the attached monasteries were essentially consigned to secondary functions, the commissions of Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok also marked crucial turning points in the modern history of the Thai nation.

By utilizing Thainess as a mode of problematization, the upcoming investigations elucidate the mechanism in cultural dynamics that signified meanings for the aforementioned temples in domestic dimension together with the ways in which each building functioned in its socio-political contexts for the Thais to engage the West and modernity. The comparative discussions on both temples aim to further self-reflexive dialogues among power, ideology, Thai identity, and the built

environment through the themes of: 1) how these religious structures were manipulated to serve politics; and 2) how politics influenced their designs along with the creations and transformations of meanings.

## 2. Wat Benchama Bophit: A Royal Sacred Ground for the “Civilized” Absolutist Siam

After his journey to Europe in 1897, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) commenced the project for a garden residence named Dusit Palace, meaning heavenly dwelling, within a walking distance of the Grand Palace. Linking the two was Rajadamnoen Avenue framed by several handsome European-style mansions built for King Chulalongkorn's sons and daughters. As the entire area around the new palace known as Dusit district was converted to a suburban enclave, a need for a space for the socialization of the entire royal elite arose (Peleggi, 2002, pp. 92-93).

In order to accommodate such necessity, King Rama V renovated an old monastery originally called Wat Laem or Wat Saithong standing within his garden palace boundary that was pulled down during the road construction. In reconstructing this monastery, King Chulalongkorn changed its name to Wat Benchama Bophit Dusitvanaram, simply called Wat Benchama Bophit meaning temple of the Fifth King. Under the supervision of King Rama V's half-brother Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongse (Naris)—highly credited as the great teacher of traditional Thai art and architecture—the Italian team of artists and architects employed at Dusit Palace continued to work here as well (Jansen, 1933, pp. 1279-1294).

The most recognized feature of Wat Benchama Bophit was the finishing material of the ordination hall: the white marble cladding from Carrara, Italy, whence its English name the Marble Temple (National Archives, RV, Ministry of Public Works 1/26, 1901) (Figure 1). Based on Prince Naris'

design, the construction of the ordination hall or ubosot started in 1891 but remained incomplete until after the King's death. This edifice has been hailed as a masterpiece of modern Thai architecture for "breaking away from the traditional construction of a Siamese temple" (Poshyananda, 1992, p. 138), reminiscent the concept of eclecticism in Europe during the 1860s-1870s (Peleggi, 2002, p. 86). The ubosot housed a sacred and revered Buddha replica image known as Phra Buddha Shinaraj, arguably the most beautiful statue of Buddha in Siam, with ashes of King Chulalongkorn later buried beneath it (Figure 2) (Wat Benchama Bophit Dusitvanaram, 2010).

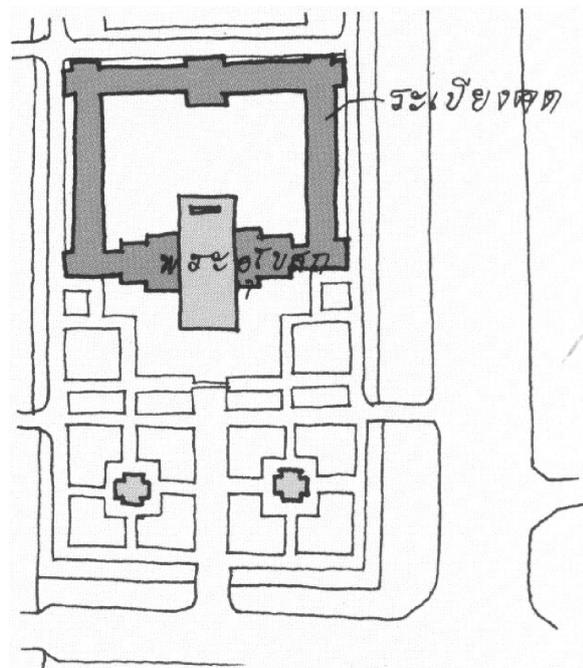


**Figure 1.** The ubosot (ordination hall) at Wat Benchama Bophit.



**Figure 2.** The replica image of Phra Buddha Shinaraj.

Unlike typical layout for temple complexes, the ordination hall at Wat Benchama Bophit was not placed at the center of the court space, or being surrounded by galleries—known as rabieang kot—on four sides. Instead, it has been integrated as a part of the enclosure, with two arms of the galleries extending out from the ubosot (Figure 3). The juxtaposition of the ordination hall and galleries, then, required a solution for visual differences in height between these two structures. As a consequence, rather than having the usual multilayered-roofs, the superstructure of the ordination hall utilized five levels of tiered roofs, leading the eyes through a smooth vertical transition by creating a visual hierarchy of roofs from the highest (the ubosot) to the lowest points (the rabieang kot). The galleries housed fifty-two Buddha images, collected by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (Damrong), an influential figure who was one of King Chulalongkorn's half-brothers. As these images represented different parts of Siam, the collection symbolically drew the country together.



Source: The Association of Siamese Architects (ASA)

**Figure 3.** A layout drawing for the ubosot at Wat Benchama Bophit with two arms extending out to form galleries enclosing a court.

The Thais' esteem for Wat Benchama Bophit largely stemmed from its elegant proportions in conjunction with the materiality. The design of the ordination hall was adjusted to support the modularity of the finishing material—the marble slabs which were cut into equal pieces regulated by a modern principle of Cartesian grid—rendering a rational proportion of the edifice's formal and spatial organizations. By means of shortening, de-curving, and regularizing the roof components, Prince Naris modified the traditional form for the roof structure of the ubosot to suit the tectonic capacity of the marble slabs, generating a more serene and sturdy visual expressions for the overall profile of the structure (Figure 4). Hence, it is not surprising to see that this particular ordination hall has served as a paradigm for numerous temple designs throughout the country, particularly those built of reinforced concrete, including the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok.

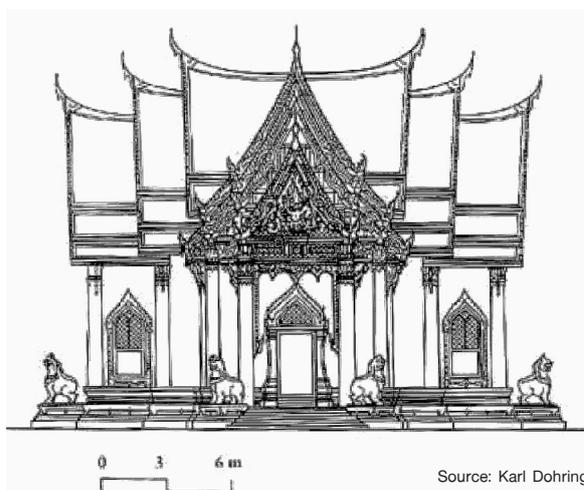
Although recent studies on architecture of the fifth reign devoted considerable attention to Wat Benchama Bophit (Peleggi, 2002, pp. 86-87; and Poshyananda, 1992, p. 138), the authors mainly investigated this building as an accoutrement of the royal identity acquisition, and largely ignored its symbolic implications for politics. In reality, however, it can be construed that King Chulalongkorn's

appropriations of Western forms and modernity, as exemplified by his commission of the Marble Temple, also encompassed political motives.

Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, rituals, and practices provide a foundation for inquiring into the said topic. From the Khmer empire, Siam adopted the custom of *devaraja*, or god-king, to its culture. Siamese architecture was infused with symbolism bounded with a distinct notion of the universe and sacredness. As for Wat Benchama Bophit, the temple incorporated this cosmological idea together with the use of Western materials and modern concept into its aesthetics. Notwithstanding a deviation from the traditional model, the layout of the ubosot and *rabieang kot* derived from a square-shaped mandala diagram depicting the Traiphumi sacred cosmology. The holy spatial configuration was accompanied by the iconography of architectural and decorative details.

While the spatial planning and architectural iconography of the Marble Temple symbolized the imagery Traiphumi cosmology, the white marble and Cartesian grid system manifested the existence of the holy universe on the earthly realm that could be physically experienced. Instead of being perceived as opposite polarities, or separation between the sacred and profane, the dualism of Wat Benchama Bophit was complimentary and unifying. The coexistence of the divine cosmic model and the physical reality became a discourse of what is called by post-colonial scholars as the “homologous opposition” strategy for the king and ruling elite to assert their authority (Spivak, 1995, pp. 24-28; and Bhabha, 1995, pp. 29-35). Not only was the Marble Temple an expression of the consecrated Hindu-Buddhist universe: the house of god, but also a spiritual residence of a sovereign who was an avatar of the deity, possessing superior power, modern knowledge, and sophisticated taste.

Socially, the discourse of homologous opposition at Wat Benchama Bophit constructed the image of Self for King Rama V to distinguish



**Figure 4.** A façade drawing for the ubosot at Wat Benchama Bophit.

himself from the Other: the monarchical subjects. The identification worked in collaboration with an integration of the animistic belief, particularly by the figures of celestial animals which were powerful vehicles of the deities, for decorative elements and emblems, e.g., Garuda (man-bird) and Airavata (three-headed elephant) at the eastern and northern pediments of the ubosot, coupled with Singhas (lions) guarding the entrance, and Nagas (serpents) on the roof of the ordination hall. These images were combined with materials and ideas from abroad and became a part of the royal Self.

The application of Hindu-Buddhist reliefs at the Marble Temple, then, mediated the authority of the kings and the ruling elite, bestowing them with creative and assertive powers. In addition to securing the dominant position and preserving the status quo of the monarchy in Thai society under the guise of religious devotion, the homologous opposition of the ordination hall kept the populace in place through spiritual indoctrination and domination. It instilled the people that being born as subalterns was their poor karma from the past lives. Only by committing good deeds—including a loyalty to the sovereign—could that person be reincarnated in a better place. The discourse was made more concrete and tangible by the hybridity of the ordination hall, exhibiting that ancient belief and practice could be reconciled with the elegant art and advanced science of the West.

On the one hand, the ubosot's homologous opposition of Western material and modern concept versus traditional Siamese architectural elements could be equated with an amalgamation of two different levels of knowledge according to the Buddhist law of Dharma: the mundane or *lokiya*, and the enlightenment or *lokutara*. Metaphorically, the knowledge of the physical world commanded by King Rama V, such as Western material culture along with modern science and technology, was epitomized by the white marble. Over them located the tiered roofs and traditional Siamese pediments

signaling the knowledge of enlightenment held by the Bodhisattva (Buddha to be)—King Chulalongkorn.

On the other hand, the Brahmanical idea of the divine and great kings, the cult of *devaraja*, was merged with the Buddhist notion of *chakravartin*, whose terminology in Thai based on the Sanskrit language was *sommuttidhep*. The association between Buddhism and Hinduism was indeed not uncommon. In Southeast Asia, albeit their fundamental differences the two religions had intertwined with each other, sharing a similar conception and structure of the *Traiphumi* cosmology. By this strategy, the Marble Temple functioned as both artistic and political statements, forming a part of a microcosmic reconstruction of the sacred universe, enabling King Rama V to postulate the position of a holy ruler in anthropomorphic form through rituals, ceremonies, and self-ascriptions (Tambiah, 1976, pp. 96-97).

In social dimension, the cult of *devaraja* was sanctioned by the regal code of architectural iconography. Historically, Siamese monarchs institutionalized a code of cultural consumption that demonstrated the social status of a person. Certain ranks in the socio-political hierarchy were entitled to specific designs of cultural artifacts, including architecture, costume, language, and custom, where particular qualities were reserved for the monarchy. For instance, only buildings commissioned by kings like Wat Benchama Bophit could be embellished with a nine-tiered parasol, or *chatra*. Violating the codes amounted to committing a high crime on the *Lèse Majesté* charge. Adorned with monarchical paraphernalia on the pediments of the ubosot, the Marble Temple was therefore bequeathed with a means to allocate arbitrate power for arbitrating social regimentation via the regal code of architectural iconography.

In addition, even though not officially codified, the Italian-born architectural components of the ordination hall performed as a social ordering tool, as much as a contrivance of self-aggrandizement

for King Rama V. The imported Carrara marble and Florentine stained glass windows—signifying a conspicuous mode of cultural consumption—resonated with the fact that commissioning the Europeans to design and build an edifice like this temple was prohibitively expensive, and only the monarchy could afford to do so. Such economic capability differentiated the royal elite from ordinary people, giving them a basis to legitimize their control over the population aside from refashioning the Westernize / modernized identity.

Whereas the appropriation of Western material culture rendered King Chulalongkorn and his forward-thinking but despotic regime to the outside world as being civilized, the royal elite's espousal and fascination with the West and modernity inadvertently undermined their legitimacy as the ruler in the eyes of the subjects, especially from a growing numbers of young foreign-educated Thais. Well aware about such a problem perhaps more than anyone else, the King himself lamented that: "in the future, Siamese people would say that I had a weakness for Western-style building and neglected the culture of my own origin" (Chulalongkorn, King, 1986, as cited in Horayangkura, et al., 1993, p. 21). Even with his concern, lavish consumptions of Western material culture appeared to personify King Rama V's era and continued to do so in the epochs of his successors.

Nonetheless, the Marble Temple was dissimilar from other buildings in Dusit district in manifesting the royal authority. Unlike beautiful and spacious Dusit Palace and other regal mansions along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, Wat Benchama Bophit by its virtue of a religious structure was virtually accessible to everyone and became a quasi-public utility. For example, the monastery on the temple ground lodged an ecclesiastical college for young men of humble origins to get their education. During the latter half of King Chulalongkorn's reign, the Marble Temple also became a place where different socio-economic classes could interact. King

Rama V often held annual fund-raising fairs, where the royal elite including the king himself assumed entrepreneurial roles by running stalls to raise money for the temple (Bangkok Times, December 14, 1907). Aside from being a showcase for the cultural modernization of the elite under the King's directives, the fête at Wat Benchama Bophit was as a well-crafted public relation measure, rendering the image of King Rama V as a benign and progressive sovereign, and helped him cultivate immense popularity with the people.

Although much had been said on the subject of the Marble Temple as a material embodiment of the refined and forward-thinking image for the royal Self as much as for the cultural and national identity of the modern absolutist Siam, few studies realized that the "the nation of Siam" was a concept completely foreign to the Thais. On the contrary, it was invented during the 19th century as a result of the Thais' experience from encountering Western colonialism (Reynolds, 2002, pp. 19-20).

In antagonizing the Europeans' encroachment, King Chulalongkorn reformed and reorganized the administrative system. Via the processes of Westernization and modernization, the country was significantly transformed in every aspect from an ancien régime to a modern nation-state. Yet, the King's notion of nation, or *chat*, was vastly different from the nationalistic principles of the contemporary Western regimes, which was based on the ideals of citizenship, civil rights, and liberty. For him, *chat* was more akin to Louis XIV's vision of the state, where the royal subjects divided into orders by birth were united as one socio-political entity under a divine ruler (Baker, 1990, pp. 225-226). In other words, King Rama V's vision of *chat* is an amalgamation between the Indo-Buddhist notion of righteous kingship or *dharmaraja* and European absolutism into an idea of nation uniting the Siamese of all classes and races in the personality of the crown (Tambiah, 1976, p. 198).

For Wat Benchama Bophit, King Chulalongkorn's idea of nation or *chat* was articulated and

expressed by the design of the ordination hall. Being a part of the King's hegemonic discourse, the Marble Temple was abundant with regal paraphernalia and ministerial iconographical references. To cite some examples, the pediments of the rabieang kot were decorated with emblems of ten ministries, while the royal seals denoting his majesty's business in different capacities—Garuda for foreign affairs, Airavata for royal correspondence, Unaloame (a sacred script for the Sanskrit syllable aum) for colonial affairs over Laos, Cambodia, and Malaya, and Chakra (disk) for domestic royal commands—embellished the pediments of the ubosot (Phra Thammakit Sophana, 1988, p. 135).

Symbolically, the locations of the pediments signified the unification of chat: the ubosot being integrated with the rabieang kot, placing the monarch at the heart of the nation reigning through the royal elites in each ministry characterized by the encircling galleries (Figure 3). The idea of chat was buttressed and exemplified by the geo-body and historiography of Siam embedded in Prince Damrong's collection of the fifty-two Buddha images around the galleries.

The convention in Thai studies generally hailed Prince Damrong as the father of Thai history in which his historiographical methodology had been accepted as the official account. At the Marble Temple, the prince organized the sequence of the Buddha images according to the empiric periods of Dvaravadi, Srivijaya, Lopburi, Chiangsaen, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin (Bangkok), regardless of where the figures were found. These images collectively contributed a long historical narrative of a nation known as Siam in spite of the fact that the indigenous denizens of the territories inducted into the "geo-body" (Winichakul, 1994, p. 17), such as the Laotians and Cambodians, did not necessarily consider themselves as integral parts of Siam. The geo-body was reinforced by eight mural paintings on the walls inside the ordination hall, illustrating the story of the life of the Buddha following the sacred

Traiphumi topography marked by the locations of eight stupas scattering across the Siamese territories claims.

In essence, Prince Damrong's mode of historiography defined the geo-body in terms of the territoriality of the nation and the collective concept of self for Thai people. This concrete notion was critical for ruling elite to manage the Thai nationhood, to distinguish concepts of integrity and sovereignty, and to control over internal processes. Yet, contrary to its implied nature of continuity and limitless history, the geo-body was formulated by the meeting of indigenous spatial discourse with modernizing of methods of representations, as depicted by the collection of Buddha images around the galleries of the Marble Temple.

Resembling King Chulalongkorn's idea of nation and Prince Damrong's national historiography, khwampenthai or Thainess, too, was constructed in terms of a discourse (Foucault, 1972, pp. 140-141). As shown by the hybridity of the ubosot at Wat Benchama Bophit, Thainess was syncretic, reflecting inherent problems of the Thai identity that resulted in an intricate dynamism and paradoxical nature of Thainess. Although the West and modernity were normally viewed by the ruling elite as "suspected Other," Thainess could never be completed without non-Thai contributions as evident by the aesthetics of the ordination hall. The fact that Westerners and their material culture had their hands on refashioning the royal image, which was projected onto the creation of the Thai identity, reiterated the roles of otherness in the identification of Thainess.

The otherness in the design of Wat Benchama Bophit fell into a well-established Occidentalizing project (Said, 1978, pp. 252-253), initiated since the reign of King Chulalongkorn's father: King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1858). Since the Siamese ruling elite regarded the Western model of modernization as the sources of and methods for achieving a respectable status among the civilized countries,

the Occidentalizing project furnished them a new and refined identity and framed their worldview about the West and modernity itself, by historical and cultural experiences with and/or against Western powers and modern world.

In fact, Wat Benchama Bophit was not the only Buddhist temple that was a part of King Rama V's Occidentalizing project, but it was accompanied by other two hybridized Western-Thai religious structures, which were: 1) Wat Niwet Thammapravat at Bang Pa-in Palace in Ayutthaya that was devised in a form of a Gothic church; and 2) Wat Ratchabophit near the Grand Palace that boasted exquisite Anglican motifs for its interior. In addition to these wats which were the three royal temples commissioned by King Chulalongkorn during his forty-two-year reign, the King refurbished Wat Rachathiwat in Bangkok, where his father resided while he was in the monkhood, with decorations by Italian artists.

Royalist advocates always portrayed the Occidentalizing project as anchored in a selective approach to the Westernization and modernization processes. Bearing in minds that the West and modernity were "suspected Other," the royal elite were cautious for taking on all aspects of Western and modern things, imported and directly supplanted in their cultural soil (Winichakul, 1994, p. 13; and Wyatt 1994, p. 275). For that reason, the hybridized Marble Temple signified an active and authoritative role of the Thais in generating, combining, and projecting their versions of contested meanings upon the immediate world and beyond, while instantaneously asserting their self-identity through their consumptions of material culture.

In any case, buildings of the fifth reign suggested otherwise. The royal elite's claim for selective Westernization and modernization was simply a myth. The stylistic hybridization of Wat Benchama Bophit seemed to be an exception rather than a norm. Most architecture of the state during the era of King Rama V was commissioned

in Western style. These structures ironically implied that in order to maintain its sovereignty, Siam had to sacrifice precisely what it fought for: independence. Although the country might be able to escape a physical occupation by Western powers, it succumbed into another colonial trap: an indirect rule or "crypto-colonization" (Herzfeld 2002, pp. 900-901), particular in cultural and intellectual terms.

Correspondingly, the Marble Temple subversively contradicted the belief promulgated by the royal-national history (Winichakul, 1994, pp. 8-9, 13-14) that Thainess was something intrinsically genuine and fixed, whose innate quality could be ascertained by the binary criterion of: nature/history; stability/change; authentic/fake; identity/difference; dominant/docile; and orientation/disorientation (Dovey, 1999, pp. 15-16). In contrast, the edifice demonstrated a dilemma faced by the Thais in constructing their national and cultural identity, which were inconsistent, ambiguous, and even self-contradictory. The homologous opposition made it the stage where two antagonistic forces of accommodation and resistance competed, reflected, converged, and integrated with one another (Kessing, 1989, pp. 22-23), which was subjected to more appropriation and contestation, resulting in a slippage of symbolic meanings.

King Rama V passed away in 1910, leaving fairly strong, relatively stable, and prosperous Siam to his Western-educated sons. However, the lack of power sharing, exacerbated by the global depression during the 1920s, coupled with the rising force of the bourgeoisie finally brought down the absolutist regime in 1932 by a bloodless coup d'état (Wyatt, 2004, pp. 232-236). During the first years of the constitutional period, the coup promoters constructed another important Buddhist temple: Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok. Like Wat Benchama Bophit, this religious structure held political significance, whose meanings are investigated in the forthcoming discussions.

### 3. Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok: A Proletarian Heaven for the Modern Nation-state of Thailand

If one were to realize that Wat Benchama Bophit was a manifestation of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmological belief in a Westernized and modernized form, then a corresponding remark could be made that Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok was an expression of the foreign democratic ideology under the guise of traditional mode of architectural signification (Figure 5). Nonetheless, unlike the Marble Temple, the latter religious structure had an overtly political genesis for its role as architecture of the state.



Source: The National Archives

**Figure 5.** An aerial view of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok in its early day.

Despite the demise of the old ruling clique, the bureaucratic system of Siam remained almost unchanged. It was not until 1933 when the bloody Bovoradej rebellion was quelled that the coup promoters known as the People's Party or Khana Rasadorn could exercise full control of the country's affairs and move ever closer to a dictatorship by using the armed forces as their henchmen.

Bovoradej rebellion was a catalyst for the construction of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok. On October 11, 1933, Prince Bovoradej, an ardent royalist and minor member of the royal family, staged a counter-coup issuing a list of seven demands including a restoration of the monarchical power

in political affairs (Nai Hon Huay, 1987, pp. 485-486). The government turned down the royalists' ultimatum, sending Plaek Khittasangkha (Pibulsonggram)—head of the junior military faction in the People's Party—to lead troops in the field. Heavy fighting took tolls on both sides around the area that became Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok. The carnage lasted until October 23 before it was finally over. Prince Bovoradej fled to French Indochina. Although there was no evidence that King Rama VII (Prajadhipok, 1925-1935) supported the mutiny, the outcome was a blow to the King, diminishing his prestige and authority. A year later, King Prajadhipok took an exile to England and abdicated the throne after a falling out with the military. He remained there until his death in 1940. For the next quarter of a century, the monarchy did not play a visible role in Thai society. Key members of Khana Rasadorn took turn to assume administrative positions.

In order to commemorate their victory, the government decided to erect a Buddhist temple, apart from building the Rebellion Suppression Monument—which was renamed the Constitutional Defense Monument (Figure 6)—next to the northern corner of the monastery. Originally known as Wat Prachathipatai (the Democracy Temple), its title was switched to Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, when a special envoy came back from India with a relic of the Buddha to be enshrined in a stupa here together with branches of the sacred Bodhi tree. The temple was inaugurated on June 24, 1942, precisely at the tenth anniversary of the Revolution to mark "the rebirth" of Siam as Thailand. Two years after the alteration on the country's name in 1939, Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena (Phot Phahonyothin), the then Prime Minister and leader of the senior military faction in the People's Party, was the first to ordain and reside at the monastery (National Archives, Ministry of Education 0701.46/1, 1941a).

Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok possessed significance not only for the government to ideologically proclaim their victory over the conservative



Source: The National Archives

**Figure 6.** The Constitutional Defense Monument.

royalists, but also to symbolize the efforts by the People's Party to shape the political landscape of the country (Prakitnondhakarn, 2004, pp. 387-388). From a semiological perspective, it could be contended that through the assertive and destructive powers of its location, the temple challenged and negated the legitimacy as well as authority of the defunct absolutist regime, occupying space both in the physical and temporal dimensions of the national history of Thailand.

In conjunction with sheltering the hallowed relic of the Buddha, the stupa at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok (Figure 7) accommodates the ashes of Khana Rasadorn's members and their spouses too. This 38-meter tall structure is actually comprised of the outer and inner stupas, separated by a 2.5-meter wide corridor. While the inner part enshrines the Buddha relic, the outer layer contains one hundred and twelve niches facing towards the interior space. Initially, there were four alternatives



**Figure 7.** The stupa at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat Bangkok.

for the outer stupa to house: 1) donated objects for spiritual reverence; 2) chronological figures and mural paintings of the Buddha; 3) statues and engravings about Thai history; and 4) ashes of the persons deemed fitting by the government (National Archives, Ministry of Education 0701.46/1, 1941b, pp. 1-2).

The idea of erecting Khana Rasadorn's shrine was envisaged by Phahonyothin but it was temporarily shelved due to the lack of available funds. Luang Wichitwathakan, the Minister of Cultural Affairs, convinced the cabinet that the stupa at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok could realize the Prime Minister's dream. In his proposal, the structure should not be limited to harboring the ashes of the coup promoters, but should include those of national heroes in a comparable manner to the French Pantheon (Prakitnondhakarn, 2009, pp. 107). Yet in actuality, the ashes of Khana Rasadorn's members and their spouses occupy the niches.

A close examination on the decorative details disclosed that numerology played an important part in the design of the stupa. Unlike traditional Thai stupas whose spires usually contain odd-numbered tiers, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen employed a six-tiered spire for its main stupa. A number of recent studies suggested that the spire referred to the People's Party's principles of freedom, peace, equality, economy, education, and unity, similar to other public edifices constructed by Khana Rasadorn administration, such as the Democracy Monument with six gates at its central turret (Prakitnondhakarn, 2009, p. 109).

With respect to the issue of terminology, whereas the custom of erecting Buddhist temples under the name of Phra Sri Mahathat dated back to centuries ago, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen signified the political spirit of the country following the Revolution. In premodern Siam, Wat Phra Sri Mahathats were commissioned exclusively by the monarchy. For that reason, the use of this name by the People's Party-led administration was intended to set a new paradigm that the commoners like the coup promoters could construct Wat Phra Sri Mahathat as well. Being architecture of the state, the temple displayed a radical shift in social and political authority from the royal elites to the proletariat Thais by infusing new meanings into the conventional mode of iconography for religious buildings, coupled with the utilizations of modern construction technique and materials.

Executed in a form of hybridized Modern-Thai structure, the ubosot at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen has been widely celebrated by Thai scholars as an apposite synthesis between the imported Modernist and traditional Thai designs, generally recognized as the Thai-style reinforced concrete architecture (Figure 8). The stylistic amalgamation also arose from the fact that during that time, Modernism was extensively employed for architecture of the state in "civilized" countries



Source: : The Association of Siamese Architects (ASA)

**Figure 8.** The ubosot (ordination hall) at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen.

throughout the world regardless of their political orientations.

Although the architect—Phra Phrombhichitr (Au Lapanon)—was a pupil of Prince Naris, the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen was remarkably diverse from the work of his teacher at Wat Benchama Bophit, and contained many innovative features. In other words, albeit influenced by the design of the ordination hall at Wat Benchama Bophit, the ubosot at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkokhen was far from being an exact replica of its precedent. Phra Phrombhichitr designed this edifice in accordance with the Modernist principles of simplicity, massive and voluminous formal and spatial configurations, functional and rational compositions, as well as structural and materialistic expressions (Chungsiriarak, 2001, p. 114). For instance, the overall profile of the building was organized into simplified geometric shapes and straight lines to fit the tectonic capability of reinforced concrete. As a result, the proportions of the roofs and façades were shortened making other architectural elements such as bracings and decorative details becoming more volumetric and less flimsy, generating a new kind of architectural characteristics for the entire ubosot.

On the one hand, the aforementioned aesthetics endowed the assertive and creative powers for the government to establish, legitimize, and maintain its authority. With the regal code

of architectural elements being obliterated and substituted by simplified and geometrical decorative patterns, the design of the ordination hall manifested the idea of modern egalitarianism in built forms. Moreover, the use of inexpensive, abundant, and versatile material like reinforced concrete at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok provided a stark contrast to the ordination hall at Wat Benchama Bophit embellished with imported and costly Italian marble and stained glass. Such a prudent choice of materiality indicated a logical and careful management of the country's economy by Khana Rasadorn, while at the same time criticized extravagant and irrational spending for luxurious goods during the royal absolutist period.

On the other hand, the absence of references to the regal code of architectural elements bestowed the assertive and destructive powers in promulgating the People's Party's denunciation of "the divine royal authority" as opposed to the notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity among human beings. The lack of iconographical allusion to the monarchical institution was clearly visible from the pediment of the ubosot, where a figure of Aruna deity rested in place of regal emblems and seals as usually practiced. Some contemporary investigations interpreted that Aruna, personifying the dawn of the day and red color according to the Hindu myth, implied the rise of the democratic age by bringing shining sunlight to disperse the political darkness of the previous epoch. Their hypothesis sounded somewhat persuasive, especially when observing that an image of the same deity appeared at the Democracy Monument too (Prakitnondhakarn, 2004, pp. 397-399).

Taken together, all these forms of power mediation operated in concert, rendering Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok a conscious attempts by the government to: 1) undermine the royal authority; 2) dissociate itself from the old rule; 3) craft a modern image of the country; and 4) convey its authority to the mass. Similar to the royal absolutism

of the 19th-century Siam, the ruling authority led by Khana Rasadorn still obsessed with constructing a "civilized" national and cultural identity for their regime and the country. Under the helm of Phahonyothin's successor, Pibulsonggram in his first tenure as the premier (1938-1944), the government embarked on the Nation Building Program, issuing a series of twelve Cultural Mandates (Ministry of Propaganda, 1936) aimed to "uplift the national spirit and moral code of the nation and instilling progressive tendencies and a newness into Thai life" (National Archives, Ministry of Propaganda. 0701. 22.1/7, 1942, as cited in Nuan la-or, 1997, p. 83). The mandates instructed the people in all aspects of their social life, which were "necessarily in the interests of progress and civilization that the world might see that Thailand was a modern nation" (National Archives, Ministry of Propaganda. 0701. 22.1/7, 1942, as cited in Nuan la-or, 1997, p. 83).

By alluding to the People's Party's concepts of nation-state, independence, racial affinity, fraternity, altruism, armed strength, and progression, the identification of Thainess by the hybridized architecture of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok was founded on nationalistic and democratic ideologies as epitomized by the Modernist design principles, structural system, and material of the ordination hall. This so-called Thai-style reinforced concrete architecture signified a capability of Thailand as a country and culture that was able to assimilate modern ideas, process, knowledge, and technology from abroad and integrate them with existing practices. As a consequence, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok exemplified the "Thai way" in negotiating modernity as stipulated by the Cultural Mandates. Moreover, whereas the traditional forms the stupa and ubosot emphasized the autonomy of the Thai nation-state from Western colonialism, distinguishing the Thais from foreigners, the absence of any symbolic reference to the crown pointed at palatial and religious structures erected before the 1932 Revolution as being backward and hence "un-Thai".

Although the above significant conceptions of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok might sound impressive, people were kept ignorant and unable to discern dissimilarities between facts versus fictions in the game of power politics in modern Thailand by the following modes of power mediation. By means of manipulation, the representational intent of the temple deceived the Thais into a false sense of freedom and security. A prime example could be seen from the stylistic affiliation with the democratic and nationalistic ideologies as a framework of references. As explained earlier, via its assertive and creative power, the qualities of novelty of this structure stood for a new and progressive democratic nation of Thailand in place of the old absolutist kingdom of Siam.

In reality, however, the said ideological projection through the built forms was merely a camouflage. As noted by Dovey (1999), the masking of power arose from the fact that a naked will to power is morally unacceptable. Therefore, self-deceit or hypocrisy was needed to legitimize that one's rise and/or exercise of power was for the common good of a society, normally carried out by an allusion to ideologies (15). In this respect, while the allusion to the Nation Building Program and twelve Cultural Mandates on the Thai identity depicted Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok as an integral part and material embodiment of the Thai nationhood, it essentially performed as a method of seduction to manage the interests and desires of the mass by a construction of their self vis-à-vis collective image, particularly in terms of national and cultural identity. Through the appropriations of Thainess discourse, Pibul administration was able to pursue their own political agenda—concealed by the iconography of the ubosot and stupa—thus masking the true color the administration, which was despotic and fascist-oriented in nature.

The mediation of power in built forms occurred by the method of authority as well. Embedded in the institutional structure of a society, authority was

marked by absence of argument resulting in unquestioned recognition and subjugation of the subjects. Being a quasi-overt measure, it framed the terms of references for any interpretation, and was able to circumvent any dispute or challenge. Obviously, the basis for transmitting authority at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok operated on Buddhist symbolism and iconography in a different manner from what had normally been carried out. Here, Buddhism became a discourse of power mediation for the People's Party and Pibulsonggram to negotiate and then relegated it to a lesser position to display their authoritative status in Thai society.

For instance, the fact that the ashes of the 1932 coup promoters and their spouses along with the holy Buddha relics were placed inside the same structure exhibited the transcending power of Khana Rasadorn that could alter an accepted religious custom to suit their political objectives. This very subversive act was heretical to the Hindu-Buddhist belief in the sanctified Traiphumi cosmology, upon which the royalty utilized to signify and legitimize their power.

Furthermore, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok was aimed from the onset to serve as a model for constructing an ideal monastery in which monks from two major orders of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand: the Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika Nikaya (the reformist movement) could co-tenant together. In pacifying their doctrinal discords, the creation of this temple allegorically accused of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868), for causing a rift in Buddhism by establishing the Dhammayuttika Nikaya as a separated order from the Mahanikaya. In contrast, it expounded the reconciliatory effort by the government as being meritorious and auspicious in practical term for bringing peace and prosperity to the nation. For that reason, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok demonstrated the predominant power of the state over the sangha council (the Buddhist clergy administration), and by extension over ordinary Thai citizens.

Resembling manipulation and seduction, the effectiveness of authority depended on legitimization and self-deceit by claiming the self-interest of the ruling power as public benefits, engendering rich layers of symbolic meanings and duplicity in architectural signification. Under the pretext of paying homage to Buddhism and democracy, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok happened to be a self-glorifying medium par excellence for Pibulsonggram and his clique in Khana Rasadorn rather than a bona fide tribute to the revolutionary and democratic spirit. To cite some examples, without a referendum to build Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok, as well as a lack of public participation in the design process and site selection of the temple, the conception and development of this religious structure were entirely dictated by the personal preferences of the coup promoters. As a result, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok miserably failed to live up to its democratic connotation as Wat Prachathipatai or the Democracy Temple. In addition, by being deviated from the customary ways of architectural signification for Buddhist temples, the iconography, symbolism, and stylistic expression of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok seemed too abstract and difficult for the public to understand their intended messages. In fact, not many people today realize the real meanings behind the numerology of the stupa, together with the implication of Aruna deity at the pediment and the rationales for the aesthetic principles of Modernist tectonic and materiality in the design of the ordination hall.

From the above, a slippage in symbolic signification ensued, which had been re-appropriated and exploited by succeeding administrations in modern Thailand. The changes of meanings for Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok and Wat Benchama Bophit are the next topic for this research to examine.

#### **4. The Politics of Transforming the Meanings of Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok**

##### **4.1 *Wat Benchama Bophit: From a Royal Sacred Ground to a National Commodity***

The politics of representations—changes in architectural signification—at Wat Benchama Bophit took a longer and more treacherous course than that of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok. The transformations of symbolic meanings for the Marble Temple actually happened since the death of King Chulalongkorn. In addition to differences in personality from his father, Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, 1910-1925) preferred to socialize with a small circle of courtiers and entourages. Theatrical performance, literature, and music composition were a passion of the crown, who did not commission any Buddhist temple during his fifteen-year reign. With the temple fare discontinued, Wat Benchama Bophit simply turned into a shrine for King Rama V, relinquishing its function of a regal playground. As the royal elite of the sixth reign moved to assume a more thoroughly Westernized identity, the hybridized design of the Marble Temple was no longer deemed as a fashionable accouterment and appropriate way to be “civilized”.

Following the nationalization of palatial mansions along Rajadamnoen Avenue and in Dusit district after the 1932 Revolution, Wat Benchama Bophit exhausted its social attractiveness to host a public congregation. Similar to other places that mediated royal authority, the architectural characteristic and iconographical program of the Marble Temple did not appeal to the coup promoters to signify the Thai identity. As Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok took up the position of architecture of the state in terms of a religious structure, Wat Benchama Bophit and other temples constructed by Chakri kings was consigned to their utilitarian purposes as places for worship, monastic residences, and ecclesiastical colleges.

With the revival of the monarchical ground in the discourse of khwampenthai or Thainess since the 1960s during a military regime headed by Sarit Thanarat, Wat Benchama Bophit along with architecture of the absolutist period had been recognized and admired for their significance in terms of a cultural heritage and national treasure in the collective Thai psyche. The post-People's Party administrations celebrated the regal genesis of the Marble Temple, whose images were extensively used in official document and in many cases were juxtaposed with pictures or emblems of the crown, as demonstrated by Thai banknotes circulated during that time (Figure 9).



Source: The Bank of Thailand

**Figure 9.** A ten baht banknote (1969-1978).

Since the 1970s, with unprecedented financial aid, trade, investment, and military assistance from the U.S., the European community, Japan, and China, Thailand had gained tremendous economic prosperity. Tourism had been developed into one of the major industries, generating an enormous amount of revenue annually for the Thais. Socio-culturally, the productions of Thai cultural artifacts, as well as the cultural consumption of the Thais, were

geared up towards the country's primary driving force: materialism and consumerism. To stimulate economic growth, all aspects of Thai culture were revisited and commercialized. Things of qualitative or abstract values such as traditions, customs, beliefs, ways of living, practices, knowledge, and natural beauty were assigned quantitative values, having tangible monetary prices and calculable numbers. These "cultural capital" included Wat Benchama Bophit, which ranked among prime examples for the commodification process of Thainess.

Accordingly, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) had promoted the Marble Temple as a major tourist attraction, advertising that to stand at the main gateway and look upon Wat Benchama Bophit "is a sight to behold. The perfect symmetry and proportions must inspire admiration of this architectural masterpiece" (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2010). The ordination hall also appeared in several TAT's media outlets, e.g. postcards, posters, calendars, books, and web pages (Figure 10), and became synonymous with Thailand.

Apart from reflecting the commodification of Thainess, the pecuniary link between Wat Benchama Bophit and tourism illustrated that the Thai identity had transmuted to be the nation's viable asset to invest and exploit (Peleggi, 2001, p. 34). In contrast to the Marble Temple, without royal flair, flamboyant



Source: The Tourism Authority of Thailand

**Figure 10.** A promotional image of Wat Benchama Bophit.

embellishment, and luxurious materiality, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok rarely registered in a popular tourist map of Thailand despite its aesthetic values, such as a conceptual congruence between tectonic and decorative principles in the design of the ubosot. Notwithstanding the lack of publicity to foreign visitors, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok continued to serve the state, but in a way that was not originally intended by its creators.

#### **4.2 *Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok: From A Proletarian Heaven to a National Crematorium***

Within less than twenty years since the fall of the absolutist rule, the People's Party regime met its demise after a long and bitter vying for political domination between its military and civilian groups. Both Pibulsonggram and Pridi Phanomyong, head of the civilian faction, ended their lives while in exile.

From 1957 to the mid-1970s, notwithstanding some elections and bureaucratized civilian administrations, the country was governed mostly by a series of junta. Beset with coups and counter-coups, Thailand—whose terminology stood for “land of the free”—was democratic just in the name. Pibul's successors, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-1973), were traditionalists. Espousing orderliness, cleanliness, and conformity, the nationalistic principles of these strongmen derived from a military/martial ethos and reverted to the Siamese absolutist triumvirate values of nation, religion, and monarchy, substituting exotic and intangible ideas—like democracy, egalitarianism, and constitutionalism—promulgated by previous administrations.

In order to legitimize and maintain his authoritarian rule, Sarit resuscitated the role, status, ancient custom of devaraja and Lèse majesté law. The revival of the monarchical grounding in the discourse of Thainess also instituted the omnipotent and sacrosanct position the incumbent crown, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. In their efforts to relegate the influence of the preceding regimes, Sarit and

his progenies portrayed Khana Rasadorn and its members as being anti-monarchy and thus “un-Thai”. Pridi and Pibul were demonized as a monarchy destroying communist and a megalomaniac autocrat respectively. The People's Party and the 1932 Revolution as a whole was perceived as an inept and premature endeavor to bring democracy to Thailand (Jeamteerasakul, 2001, pp. 34-36; and Prakitnondhakarn, 2004, pp. 464-465).

In socio-cultural dimension, the royalists tarnished the value of art and architecture during the post-1932 period as well. For example, M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, a royal descent Thai Prime Minister (1975-1976) and conservative scholar, criticized that art in the age of Khana Rasadorn was the most degraded form of aesthetics. To phrase it under nationalistic term, he went on, there was no “Thai” art during this time. Leaders of the coup promoters had no understanding and appreciations for beauty. They were intelligentsias, whose knowledge and taste did not venture beyond nude images in Parisian street cafés. When the age of royal absolutism ended in 1932, People's Party cadres though they must change the country in every aspect. So, traditional Thai art must be abolished, since it was sponsored by the absolutist reign (Pramoj, M. R., 1985, as cited in Prakitnondhakarn, 2009, p. 2).

Correspondingly, the concept of the Thai nationhood along with the discourse of Thainess were reinterpreted and altered. Although the junta retained some aspects of Pibul's Nation Building Program—chiefly the modernization process—they abolished and/or amended most cultural policies and social practices of their predecessors. With the termination of Pibul's twelve Cultural Mandates, architecture of the state together with other cultural artifacts conceived by Khana Rasadorn lost the *raison d'être* to mediate power of the state and to signify what the royalists perceived as the Thai identity. Consequently, the military regime re-appropriated and reconstructed their meanings by displacing the framework of representations.

During the Cold War, Thailand aligned with the United States and the Free World in the armed conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that lasted until the late-1980s. Thai troops battled against their neighbors under a banner of defending the country from communist expansions. Domestically, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) intensified its revolutionary war throughout the country—claiming thousands of lives from Thai citizens.

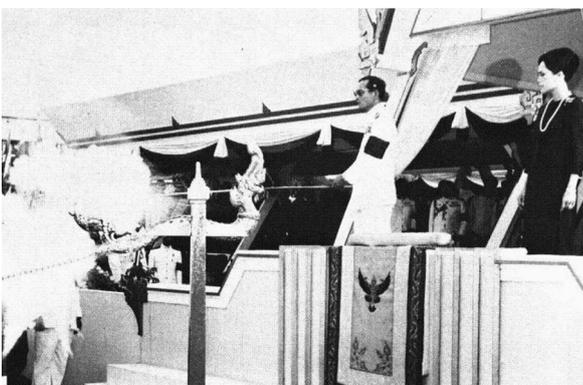
As the armed conflicts prolonged, the junta employed Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok as an official crematorium for dead armed personnel and government officials who lost their lives in the line of duty. Apart from honoring the fallen “national heroes,” the funerals at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok were symbolically intended to muster public support and sympathy for participating in the war in Indochina, as well as for curbing the internal communist insurgency. The funerals became a state affair, presided over by King Bhumibol and the royal family (Figure 11). The temple was re-semanticized to propagate a new sense of nationalism and democracy under the regal authority coupled with the power of the military rule. Although there is no substantial account to verify the reason behind the government’s selection for Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok in such a capacity, it is not too far to hazard the suggestion that its original name: Wat Prachathipatai (the Democracy Temple) and

the militaristic history of the location might play an important part in utilizing this religious structure as a state crematorium to honor the sacrifices for the democratic ideology and Thai nationhood. Regardless of the true cause on this matter, the Royal Thai Air Force had continued to use Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok as an official crematorium, even after the armed conflicts in Southeast Asia and the communist insurgency ended.

The semantic refashioning of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok occurred through a reinvention of religious ritual—the state funerals—in place of a physical modification. The concept of sacred kingship was revised and merged with a modern practice of constitutional monarchy under an authoritative umbrella of the royal-national historiography, contesting and eventually eclipsing the People’s Party’s idea of egalitarian democracy and Pibul’s vision for Thainess. Whereas the original meaning of the temple became merely a vague vestige on public memory, by re-articulating the discourse of Thainess, the hegemony of the royal-national history rendered any symbolic identification of Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok with Khana Rasadorn in a negative connotation.

## 5. Conclusion

The above discussions delineate that the royal elites, People’s Party government, junta regime, and successive administrations alike resorted to the discourse of Thainess under dissimilar definitions to mediate, legitimize, and maintain their power by constructing, reinterpreting, and re-inscribing the meanings of Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok. The preceding critical and analytical examinations on both temples also reveal the manners in which Buddhist symbolism and iconography had been manipulated to serve politics via under ideological pretenses, sanctified by spiritual beliefs, as well as religious rituals, rites, and practices.



Source: The Royal Archives

**Figure 11.** King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit presiding over a state funeral at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok during the 1970s.

As much as the ruling authorities in modern Thailand and their politics of representations shaped the aesthetics and significations of the temples, the hybridized designs of Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok supplied them: 1) a means of power meditation; 2) a symbolic device for the creations and revisions of Thainess; and 3) a strategic tool to implement social policies as well as to prescribe political ideologies for the populaces. The hybridity of the temples was, thereby, a tactical method employed by Thai governments to appropriate Western/modern material culture to suit their own political agenda by reciting the concept of Thai nationhood through the built environment.

By operating as a means to reframe the Thai-self, the temples became a sacred-cum-secular tool to locate the Thai cultural and national identities along with/against the Western initiated projects in the name of a modernization process. Their hybridized designs further demonstrated that the Thai identity was essentially a product of modernity, which had been hybridized in various aspects. In other words, the identification of Thainess was an outcome of a historically-rooted and culturally-grounded system of knowledge and power production, which had been defined and redefined itself over the course of the Westernization and modernization processes in Siam and Thailand.

In short, Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok exemplified that, in addition to generating the Thai identity and reflecting the Thai worldviews on the West and modernity, the discourse of Thainess—the Occidentalizing project—had uncovered the uncertainty and anxiety among the Thais over their own modernization and Westernization processes. As evident by the characteristics of the ordination halls, perhaps the most important contribution from the West and modernity to the making of Thai-self had been their role in the production of hybridized knowledge and power, giving rise to continued dialogues concerning Thailand's path to modernity.

In any case, the transformations of meanings for both temples testified that, similar to language, architecture of the state in Thailand had been in a perpetual evolution. Architectural signification had been caught between the polarities of: 1) conservative force tending to preserve the existing meanings; and 2) revolutionary force striving for the rise of new meanings. The conservative force led to stability of meanings and institutionalization of forms. Its revolutionary counterpart replaced old meanings and forms with new ones. The forms remained the same, but the meanings were in flux. As aptly summed up by Juan Pablo Bonta (1979):

“The repeated use of a signal may lead finally to its obsolescence. When a form becomes obsolete it may be ‘de-semanticized,’ it loses its meaning and its usage may be abandoned. Abandoning a form, however, is a rare event in the history of design. Once a form is established and has become familiar to a certain community, it will tend to recur over and over again before fading, ‘re-semanticized’ with some supplementary or metaphorical meaning, as the result of some subtle principle of economy. Changes of meaning are far more frequent than a disappearance of forms” (29).

Moreover, the politics of representations at Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok discloses that buildings are not inherently suppressing or emancipating. People employ them to generate such meanings, and by a discursive mode of signification buildings can serve interests for which they are not originally intended. In essence, these ubosots testify that “architecture thus responds to broader cultural issues outside its own aesthetic and semantic preoccupations” (Panin, 2007, p. 147).

As the present Thailand is progressing towards a more pluralistic society and cultural entity, awareness on the true nature of Thainess needs to be elucidated and disseminated. In bringing the investigations to a close, this research would like to reiterate that the Thai identity is indeed

a product of taxonomies mistakenly identified as methodology instead of theoretical foundations. Besides ideological deceptions, Thai people's experience with Western colonization, or the lack thereof, framed the creation and revision of the Thai identity. As shown by Wat Benchama Bophit and Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Bangkok, Thainess has been used to support an established point of view projected by the ruling authorities as a legitimate discourse about Thailand to advocate and defend certain perspectives, sentiments, constraints, taboos,

alibis, possibilities and plausibilities while repressing and negating others (Winichakul, 1994, p. 173). The relationships between the two temples and their social, cultural, and political settings are dialectical, complicated, intertwined, ambiguous, controversial, and contradictory in nature. Regardless of these complexities, investigating the dialogues among architecture, hybridity, identity, and ideology remains quintessential to understand the mediation of power as well as the politics of representations in the built environment.

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