

Chakri Maha Prasat: A Colonial Discourse in Siamese Architecture

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Abstract

Modernity is a creation of the West. In a non-Western context, it normally reflects a direct intervention of the Western powers by means of colonization. However, the Siamese, known today as the people of Thailand, have argued that they are an exception to such an occurrence.

The shift toward Western culture and Modernity is evident in the production of Thai cultural artifacts, notably its art and architecture throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Many works have been the results of hybrid designs—the syntheses between European and Siamese artistic styles, either in painting, sculpture, costume, music, literature, performing art, cuisine, or architecture. One of the best known examples is the Chakri Maha Prasat. Situated at the central location in the Grand Palace or *Praborommaharajawung* in Bangkok, this throne hall holds more importance than simply evidence of stylistic changes; it is in essence a manifestation of social, political, and cultural awareness, as well as bearers of national identity.

This research illustrates how various architectural ideas have contributed to the physical design and spatial configuration of places associated with negotiation and allocation of political power in 19th century Siam, such as the Chakri Maha Prasat. It also examines the Siamese's resistance and reconciliation to process of colonization.

Keywords

19th – 20th century Architecture in Thailand
Critical Studies on Thai Architectural History
Post-colonial Theories
Cross-cultural Studies
Semiology
Hybridity

Introduction

Modernity is a creation of the West. In a non-Western context, it normally reflects a direct intervention of the Western powers by means of colonization. However, the Siamese, known today as the people of Thailand, have argued that they are an exception to such an occurrence by experiencing Modernity without a physical occupation from the West.

The shift toward Western culture and Modernity is evident in the production of Thai cultural artifacts, notably its art and architecture during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many works have been the results of hybrid designs—the syntheses between European and Siamese artistic styles, either in painting, sculpture, costume, music, literature, performing art, cuisine, or architecture. One of the best known examples is Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall. Situated at the central location in the Grand Palace in Bangkok, the edifice holds more importance than simply evidence of stylistic changes; it is in essence a manifestation of social, political, and cultural awareness, as well as a bearer of national identity.

The subject of hybrid Siamese–European architecture has been extensively researched. The majority of the studies, however, shares the view prescribed by the “royal–national history”: great Siamese kings and ruling elite adopting only good things from the West to “civilize” the country while successfully preserving the traditional values [1]. These studies have contributed a saturated field of knowledge in terms of historical, typological, and stylistic analyses based on canonized chronological accounts of the Siamese courts as exemplified by royalist historian Naengnoi Suksri’s antiquarian work *Palace Architecture in Bangkok* (1996). While the aforementioned types of scholarly literature are impressive and imperative, this paper does not seek to follow their cliché. Instead, it presents an alternative reading on Chakri Maha Prasat via semiology, or a study of signs, on a Post-colonial perspective.

Being interpretative and critical rather than descriptive and didactic, this article explores the meanings of the throne hall and illustrate how various architectural ideas have contributed to the physical design and spatial configuration of places associated with politics such as Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall. The paper also examines the Siamese’s resistance and reconciliation to process of colonization, arguing that the appropriation of Western material culture by the Modernizing elite have subjected the country into an alternative form of Western domination: cultural and intellectual colonization with the elite inadvertently acting as colonial agents. As a consequence, hybrid Siamese–European architecture like Chakri Maha Prasat renders the Thais’ assertion of “Modernization without Westernization” very problematic.

In addition, against the convention in Thai academia on neutrality of architecture, interpretations shown here further a criticism raised by recent studies [2] that Chakri Maha Prasat served as a discourse for “power politics.” The ruling elite used the building to generate meanings to pursue their own political interests and negate others via a discursive mode of architectural signification. Accompanying what appears to be a stylistic schizophrenia, the design of Chakri Maha Prasat manifests levels of plurality, complexity, and contradiction in its meanings, which are always ambiguous, fluctuating, and even paradoxical.

A Brief History of Chakri Maha Prasat Building

Commissioned by King Rama V, or Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the foundation of Chakri Maha Prasat was laid on May 9, 1876 to celebrate the centennial of the Chakri Dynasty and to be a showpiece of Chulalongkorn’s Modernizing spirit and his self-aggrandization. The edifice was initially planned not as a single structure, but as a compound of multiple buildings composed of three aggregated structures; each contains various royal rooms for different functions (Figure 1).

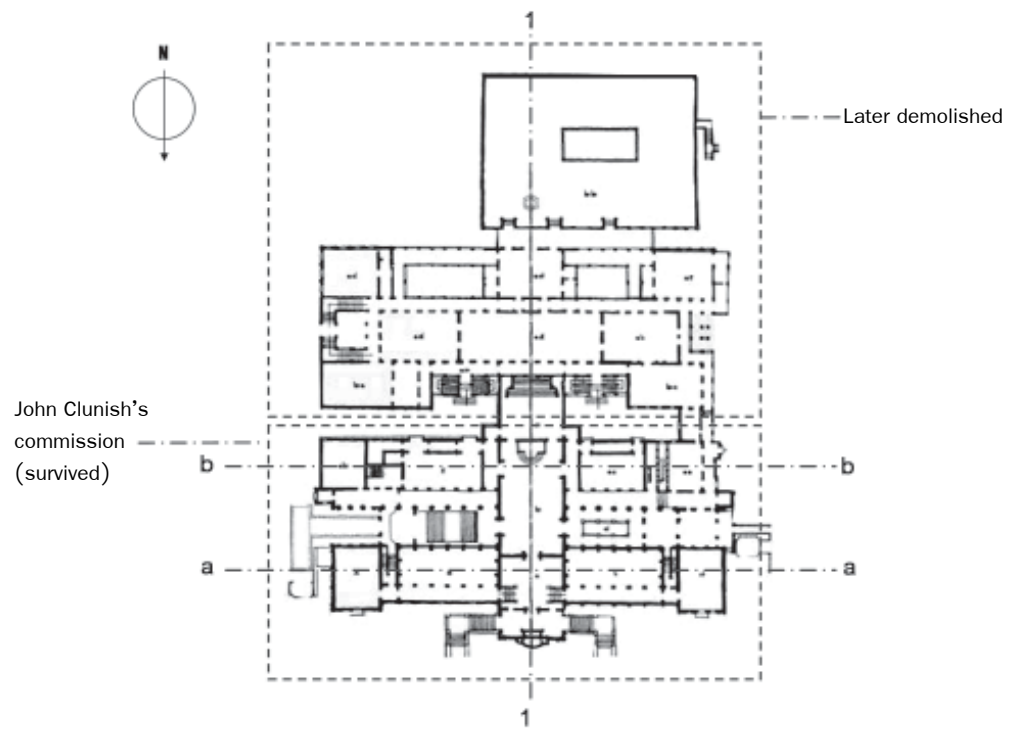


Figure 1 Chakri Maha Prasat ground floor plan as originally built

Despite the fact that Chakri Maha Prasat was originally conceived as a group of buildings, this article concentrates its investigation primarily on the frontal piece which is the throne hall: the main portion that has survived to the present day (Figure 1). Designed by a Singapore-based British architect John Clunish, the throne hall was built between 1876 and 1882, under the supervision of Henry Clunish Rose and Chaopraya Panuwongmahakosathibodi (Tuam Bunnak). Since the time of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-1925), the royal residences have moved out of the Grand Palace, leaving Chakri Maha Prasat abandoned and degenerated. A major renovation was undertaken by King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935) in 1932. Due to budgetary constraints, the attached structure in the rear could not be restored, and was demolished. Only the frontal portion (Clunish's work) remained. In 1982, during the reign of King Bhumibol or Rama IX, the present King of Thailand, another major renovation project took place for Bangkok's Bicentennial Celebration in 1982. The edifice has been transformed into reception and throne halls, royal shrines, galleries, armory, repository, and a museum.

Physical Analysis

Physical Description and Formal Analysis

In the frontal piece, the plan is symmetrical, faced by a carefully manicured Chinese-style garden with topiary. Fundamentally, it is a rotated H-shape composition, with a three-story structure at each leg of the "H," and a two-story structure with a basement at the bar of the "H." This arrangement generates two axes—north-south (line 1-1) and east-west (lines a-a, and b-b)—intersecting above the Waiting Hall and Throne Hall (Figure 1). At the crossing point in the Waiting Hall, a large Thai spire, or *Prasat*, located between two smaller counterparts, contributes unity to the overall design [3]. When projecting this geometry vertically to organize the building's body in three-dimensional space, the unity of forms is achieved via absolute symmetry and balance, especially in the front facade. Under the Throne Hall lies a rusticated podium functioning as storage. Above the hall are the galleries. Each represents the heavenly palace, and all are linked to one another by processional arcades (Figure 2) [4].

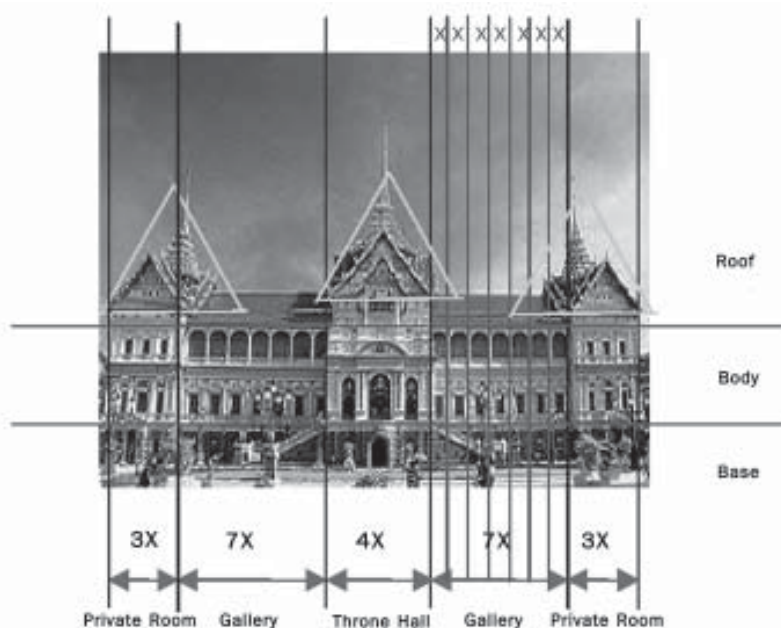


Figure 2 Geometrical analyses: vertical and horizontal dimensions on the front facade
(Author's collection with notation from the author)

Turning to the massing and elevation treatments, solving the problem of Chakri Maha Prasat's sheer size seems to be the architect's main concern. The building is divided vertically into three parts: base, body and roof, with rusticated-surface materials to express the heaviness at the base (Figure 2). Horizontally, the body of the edifice is broken down into five parts: two flanking towers and the central portion connected by two Mookrasans, or galleries, with bands of arcades and large windows. In conjunction with the vertical orientation of the towering spires, these five elements create a feeling of lightness in the entire composition. Such a feature is strengthened by the arrangement of structural bays: pilasters and engaging columns that generate equal rhythms throughout the facade. Here, the application of a modular system is quite visible. For example, each bay of the columns or pilasters serves as a basic measurement unit (X), constituting the whole front facade configuration: the Private Rooms ($3X$ for each); the Galleries ($7X$ for each); and the Reception/Throne Hall ($4X$) (Figure 2). The bulkiness is moderated by the projecting/cascading entrance portico, giving the building a human scale, but still

retaining the majestic character of the throne hall. Furthermore, the Thai tiered roofs and spires, the Prasats, together with dormers and gables, help reduce the large, massive straight roof surface. Their triangular forms pointing toward the sky effectively reinforces the appearance of verticality (Figure 2).

Stylistic Analysis

A stylistic analysis of the throne hall yields the Neo-Classical spatial organization in plan. Since the building was laid out according to an intersection at the cardinal axis, symmetry for formal and spatial organization, as well as circulation, was created. With such a rational arrangement, clear circulation into and through the structure is obvious (Figure 1).

As for the facade, with its rusticated base, carefully proportioned structural bays forming perfect double squares, projecting cornice, frieze and architrave dividing the floors, as well as the engaged Corinthian order, the building appears largely in the English Neo-Renaissance Style. This Italianated architectural design stresses utilitarian elements and a rational composition of the pieces over lavish surface ornamentation of Classical elements. Since

architect John Clunish was British, it is possible to assume that influences from his countryman Inigo Jones, an advocate of an Italian master Andrea Palladio's works, might play a significant role in the facade design of the Chakri Maha Prasat.

Upon close examination, decorative elements reveal that the interior design of the throne hall is eclectic, resulted from more than a synthesis of two styles. The stairway at the King's Entrance is reminiscent of the Austro-German Baroque tradition of grand staircases where an imposing stairway dominates entry hall space. Other Baroque vestiges exist as well. Details inside the Private Reception Rooms boast extravagantly gilded tendrils framing vaults and ceilings. Influences from French Rococo decoration can also be seen adorning the wall and ceiling in the royal quarters above the State and Private Dining Rooms where flamboyant decorative components weave together the vertical and horizontal planes.

As regards the traditional Siamese architectural elements, the roofs and spires of Chakri Maha Prasat descend from those of the late Ayutthaya Period in a direct line of palace architecture tradition (Figure 2). Nonetheless, the building is not an exact copy of Ayutthaya throne halls. Since its design is based on a Western plan, the Siamese superstructure cannot follow its original stylistic pattern. Not only is the terra cotta roof less steeply sloped, but the gilded spires are also shorter and more corpulent than the traditional models [5].

Finally, it is worthy to note that the stylistic arrangement of the throne hall's interior space displays quite an amicable visual composition, as opposed to the crashing effect produced by the facade design. Although far from being an expression of a refined taste, this so-called "orgy of styles," has created an energetic living environment as evident in the Reception Hall (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Reception Hall and the Throne

Semiology: Iconographic and Symbolic Analysis & Interpretation

Spiritual Signification

Hinduism

Chakri Maha Prasat was conceived on the concept of double identities. Its traditional Siamese elements, i.e., spires and roofs, signify the cosmic model—heaven, earth, and the underworld in which the throne hall dwells at the center of the universe—while the European body manifests the existence of that ideological universe on the earthly world—the physical reality in Newtonian Physics that could be bodily experienced. Instead of being perceived as opposite polarities, or as a separation between the sacred and profane, the Siamese ruling elite viewed the dualism of these buildings as complimentary and uniting [6].

On that basis, Chakri Maha Prasat symbolizes the house of god where the power of *Vishnu* lies. Simultaneously, they are houses of majesties who possess *rasa*—superior and sophisticated artistic and esthetical tastes. This creates the image of Self to distinguish them from the rest of the Siamese population, the Other. It is reinforced by an integration of the animistic belief, particularly the cosmic animals, which are powerful vehicles of the deities, for decorative elements and emblems, i.e., *Garuda* (man-bird), *Airavata* (three-headed elephant), *Singha* (lion), and *Naga* (serpent). All of these are coupled with the European designs, which also become part of the Self.

Buddhism

By alluding to the Buddhist holy book of *Dhrama*: the *Tipitaka* [7], the edifice's disharmonious juxtaposition of Western and traditional Siamese architectural styles could be equated with the two different levels of knowledge: the mundane, or *lokiya*, and the supra-mundane or the enlightenment, known as *lokutara*. Metaphorically, the knowledge of the physical world commanded by the king—the profane, i.e., Western science and technology, the physical reality in the Newtonian Physics—is signified by its British Neo-Renaissance body and the Italianated Neo-classical plan. Above it lies the knowledge of enlightenment—the sacred—that only the *Bodhisattva*—king possesses, symbolized by the Siamese spires and tiered roofs.

Social Signification

Royal Authority and Caste System

Examining the meanings of the throne hall requires an understanding on its context: the Grand Palace. The fact that symbolic meanings of Siamese cities, palaces, temples, and royal buildings derive from Hindu-Buddhism cosmology is widely recognized. *Mandala*, or cosmic diagram, depicting the law of the universe has been translated into spatial organization of the built environment throughout Asia. Notwithstanding, most studies on Thai architecture, including the majority of those on Chakri Maha Prasat, view this microcosmic concept and practice chiefly as a spiritual-cum-cultural heritage, and downplay if not ignoring its political and social applications. In other words, few studies employed the *Mandala* diagram as a basis for their architectural interpretation, particularly on political and social signification of the throne hall.

While not strictly laid out according to a sacred geometry of a *Mandala* diagram, it can be argued that the layout of Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall and the site plan of *Praborommaharajawung*, are primary tools to convey the meaning of political authority and social structure (Figure 4). Yet, it was not the form of the palace or the throne hall per se, but rather an allusion to principles of Hindu-Buddhist microcosm of the built environment that supply them a framework for political and social signification.

Beginning from outside of the fortified wall, space is organized by establishing a sequence of access, subdivided by walls, gates and courtyards as screening devices, suggesting a social ordering system. In the physical sense, the more one progresses through the sequence, the closer that person comes to the monarch. Similarly, in social and spiritual signification, the more one advances through the physical screenings, the higher his/her social status and spiritual being are elevated.

According to the Hindu-Buddhist cosmography, as depicted by the *Mandala* diagram, the god-king resides on *Mt. Meru*, surrounded by four continents and vast oceans. At the summit of the mountain is the Chakri Maha Prasat where the seat of cosmic power lies: the throne. When translating this ideology into physical reality, the approaching path metaphorically slopes up to the conceptual mountain. As a result, the Grand Palace's flat terrain becomes an elevated ground: a sacred geometry of a concentric plan pierced by an axial passageway that is also the path of the god descending to the earth. Symbolizing the topography of the universe, the outer high walls, bastions and series of inner walls around the palace stand for the four continents. The Chao Praya River to the west of the palace The social domain of *Shudra* (manual labor) and the subaltern (woman in the Harem) performs as a reference to the oceans.

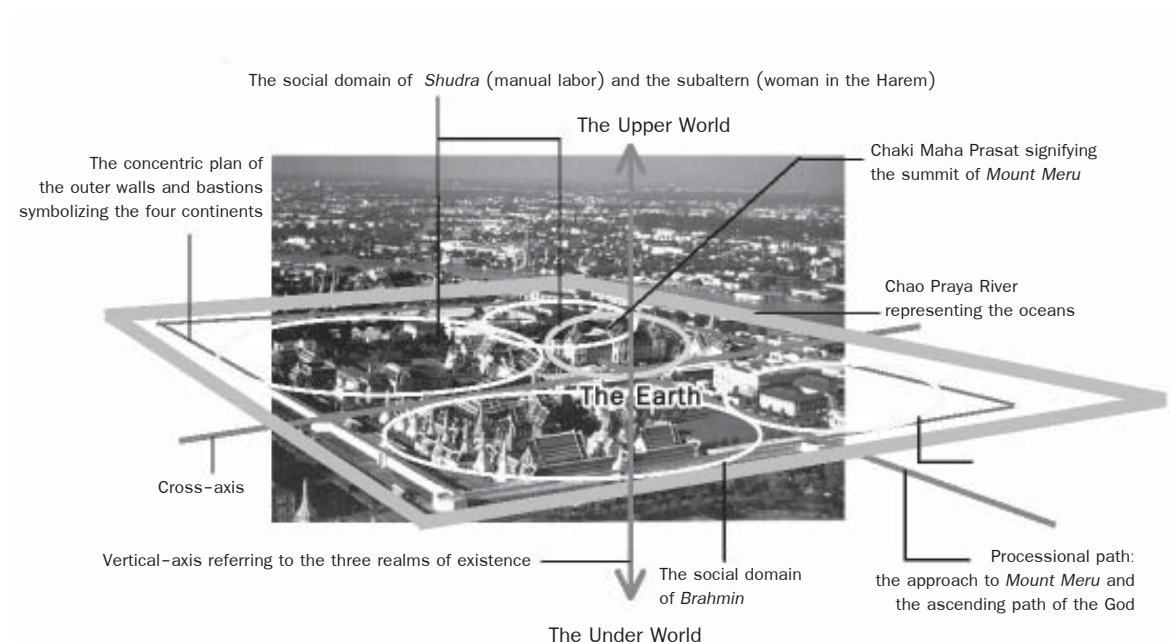


Figure 4 The Grand Palace's cosmographical interpretation, based on the sacred geometry of a *Mandala* Diagram
(Author's collection with notation from the author)

With regard to the site plan of the Grand Palace (Figure 4), its outer parts can be visualized as the areas around the summit where *Vishnu*'s loyal subjects live, implying the principle of the Caste System. Up the ladder, social hierarchy begins with the Emerald Buddha Temple, sanctified ground used for Buddhist and Brahman rituals and ceremonies that symbolizes the high status of *Brahmin* or the clergyman class. Next to it are various governmental offices, referring to the second class of *Kshatriya*, or warrior. Near this group are the Royal Mint and its facility, signifying a lower social status for the class of merchant or *Vaisy*. Finally, the area behind the Chakri Maha Prasat is preserved for living quarters of female members of the royal family and their attendants, accessible exclusively by the king. It is equivalent to the back of the cosmic mountain, where the lowest social class resides: woman and common labor, or *Shudra*. The area could be seen as being a town-in-town, comparable to the Chinese Neichao, the Harem of the Forbidden City. Evidently, the oppression of the female is inherent in traditional Siamese society. The female quarter's obscure location and its restricted access represent the silent voice of the "Subaltern [8]."

Political Signification

Colonialism and Anti-colonialism

In a recent publication on the royal consumption of cultural artifacts and the remaking of their self-image, Maurizio Peleggi's book *Lords of Things* (2002) spends a considerable amount of criticism on hybrid Siamese-European architecture, calling it as "kitsch." Although offering well-grounded arguments on the questions of good taste and the validity of Siamese Modernizing elite re-fashioning of self-identity, Peleggi seems to miss the point when it comes to political implications of the hybrid buildings [9].

Unlike Peleggi, this article maintains that Siam's resistance to Western colonization happened via the appropriation and subversion of Western cultural artifacts and practices, rather than through brute force. By creating hybrids, the Siamese rewrote, reinterpreted, rearranged, and recreated European cultural artifacts to suit their ends, instead of mindlessly copying them. In architecture, the Siamese resistance to European colonial powers was exhibited through the integration of Western architectural styles with the Siamese system of signification—the Siamization process of Western architecture—resulting in hybrid Siamese-European designs [10].

Applications of such a subversive discourse to combat Western colonization are evident in the design of the Chakri Maha Prasat, notably via the edifice's disharmonious juxtaposition. Chaopraya Srisuriyawong (Chaung Bunnak), the former Regent, turned the building into a savvy political statement, when he persuaded King Rama V to superimpose the Thai roof and spires over the European body instead of having three domes to finish the throne hall in an entire Western design [11]. The former Regent's reason was that the king should follow the royal tradition of Siamese kings in constructing *Prasats* or throne halls.

Knowing the magnitude of the political implications for having a Thai roof and spires over the European body, Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) decided to follow Srisuriyawong's advice. In any case, a caution must be heeded that the clashing effect between the Thai roof and European bodies may also be perceived as a material embodiment of the internal power struggle within the Siamese ruling elite between Chulalongkorn's Modernizing faction and conservative nobles led by Bunnak family. The encounter suggests that, by the late 19th century, the conservative party was still a force to be reckoning

with. The king and his progressive circle (Young Siam) had to compromise and could not fully proceed with their Modernization scheme.

In spite of the above possibility, Chakri Maha Prasat's anti-colonial message appears more tangible. By turning the throne hall into a hybrid structure, the king exhibited Siamese cultural dominance over European culture by literally placing the former above the latter. Although being conceived in a Western manner, the hybridity of the Chakri Maha Prasat functions as a parody of its origins, undermining the strength of Western civilization and thus invalidating the claim of Western righteousness in their colonial process.

Through hybridization, the meanings of Chakri Maha Prasat in resisting West colonialism begin to emerge when contemplating the Thai custom of assigning hierarchical values to different parts of the human anatomy. The belief identifies that the most revered and auspicious part is the head, where a headdress is worn to characterize the wearer's socio-economic status, while the least propitious ones are the feet, where footwear is worn (Figure 5). In this respect, Chakri Maha Prasat becomes an organic entity [12].

Similar to a human figure, the edifice's European base and body are equivalent to legs and a torso dressed in European attire. Indubitably, the superstructure of the building is analogous to a head of a royal personage, where a traditional Thai crown would be put on, which was insinuated by the spires and tiered roof. Hence, the message of Siamese's superiority: a cultural-cum-political connotation carried by the throne hall, was manifested loud and clear.



Figure 5 A composite drawing of a European lady dressing in Victorian costume and wearing Thai crown (Author's collection with notation from the author)

Be that as it may, in order to effectively combat Western encroachment, the Siamese kings and the ruling elite had to oppress their own people, for which the Chakri Maha Prasat—as explained earlier—became as an excellent medium through its spiritual and social signification. This phenomenon of the twin trajectories of colonial/anti-colonial processes left a profound mark on Thai civilization. Compared to its neighbors, i.e., Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, Thailand had no experience in dismantling foreign colonial governments and institutions. On the contrary, as a nation-state, historians generally view the country in terms of continuity in social, political, and cultural systems [13]. Accordingly, the anti-colonial discourse operating through nationalism: the king, religion and nation, had a different rationale by avoiding Western colonization rather than experiencing it.

Cultural Signification

Cultural and National Identity

Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall manifests Thai national and cultural identity in two ways via what Post-colonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon (1965; 1995) called an “oppositional discourse of Self and Other [14].” Through this mode, the throne hall signifies its meanings in binary terms, for instance positive versus negative, divine versus secular, indigenous versus foreign, etc. By creating positive identification, or “what it is,” its multiplicity and duplicity of architectural styles testify for the double identity (god-king) and multiple consciousness (sacred/profane, progressive/conservative, Western/Siamese, etc.) of the monarchy, and ruling elite, as well as Siam as a whole. Although the edifice is conceived as a vision for the future of the kingdom, it is not intended to be understood as a break from the traditional past, but rather as a sign of continuation in the social, political, and cultural structures of Siam. The throne hall’s material conditions link the heritage from the past, represented by Thai spires and tiered roofs, to the vision of the future, a nation-state symbolized by a European body of the building.

By employing Western architectural styles in his throne hall, King Chulalongkorn presented himself to the world as: a) a ruler of a modern nation that was also a regional force to be reckoned with; b) a sovereign who was shrewd in international politics; c) a powerful power broker; d) a connoisseur of European art and culture; and e) a highly educated gentleman of Western technology and knowledge not as a figurehead of an ancient empire but as chief executive of a modern nation-state. At the same time, for Thai people, Chakri Maha Prasat’s traditional Siamese architectural elements maintained the status of the king as a *Devaraja*, whose cosmic power would defeat the invasion of Western colonial powers, and lead the

kingdom to a golden future. Reconciliation of these two contradictory meanings was achieved that the creation of a hybrid structure, inharmoniously juxtaposes European and the traditional Siamese architectural styles. The throne hall, then, functioned as a part of the overall selfdom of the modern Thai nation-state, expressing that “the identity of the king is what the identity of the nation is all about, and without the king Siam cannot therefore be a nation.”

Such an egocentric perspective is institutionalized as the cultural-cum-political duty for cultural artifacts, most visibly in architecture. The homologous opposition of the Chakri Maha Prasat reinforces the myth of the nation. The hybridity of Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall manifests this by combining what the sovereign thinks is the best of the European styles with those of the Thai.

The Chakri Maha Prasat displays the national and cultural identity of Siam in terms of negative identification, or “what it is not,” as well. While exhibiting what Siam wants to be, the edifice also demonstrates what the nation does not want to be, or does not want others to perceive it as [15]. The throne hall’s hybridity is equated with the Buddhist “middle path” ideology used by King Rama V to give Siamese people a way to adopt Western knowledge and culture that is in accordance with their applicability to situations in Siam, not according to the models or standards of their origins. At the same time, even though preserving traditional Siamese institutions and customs, these too can be modified to suit the nation’s circumstances. Those that are not useful should be abandoned altogether.

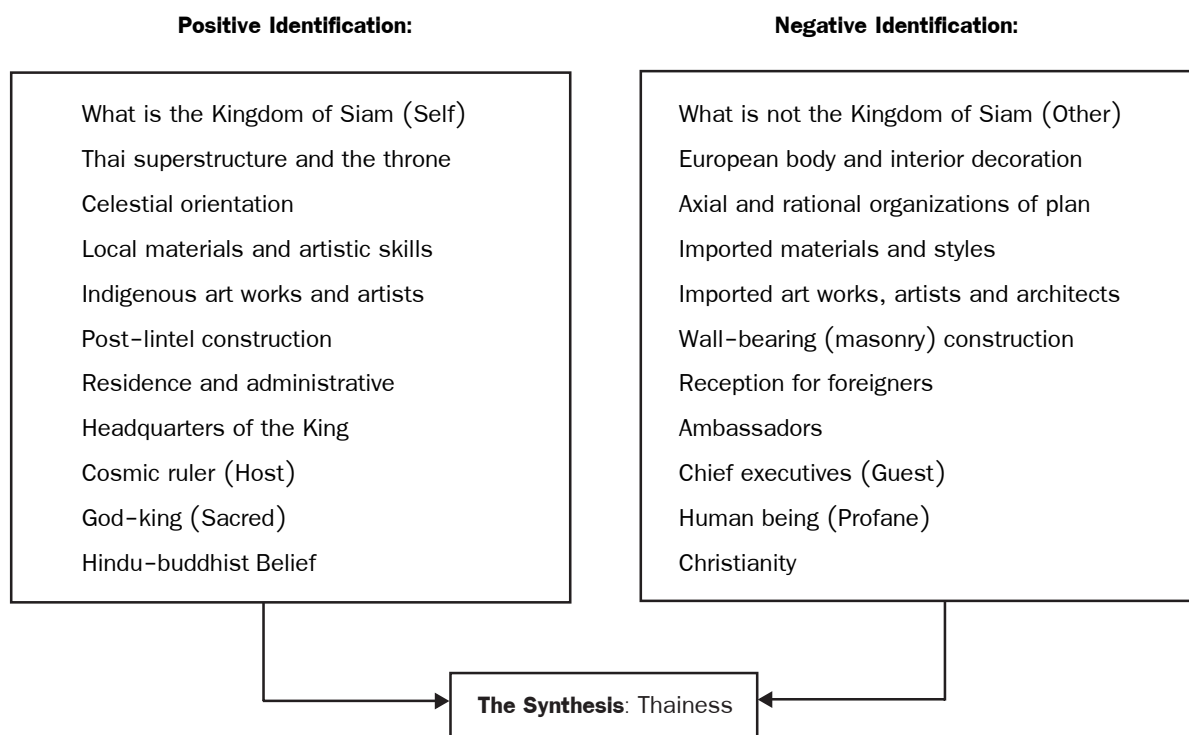


Figure 6 The positive and negative identifications of Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall

The hegemony of Buddhism, the royal authority, and Siamese culture, over Christianity and Western civilization is expressed by the location of the Thai spires and tiered roofs on top of the European body in the architectural composition of Chakri Maha Prasat (Figure 2 & 5). In doing so, the building also demonstrates the national and cultural identity of Siam by creating an oppositional discourse of Self and Other, described in the above diagram.

Then, a new and eclectic albeit syncretic identity of the kingdom emerged. As shown by the diagram (Figure 6), the cultural identity of Siam manifested by the throne hall—based on the triad values of nation, religion, and monarchy—is a mixture of what seems to be a Western and Modern oriented culture, conservative practice and traditional values. Here, the process of globalizing forces (colonization: Westernization and Modernization), which draws Siam and its people, as well as events, onto the world stage, coexists with the power of localizing forces (anti-colonization: Siamization) that reify, exoticize, and ultimately turn Thai culture into opposition against the globalization process [16]. A play between the

exoticism of locality and the globalization process generates a paradox affirmed by Chakri Maha Prasat as the national and cultural identity of Siam.

Conclusion

Far from offering a comprehensive account, this study presents merely one way of comprehending and appreciating Chakri Maha Prasat throne hall, and by extension, Siamese culture. Although it attempts to the conduct its investigation in multi-dimensions, there are other topics excluded from the picture, namely in the areas of gender and economic signification, apart from the tectonic aspect of the building.

However, this research provides a ground for arguing that Siam has successfully stayed autonomous is highly in fact questionable. In order to maintain its sovereignty by claiming to be a civilized Modern dominion, the kingdom has to sacrifice precisely what it fights for: its independence. Although Siam may escape a physical occupation, it runs straight into an indirect rule, or “crypto-colonization” [17] by

the West, manifested by the production of its cultural artifacts and intellectual works.

As a case in point, the applications of the European architectural components in the Chakri Maha Prasat exhibit that the kingdom's aspiration to imitate the West carries more weight than does conserving its own culture. By taking the notions of nationalism, nationhood, and nation-state as virtues symbolized by European architectural styles, Siam becomes submissive. The throne halls proclaims the superiority of the West in transforming of the Kingdom of Siam into a modern nation-state, rather than promoting the indigenous culture of the Thais. Keep in mind that it was conceived entirely in the Western design, while the Thai elements are an afterthought or are merely decorative details. The throne hall looks predominantly European with numerous modifications of Siamese designs to suit the European concept, not the other way around.

Nevertheless, the throne hall also defines both Anti-colonialism and Colonialism, and vice-versa. While manifesting the identity of "the nation of Siam," the Chakri Maha Prasat, too, is the place where these two forces compete, reflect, converges, and integrate.

On that account, the design of Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall presents well-developed cultural-cum-political strategies and skillful maneuvers by the Siamese monarchs and ruling elite that challenged and countered Western colonization while at the same time maintained their power via the construction of a cultural and national identity. This was accomplished through displays and representations of material conditions in the production of cultural artifacts, notably architecture, by a discursive means of hybridization: rewriting, reinterpreting, rearranging, recreating and displacing.

In doing so, the Siamese kings and the ruling elite adopted Western ways of life, forms of consciousness, traditions, and technology, and then subverted them to produce a statement of resistance and defiance within the confines of the so-called Western "master discourse." The interplay between accommodation and opposition resulted in the strategies of evasion and appropriation, known as "sly-civility," manifested through the hybridization of Western cultural artifacts as a problematizing mode of anti-colonialism [18].

In other words, fighting Western encroachment gave the 19th century Siamese ruling elite justification to oppress the native people under the guise of unifying to create a modern nation. Bangkok's anti-Western colonization turned out to be a colonial process on the inhabitants of today's Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. This was carried out via the discourse of nationhood-making and manifesting "the myth of Thainess—to invent and reaffirm the cultural identity of Siam, in which architecture played a major role, particularly through its hybrid Siamese-European designs.

Finally, Chakri Maha Prasat throne hall further reveals that in constructing national and cultural identity, it supplied an image of "what Siam wants and does not want others to see" rather than "what Siam really is." To accomplish such goals, the discourse of nationhood acted as a framework for creating architectural meaning, and through the production of hybrid structures the Siamese monarchs and ruling elite manipulated architectural signification to suit their own interests.

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 Prakitnondhakarn, Chatri. (2004). Karnmuage Lae Sungkhom in Slipasattapattayakum: Sayam Samai, Thai Prayuk, Chatniyom, Art and Culture. Bangkok: Matichon.
- [3] The Thai spires replaced domes for the roof structure of Chakri Maha Prasat despite King Rama’s V initial desire to construct the throne hall in a truly Western style rather than a Western style interpreted by native Siamese architects.
- [4] Markbreiter, Mark. (1994). “The Rama King and the Chakri Building,” Arts of Asia. May–June 1994.
- [5] Suksri, Naengnoi. (1996). Palace Architecture in Bangkok. London: Thames and Hudson.
- [6] Aasen, Clarence T. (1998). Architecture of Siam: A Cultural History Interpretation. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press.
- [7] The Tipitaka refers to the three baskets of the Pali canon, consisting of the Vinaya pitaka (monastic rules), Sutta Pitaka (sermons of the Buddha) and Abhidhamma (commentaries and philosophical discourses). Thai transcriptions and translations of Pali are also available.
- [8] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1985). “The Rani of Simur” in Europe and Its Others. Vol. 1, Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature on July 1984. et al. Francis Baker. Colchester: University of Essex.
- [9] Peleggi, Maurizio. (2002). Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- [10] “What is articulated in the doubleness of colonial discourse is not the violence of one powerful nation writing out another [but] a mode of contradictory utterance that ambivalently re-inscribes both the colonizer and colonized.” See: Bhabha, Homi. (1995). “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1917.” in Europe and Its Others, ed. Francis Baker, 89.
- [11] He argued: “The royal tradition of construction a throne hall is always based on having a row of three large halls with three spires and tiered roofs on top. In Ayutthaya, Phra Viharn Somdej, Sanpetch Prasat and Phra Suriya Amarin in the Old Grand Palace were built in this way. For Rattanakosin [Bangkok], Chakrapadi Bhimman Throne Hall [Phra Maha Monthien] is equivalent to Phra Viharn Somdej in Ayutthaya, while Dusit Maha Prasat is comparable to the Suriya Amarin. Since the location of Chakri Maha Prasat

Throne Hall sits between the Chakrapadi Bhimman and Dusit Maha Prasat, this building is thereby analogous to the Sanpetch Prasat. Correspondingly, its superstructure should be in harmony with those of the flanking Chakrapadi Bhimman and Dusit Maha Prasat, aside from to be in accordance with the royal tradition.” See: Sukkata, Pensupa. (2000). Yeam Ruan Yeaun Ardeet [Architecture and the Past]. Bangkok: Paktas, 85.

[12] The most obvious case study for assigning socio-political values hierarchically to different parts of human anatomy come from the Siam Royal Language or Rajasapt, stemming from the Khmer’s cult of Devaraja. For example, when a commoner addresses the monarch, he/she must call him/herself “the dirt under his/her majesty feet,” or tai fa laong toulee phrabat, and referring to the monarch as “the lord above the head,” or phra chao you hua.

[13] Although it is true that Siam assumes the identity of a Western-oriented modernized country, totally immersing itself into Western culture is undesirable. As a result, in taking on the identity of a modern nation-state, Siam must distinguish itself from its neighbors who fall into the colonial fate either by being vassal territories for the French or the British, aside from differentiating itself from the colonial powers. To do so, selective Modernization is mandatory, coupled with the construction of the discourse of Thainess. In order to prevent the kingdom from stumbling into a complete conversion to the Euro-centric culture, three requirements must be fulfilled.

Firstly, although permitting the Catholic and Christian Churches to carry on its missionary activities in the country, Christian philosophy must be counteracted and intellectually disputed to preclude it from shaking the faith of the Thais in Buddhist ideology.

Secondly, the absolute monarchy must be maintained by prohibiting the perforation of Western political ideas that could undermine the authority of the monarchy, e.g., democracy and socialism. Yet, in reality, a ban on political ideas is very difficult and impractical. For that reason, Siam has to accept democratic ideology, but only on a superficial level simply to mislead the European that Siam is an open-minded society, while in practice vehemently rejecting it.

Thirdly, the king—symbolizing the spirit of the nation—must find the way to exhibit the superiority of Thai culture and his power, over that of Farangs. He must make his subjects understand the virtue of retaining the indigenous tradition via the exercise of his authority by rituals and ceremonies.

[14] Van Esterik, Penny. (2000). Materializing Thailand, Materializing Culture. Oxford; New York: Berg.

[15] See: Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture and the Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London; New York: Routledge, 1995. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

[16] Van Esterik, Materializing Thailand, Materializing Culture.

[17] See: Winichakul, Thongchai. (1994). Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

[18] See: Parry, Bentina. (1987). “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse.” Oxford Literary Review 9, no. 1&2.

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Figure Credits

Figure 1 Suksri, 1996 with notation from the author

Figure 2 Suksri, 1996

