

ESSAYS ON THAILAND'S ECONOMY AND SOCIETY  
FOR PROFESSOR CHATTHIP NARTSUPHA AT 72

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for Professor Chatthip Nartsupha at 72

edited by  
Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker

Sangsan  
2013



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# TRANSITION DEBATES AND THE THAI STATE: AN OBSERVATION

KULLADA KESBOONCHOO-MEAD AND KENGKIJ KITIRIANGLARP

Left-leaning academic historians both of the West and East have long been interested in studying the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the so-called transition debate. A group of Western scholars have continued to write on this subject.<sup>1</sup> In Thailand before the year of the defeat of the Communist Party of Thailand in the 1980s the topic was lively debated by Chatthip Nartsupha and Nidhi Eoseewong among others. Following the coup in 2006 a new group of Thai academics resurrected the topic asking related question as to the nature of the Thai state and democracy, the role of the monarchy and the socio-economic conditions of the Thai society. In other words they became interested in the question of what factors are obstructing the development of democracy in Thailand. In particular, they again asked questions about the position of the monarchy, the nature of the Thai state, and the socio-economic conditions of Thai society. In 2011 Thongchai Winichakul presented a paper on the legacy of the Thai absolute monarchy. The editor of *Fa dieo kan* asked a group of academics such as Nidhi Eoseewong, Thanet Charoenmuang, and Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead to react.<sup>2</sup>

Here, we argue that the issue of whether or not Thailand can yet be accounted a full democracy must be set within the context of the transition debate. We believe that a study of the nature of the state and its

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1 See the history of the transition debate in the west in Ellen Meiskins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

2 See *Fa dieo kan* [Same Sky], 9, 2 (April-June, 2011).

evolution is key to answering this question. Capitalism has been responsible for state evolution and democracy represents a certain stage in its development. In the democratic system as well its forerunners, the state is the power center that determines in detail the production of society, and decides which groups play what roles. This is particularly the case in the capitalist economy. Hence understanding the development of democracy and the changing nature of the state must begin from examination of the relations between state and capitalism. This paper offers some preliminary observations about the changing nature of the state from the early Ayutthaya period to the revolution in 1932, how it was both determined by capitalism and at the same time influenced the working of capitalism. Expansion of the economy<sup>3</sup> plays an important part in the development of the state both in Europe and Southeast Asia. This approach is developed from work that we have presented earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The paper is divided into three main sections: first, a critical review of important works on the transition debate in Thailand, starting from the writing of Chatthip Nartsupha, Nidhi Eoseewong, Benedict Anderson, Thongchai Winichakul and Chaiyan Rajchakul, as well as those of Jit Phumisak and Songchai Na Yala; second, an adaptation of Victor Lieberman's analysis to explain the development of the Thai state from Ayutthaya to the early Bangkok period. The discussion on state transformation from then to the revolution in 1932 is based on Kullada's study of the Thai absolutist state, incorporating Chaiyan's argument on the transition. Lastly we discuss the transition debate in the works of Nidhi, Ben Anderson, and Thongchai on three issues, namely the feudal state, the bourgeoisie and change in Thai society, and colonialism and the Thai state. The paper aims to raise new questions and present our view on the nature of the Thai state in the present day.

3 The two authors disagree on this point. Kullada uses the framework of Fernand Braudel, seeing long-distance trade in the era prior to the modern state as capitalist, while Kengkij follows Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood's proposition that world capitalism did not arise until Britain adopted a capitalist mode of production. To avoid conflict here, we portray long-distance trade as an expansion of the economy.

4 Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004); and Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *Wiwatthanakan rat angkrit lae farangset nai krasae setthakit lok* [The English and French state transformation in the world economy] (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 2009); Kullada Kesboonchoo, "Thai Democratisation: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives" *Southeast Asia Research*, 3, 2 (1995), pp. 204-18; and Kengkij Kitirianglarp, "Sathana khong wiwatha wa duai kan plian rup khong rat thai phai lang 2475" [The state of debate on the transformation of the Thai state since 1932], *Chunlasan ho chotmai het thammasat* [Thammasat University Archives Bulletin], 16 (June 2012-May 2013), pp. 11-37.



## THE TRANSITION DEBATE IN THAILAND

What is the influence of Nidhi or the Nidhi School on the study of Thai history at present? In 1981, before the appearance of *Pen and Sail*<sup>5</sup> in the journal *Lok Nangsue* (World of Books), Somsak Jeamteerasakul praised Nidhi as follows: “Nidhi Eoseewong is a major historian, the most capable of the present era. Although his output is not large—around ten pieces (about half of which are historical) – yet almost every one of his works has won rapid and widespread acceptance.”<sup>6</sup> Yet twenty-four years later, Chris Baker observed that “There has been no academic review of *Pen and Sail* since it appeared in book form, and there has been no general attempt to review Nidhi’s historical work as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> Though Nidhi received such praise from Somsak for revolutionizing the understanding and practice of Thai history, there has hardly been any work that engages with the thinking and arguments in *Pen and Sail* – indeed scarcely a single work of any significance other than that of Somsak, which should be reevaluated. Apart from the masters theses by Saichol Sattayanurak and Attachak Sattayanurak, Nidhi’s main disciples, not a single other major work has continued the pioneering arguments or the approach presented in *Pen and Sail*.

We agree with Chris Baker that there has been no major critical review of Nidhi’s *Pen and Sail*, only three pieces, appearing many years apart, namely Somsak’s article in 1982,<sup>8</sup> a masters thesis in history by Davisakd Puaksom in 1997,<sup>9</sup> and Chris Baker’s essay in 2005.<sup>10</sup> This paradox leads us to conclude that Nidhi’s present *éclat* has nothing to do with his role as a historian, known by his major works of history, but as a public intellectual, known through his columns in local daily and weekly newspapers. (From this perspective, Chatthip seems to have been more successful, having published numerous books and attracted a large number of disciples to his school).

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5 Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005).

6 Somsak Jeamteerasakul, “Sangkhom thai jak sakdina su thunniyom” [Thai society from feudalism to capitalism], *Journal of Thammasat University*, 11, 2 (June 1982), p. 143.

7 Chris Baker, “Afterword,” in Nidhi, *Pen and Sail*, p. 374.

8 Somsak, “Sangkhom thai jak sakdina su thun niyom,” pp. 128-164.

9 Davisakd Puaksom, “The Readjustment of Knowledge, Truth, and Power of the Elites in Siam, 1782-1868,” Ph.D. thesis, Department of History, Chulalongkorn University, 1997.

10 Baker, “Afterword,” pp. 360-387.

It is generally acknowledged that Nidhi wrote his important work in the late 1970s to argue against the analysis of Thai society by two schools of historical study, namely the Damrong Rajanubhab school and the Marxist school spearheaded by Chatthip Nartsupha.<sup>11</sup> Here we compare the similarities and differences between the Chatthip school and Nidhi school on four important issues.

First, while Chatthip argues that the Thai society and economy before the Bowring Treaty were self-sufficient with very little linkage to the outside world,<sup>12</sup> Nidhi by contrast portrays the Siamese economy of the early Rattanakosin era as entirely different from that of the Ayutthaya era because of its involvement in the economic system of Southeast Asia and China which meant that international trade affected people at all levels of society.<sup>13</sup> In other words, while Chatthip sees Siam before the Bowring Treaty as closed and stagnant, Nidhi presents a contrasting picture of an open and dynamic society undergoing significant change.

Second, Chatthip proposes that the elite had not changed much from the *sakdina* (feudal) class of the Ayutthaya period which accumulated from landlordism, and that Siam had to await the Bowring Treaty for a bourgeoisie to emerge. By contrast Nidhi argues that the major consequence of the expansion of trade in early Rattanakosin was the birth of a bourgeoisie: “the upper class in early Bangkok had roots in the circle of trade and official nobility. They were in a position to change the method of extracting profits from foreign trade because the trading environment was undergoing rapid change, and because they were not constrained by old traditions and practices.”<sup>14</sup> As for Chinese traders, another component of this new bourgeoisie, “Hence the private trade of the Chinese was not trade by independent merchants, but by merchants prepared to work with *sakdina* and be sucked into the system to gain its benefits. The rapidly increasing foreign trade in early Bangkok, instead of giving birth to a new class independent of *sakdina*, gave birth to nothing. Rather, it

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11 We agree with Baker’s argument (“Afterword,” p. 376) that Nidhi was greatly influenced by Jit’s work, especially his classification of literature into literature of the upper class and literature of the *phrai* – which seems to conflict with the general view that Nidhi disagrees totally with the Marxist school of history. We think we should summarize more narrowly that Nidhi disagrees with the analyses of the Marxist school of “Chatthip and associates” rather than with the Marxist school as a whole.

12 Chatthip Nartsupha et al., *Prawatisat setthakit lae sangkhom* [Social and economic history], (Bangkok: Sangsan, 1984), p. 330.

13 Nidhi, *Pen and Sail*, p. 65.

14 Ibid., p. 66.

made the sakdina upper class more bourgeois, in the sense that the main foundations of their power came to rest on commerce.”<sup>15</sup>

Third, no matter how much Nidhi or Chatthip differ on the timing of the emergence of a bourgeoisie, both conclude that the Siamese bourgeoisie (even after the visit of Bowring) was not independent of the sakdina system but indeed became a part of it and had no intention to dismantle the sakdina system as happened in the Western world.<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, Nidhi confines his analysis to the early Rattanakosin period, concluding that “the early Bangkok economy should not be called a capitalist economy, even though some of its characteristics were similar. We should rather state that the foundations for a capitalist-style economy were laid in Siam in this era as the basis for the fuller development after the Bowring Treaty.”<sup>17</sup> Chatthip, by contrast, generalizes about the period as a whole, concluding that “Until 1941 the sakdina mode of production remained dominant in Thailand, and the society and economy which arose was fundamentally a sakdina economy in which capitalism was a secondary element, influencing mainly production for export. The class structure, relations among major classes, state, and culture remained sakdina/feudal in nature.”<sup>18</sup>

Although Nidhi described the dynamism of early Rattanakosin society in a way that was difficult to contradict, undermining Chatthip’s argument beyond hope of rescue, Nidhi scarcely offered any systematic analysis of contemporary Thai society after the appearance of *Pen and Sail*. We have found only a few essays in which Nidhi attempts to characterize the contemporary Thai bourgeoisie. One of these is a short paper on “The culture of the Thai Bourgeoisie and the cult of King Rama V”<sup>19</sup> which extends his analysis based on early Rattanakosin to reach some general conclusions about the Thai bourgeoisie. Here Nidhi argues that the bourgeoisie in early Rattanakosin and the present day share one

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15 Ibid., p. 76.

16 Ibid, pp. 77, 100-101; Chatthip and et al., *Prawatsat setthakit lae sangkhom*, p. 341-343; Chatthip Nartsupa and Somphop Manarungsan, “Introduction,” in Chatthip Nartsupa and Somphop Manarungsan, ed., *Prawatsat setthakit thai chon tueng 2484* [Thai economic history until 1941] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1984), p. 5.

17 Nidhi, *Pen and Sail*, p. 114.

18 Chatthip and Somphop, “Introduction,” p. 8.

19 Nidhi Eoseewong, “Wattanatham khong chonchan klang thai” [Culture of the Thai middle class] in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sangsit Piriyaarangsarn, eds., *Chonchan klang bon krasae prachathippatai* [Thai middle class in democratization] (Bangkok: Political Economy Study Center, Chulalongkorn University, 1993), pp. 60-65.; Nidhi Eoseewong, *Latthi sadet pho ro 5* [The cult of King Rama V] (Bangkok: Sinlapa Watthanatham, 1993).

important thing in common, namely their acceptance and adoption of a sakdina mentality and worldview rather than constructing a mentality and worldview of their own class. Baker makes a similar point that Nidhi “repeatedly emphasizes the continuities between the bourgeoisie of the early Bangkok era (meaning, mainly the court) and the bourgeoisie of the present day.”<sup>20</sup> Several questions thus arise. Is it true that the Thai bourgeoisie does not undergo any significant change over more than 200 years? If so, how do we explain the role of the People’s Party, that challenged the absolute monarchy, of the Communist Party of Thailand, and of the Red Shirt Movement at present?

Several theoretical problems emerge from this view. First, what are the “continuities” of the bourgeoisie class from early Rattanakosin to the present day? Are the bourgeoisies in the two periods fundamentally similar or (as Baker notes in the brackets) is the present-day Thai elite, that rides on the coattails of the sakdina system, still under the sakdina power structure? If the latter is true, then the power structure of the Thai state has not changed its basic principles from early Rattanakosin until today. In other words, the Thai state is still a sakdina state. As we shall see, Thongchai also shares this analysis.

Second, if we accept Nidhi’s proposition that the Siamese elite had already become more bourgeois by plunging into the export economy in early Rattanakosin, how can we say that the Thai state and its ruling class have remained “sakdina” rather than bourgeois over more than 200 years? We believe this ambiguity arises because Nidhi depicts enormous dynamism in early Rattanakosin, but absolutely no dynamism at all in his analysis of contemporary Thai society, especially with respect to the historical status of the Thai bourgeoisie. Nidhi’s problem is that he does not explain whether the forces that affected the bourgeoisie in late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin either changed somehow or petered away after Bowring.

For sure, Nidhi is interested only in studying the relationship between economic change and cultural change, not the nature of the state and government. He does not even enquire how the Thai state changes in response to the dynamism he describes. As a result, his work cannot identify the transition from sakdina to capitalism. Even though he believes that he identifies the emergence of a bourgeoisie, he cannot explain what implications this had for subsequent changes in the state.

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20 Baker, “Afterword,” p. 370.

Nidhi's conclusion does not differ from that of Chatthip, namely that the modernization of the state had to await Bowring's visit and that this modernization was not a break from *sakdina* – which does not tell us anything about the nature of the state at that time and its relations with various social forces, especially the bourgeoisie that arose in early Rattanakosin.

As for the reactions to the debates between Chatthip and Nidhi, the long article by Somsak cited above is an important contribution to the study of the transition in Thai society. Somsak points out the significant differences between Chatthip and Nidhi, especially in approach, “where Chatthip focuses on the major ‘mode of production’ and its *general characteristics in a particular period of history*, Nidhi is interested in the *specific characteristics* of history in greater detail.”<sup>21</sup> More importantly, Somsak disposes of the Chatthip school's proposition that Siamese society was stagnant and unchanging before the arrival of the West and remained essentially *sakdina* both before and after Bowring because the intrusion of western capitalism not only failed to breakdown the old structure of power but even made the *sakdina* state stronger, while Thai village communities were so robust and resilient that the entry of Bowring failed to give rise to an independent bourgeoisie as the spearhead of a transition to a capitalist mode of production.<sup>22</sup> Somsak uses Nidhi's arguments to highlight Chatthip's weaknesses and failings, and endorses Nidhi's proposition that “there were significant changes in early Rattanakosin before the foreigners arrived.”<sup>23</sup>

Even though Somsak tries to point out the limitation of Nidhi's work, his essay offers no proposition with significant implications for the study of the transition in Thai society. Somsak argues that change in Siam after the Bowring Treaty “was on a ‘*different trend*’ from that before 1855, even though some features were similar... because ‘*the economic fundamentals of the two periods differ*.’ To risk a clearer statement, while ‘*capitalism*’ before 1855 arose *internally* within Thai society, ‘*capitalism*’ after 1855 was *dependent* on foreign countries.”<sup>24</sup> By using the term “capitalism” for the periods both before and after Bowring and adding

21 Somsak, “Sangkhom thai jak sakdina su thun niyom,” p. 154.

22 Chatthip Nartsupha and Suthee Prasartset, “Rabob setthakit thai 2394-2453” [Thai economic system 1851-1910], in Chatthip Nartsupha and Somphop Manarungsan eds., *Prawatsat settakit thai chon teung 2484*, pp. 169-201.

23 Somsak, “Sangkhom thai jak sakdina su thun niyom,” p. 153.

24 Ibid., p. 155.

the short qualifiers as “internal” and “dependent,” Somsak makes his argument ambiguous. From one angle, Somsak seems to believe that *in general* Thai society before and after Bowring had “continuities,” namely a “capitalist” mode of production, yet from another angle capitalism differs in significant ways between the two periods but he does not explain in what way it was different. In our opinion, Somsak is trying to find a compromise between the views of Chatthip and Nidhi, rather than offering anything new.

In his masters thesis, Davisakd Puaksom points out the dynamism and “inseparability” of external and internal factors in explaining Siam’s transition to modernity. However Davisakd focuses on changes in mentality in the early Rattanakosin period, and on the evolution of present-day historical debate between the Nidhi school, which stresses internal factors, and Thongchai’s school which, as we shall see, stresses external factors, meaning the advent of Western (colonial) knowledge and technology. Davisakd sums up the differences between Nidhi and Thongchai in this way: “Nidhi Eoseewong sees change as continuous, long, and gradual while Thongchai Winichakul sees change as abrupt.”<sup>25</sup> Thongchai’s work limits the period for understanding the change to the time of western colonialism’s arrival, along similar lines as Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. Anderson argues that significant change (such as the emergence of nationalist ideology) had to await the advent of Western colonialism. This argument effectively reverts to Chatthip’s view of Siam before modernity as stagnant, isolated from the outside world, and lacking in internal dynamism.

Davisakd cites Chatthip’s argument that “Had it not opened up to international trade, Siam might have remained pure sakdina for many centuries.”<sup>26</sup> The phrase “*pure sakdina*” displays Chatthip’s extreme view of history in which pre-Bowring Siam was a completely closed society, isolated from the world outside, with hardly any change until 1855 brought relations with the outside world and change. Davisakd argues that Anderson and Thongchai share the same view: “Thongchai does not state explicitly that he emphasizes ‘external factors’ as the major cause of change, but his stress on the role of Western knowledge and modern technology implicitly makes these ‘external factors’ paramount in the

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25 Davisakd, “The Readjustment of Knowledge,” p. 28.

26 Chatthip Nartsupha, “Wa duai thitsadi sethasat thai” [On Thai economics theory], *Sethasat kap prawatsat thai* [Economics and Thai history] (2524) cited in Davisakd, “The Readjustment of Knowledge,” pp. 21-22.

transition from 'old Siam' to 'new Siam'.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the limitation on Siam's progress towards modernity is that Siam was not colonized completely or remained in semi-colonial state, making the transition to modernity truncated and incomplete.

We have argued elsewhere about the limitations of the post-colonialism approach of Anderson and Thongchai (and offered a different interpretation).<sup>28</sup> In particular, Thongchai's main argument, which was developed from the work of Anderson, is that the Thai state is stuck in transition, unable to move beyond the legacy of the absolute monarchy, and thus cannot be constituted as a fully realized nation state. Thongchai even concludes, "if we view from the present, looking at the overall changes of the last 100 years... what appears more clearly is that the legacy of the absolute monarchy remains in every particle of the present."<sup>29</sup> In past history, "the People's Party and others who rejected absolute monarchy did not touch the legacy of absolute monarchy very much."<sup>30</sup> Even though "the changes brought about by the People's Party were significant and had enormous impact on the history of Thai politics, and even though the courage and contribution of the People's Party are undeniable, yet the fundamental legacy of absolute monarchy has been passed down, and the power of royalty and the special roles and status of the monarchy have subsequently been revived."<sup>31</sup>

Nidhi, Chatthip, Thongchai (and Anderson) share some common problems.

First, Nidhi and Chatthip were obsessed with searching for an (independent) bourgeoisie as the major agent of change. Because Chatthip could not find one, he concluded that society in early Rattanakosin was stagnant and unchanging. Nidhi by contrast argued that a bourgeoisie emerged in early Rattanakosin but not as an independent force because this bourgeoisie resulted from a transformation of the old *sakdina* class. As a result this bourgeoisie was a powerful force behind a changing mentality, but did not challenge or destroy *sakdina*.

27 Davisakd, "The Readjustment of Knowledge," p. 26.

28 Kengkij, "Sathana khong wiwatha wa duai kan plian rup baep rat thai phai lang 2475," pp. 11-37.; and see Kullada's response to Thongchai in "Thun niyom lok kap wiwatthanakan khong rat thai" [World economy and the Thai state transformation], *Fa dieo kan* [Same Sky], 9, 2 (April-June 2011), pp. 84-92.

29 Thongchai Winichakul, "Moradok somburanayasitthirat nai pattjuban" [The legacy of the absolutist monarchy today], *Fa dieo kan* [Same Sky], 9, 2 (April-June 2011), pp. 45-46.

30 Ibid., p. 53.

31 Ibid., p. 53.



Our question to Chatthip and Nidhi is this: does a bourgeoisie that can drive for change towards capitalism need to be “independent” from the sakdina system?<sup>32</sup>

Anderson<sup>33</sup> and Thongchai stress the advent of western colonialism and the rise of popular nationalism as the agency of change towards (unrealized) modernity in Siam. Both face the same problem as Nidhi and Chatthip. Because Siam was in a state of semi-colonialism, the royalist elite established an absolutist state, but its lifespan was too short for the rise of a popular nationalist movement, and thus the transition from absolutist state to nation state was incomplete. All four arrive at the same conclusion that there was no social force to serve as the agency for a transition towards a capitalist nation state (as happened in Europe and all the colonized countries), or that this force faced limitations though these limitations are not explained (see below on Nidhi’s reaction to Thongchai).

Second, while Nidhi is able to identify a bourgeoisie, he cannot explain where it disappeared to after 1855, and thus he cannot explain how the dynamism of economic and cultural change in early Rattanakosin, which had given rise to this bourgeoisie, affected the nature of the Thai state in the later period. In the same vein, for Anderson and Thongchai, the premodern Thai state is stagnant and undynamic, and only the advent of western colonialism causes the elite to develop towards colonial modernity.<sup>34</sup>

Third, though Chatthip and Nidhi neglect the methodology of comparative history and portray Siam as distinct from the premodern and colonial-era states in other colonial Southeast Asia, and Anderson by contrast gives much importance to comparative history in all his works, they all arrive at the same conclusion that Siam has a distinc-

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32 In Chatthip’s view, “The People’s Party was not a party with roots in a free bourgeoisie.... The change of government in 1932 was thus a bourgeois revolution which arose before development of the forces of production and class formation,” Chatthip, “Kan sawaeng ha rabob setthakit mai lang kan plian pleng kan pokkhong thai,” [In search of a new economy after 1932] in Chatthip and Somphop, eds, *Prawatsat setthakit thai chon tueng* 2484, p. 552.

33 Benedict Anderson, “Studies of The Thai State: The State of Thai Studies,” in Eliezer B. Ayal ed., *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science* (Athens: Ohio University Center of International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1978), pp. 193-257.

34 These are the words of Tamara Loos in *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2006). As Anderson shows, the Thai absolutist state copied its form from the British colonial state in India rather than from British absolutism; see Benedict Anderson, “Official Nationalism and Imperialism,” in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), pp. 83-111.



tive society which cannot be compared to western societies or colonized societies. Thongchai is no different.<sup>35</sup>

Fourth, all three giants give too little importance to the economic forces and structural changes of the world economy over the long term. While Nidhi thinks that economic change began in the late Ayutthaya period or early Bangkok, Chatthip perceives no significant economic changes until Bowring's entry, while Anderson and Thongchai argue that changes arose only with the intrusion of western colonialism into Southeast Asia. All of them limit the scope of their study to a span of no more than 200 years.

Here we must give credit to Jit Phumisak and Songchai Na Yala for addressing an important theoretical issue, namely that the changing nature of the state marks the turning point from one historical era to another. Unfortunately both faced an untimely death,<sup>36</sup> and did not have the opportunity to back up their theory with empirical research. Most Thai and western academics view Jit as a dogmatic and mechanistic Marxist,<sup>37</sup> but we (differing from almost all leftist academics in the later period) find Jit's *The Real Face of Thai Sakdina* (Chomna sakdina thai) very important for arguing that sakdina society was not unchanging (as Chatthip and other interpreters of Jit claim), but extremely dynamic and full of conflicts, especially within the sakdina class itself. In this paper we would like to develop on two of Jit's points.

First, Jit describes the nature of the state in the sakdina era as follows: "The form of government of sakdina society is 'monarchy' (power in the hands of a king) or 'absolute monarchy' (power and absolute right in the hands of the king). Only with this form of government does the landlord class have a guarantee that it is safe to repress and exploit labor and extract whatever benefits they want."<sup>38</sup> In Jit's view the general form of the sakdina state is monarchy until the final stage when it changes

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35 See Kengkij, "Sathana khong wiwatha wa duai kan plian rup baep rat thai phai lang 2475," pp. 26-37.

36 See the argument in Somkiat Wanthana, "The Politics of Modern Thai Historiography," Ph.D. thesis, Department of History, Monash University, 1986, pp. 50-53.

37 See the similar view in Patrick Jory, "Historiography in Thailand from 1945 to the Present," paper presented at a seminar on "History and theory," Thammasat University, 15 June 2009, p. 8; Davisakd argues, "Jit was so dominated by the thought of finding examples of class exploitation in sakdina society that he forgot to look at the turning point of sakdina society itself," "The Readjustment of Knowledge," p. 17.

38 Jit Phumisak, *Chom na sakdina thai* [The real face of Thai feudalism] (Nonthaburi: Sripunya, 2005), p. 49.

from monarchy to absolute monarchy which continues to preserve the sakdina state (in line with the argument of Perry Anderson).<sup>39</sup>

Second, following from this first proposition, Jit argues that “Hence the final stage of struggle within the class is when the king tries to abolish the rulers of dependent cities and vassal states, and appoint his own people to rule big and small *mueang* in their stead in order to ensure that these rulers will not rebel like their predecessors. The abolition of the Sukhothai state and its absorption into the early Ayutthayan state, and the abolition of the Chiang Mai kingdom, Phrae, and so on in the reign of King Rama V, were designed to monopolize power.”<sup>40</sup> The result is that “the form of government under sakdina rule begins with decentralization and ends with centralization.”<sup>41</sup>

In sum, Jit argued that there is great conflict within the ruling class under sakdina, resulting in a constant effort to monopolize power in order to overcome instability, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Thus the sakdina state and society were never stagnant but full of movement and change. To understand those changes, we must consider the nature of the state or form of rule as a window on the social transition.

Jit’s argument seems consistent with the work of Songchai Na Yala about the identification of a period as sakdina or capitalist: “At any turning point in society, one way to know what is the dominant mode or relations of production is to study what class dominates the society at that time, what class has captured state power”;<sup>42</sup> and “apart from determining the social relations of production, must also identify what class dominates state power (in this case), whether it is sakdina or capitalist. The dominant mode of production must be one or the other, not somewhere in-between.”<sup>43</sup> Songchai’s argument is reinforced by that of Chaiyan Rajchakul who maintains that the 1932 revolution allowed an enlightened section of the state bureaucracy to undermine the absolute monarchy and the dominance of sakdina.<sup>44</sup>

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39 Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

40 Jit, *Chom na sakdina thai*, p. 49.

41 Ibid., p. 52.

42 Songchai Na Yala, *Wiwatha wa duai kueng mueang khuun kueng sakdina khong thai* [Debate on semi-colonial and semi-feudal in Thailand] (Bangkok: Numyard, 1981), pp. 17-18.

43 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

44 Chaiyan Rajchakool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy: Foundations of the Modern Thai State from Feudalism to Peripheral Capitalism* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994).

In other words Jit, Songchai and Chaiyan propose something that both Nidhi and Chatthip (and Somsak and many others) have neglected, namely that the indicator of the turning point in the transition from sakdina to capitalism is the form of the state, determined by what class dominates state power under the sakdina mode of production. The early sakdina state had the form of monarchy, which later evolved from a monarchy with a weak centre to a more centralized absolute monarchy. To identify when the sakdina state or sakdina era is superseded, the major marker is the collapse of the absolutist state and the emergence of a nation state.

We want to move beyond the limitations of Chatthip, Nidhi, Anderson, and Thongchai as discussed above by using the perspectives of Jit about the sakdina state and Songchai about locating the transition by identifying the class that dominates state power, as well as Victor Lieberman's work on comparative history, as the basis for re-examining the relationship between the Thai state and the world economy.

#### HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE THAI STATE

Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* compares different states from around 800 AD to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Southeast Asia is the center of analysis in the first volume, and France, Russia, China, Japan, and South India in the second. He argues that all these states have a similar path of development, which he studies in three dimensions: the form of government, economy, and culture. He argues that development of the state follows a single path of accelerating consolidation at the centre, marked by constant interruptions (crises such as war), which he calls interregna, when the state hits a low point, before resuming the process of consolidation to build a new state. Each time, economic expansion is the cause of both consolidation and of the collapse of central power. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, states emerged in the basins of the Chao Phraya, Irawadi, and Red Rivers. All of them experienced consolidation, punctuated by periodic crises after which they quickly revived.

Lieberman shows that the early states in mainland Southeast Asia achieved a certain level of consolidation. Pagan, Angkor, and Dai Viet, which he calls the "charter states" or "charter polities," all emerged through expansion of internal production and ecological changes which were beneficial to production. We agree with his analysis that the emergence of early states and the expansion of production were caused by internal factors, not through the influence of external trade. These early

states collapsed because of stresses resulting from economic expansion, such as declining soil fertility, silting of canals, and falling ratio of arable land to expanding population. In addition, territorial expansion resulted in conflict between the center and outer regions, as the center was weak and had not established institutions of firm control.<sup>45</sup>

Lieberman classifies states prior to the 14th century, both in Europe and Southeast Asia, as charter states, and states in Southeast Asia from the 14th century onwards as “decentralized Indic states.” But we feel that the sakdina state of Ayutthaya in its first 100 years shared the same characteristics of a “charter state” as Pagan, Angkor, and Dai Viet, and that from the 15th century onwards, when trade increased, Ayutthaya evolved into a late sakdina state.<sup>46</sup> Here we will try to adapt Lieberman’s frame of analysis to briefly explain the changing form of the Thai state from the Ayutthaya era until 1932.

In early Ayutthaya, population was concentrated around the capital, and the power of the state was limited to the surrounding area which could be reached within 2-3 days. Secondary centers of trade and production at greater distance were “dependent towns” (*mueang luk luang*), ruled by appointed royal kin who had to send tribute as proof of their loyalty and mobilize troops for military campaigns. Ayutthaya sent envoys (*yokkrabat*) who acted as spies relaying information to the capital. The provincial lords tended to attack Ayutthaya in bids to seize power.<sup>47</sup>

Vassal states were ruled by hereditary ruling families, who had to display loyalty by sending tribute, often to more than one center of power. Lieberman argues that Ayutthaya’s power was based on agriculture and manpower. Expansion in production of rice and cotton attracted more settlers, creating a greater concentration of population than elsewhere. Increased demand for goods such as salt, shrimp paste, ceramics, and cloth created a market economy from which the state could extract a surplus in the form of taxes, corvée labor, and military mobilization that gave the kings the resources for patronage, temple construction, and warfare.<sup>48</sup>

In the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, Ayutthaya’s trade increased with China and

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45 Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 236-242.

46 See further on the two stages of the sakdina state in Kullada, *Wiwatthanakan rat angkrit lae farangset nai krasae setthakit lok*, pp. 35-76.

47 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels, Vol. 1*, pp. 246-247.

48 Ibid., pp. 248-252.

the Indian Ocean. By 1530, long-distance trade together with industrial production became the base for consolidation of power to the center. The Ayutthaya state developed control over manpower, administration, art, and culture in a manner similar to other states in mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>49</sup>

This system collapsed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, due mainly to the weakness of the military and administration, as well as increased warfare and growth in trade.<sup>50</sup> Lieberman's main argument is that both Ayutthaya and Burma expanded their economies, especially trade, resulting in competition for economic resources. The two states warred for economic objectives connected with trade. Lieberman argues that the Ayutthaya state was weaker than Burma in terms of leadership, numbers of soldiers, and strategy. In addition, Phitsanulok sided with Burma, resulting in Ayutthaya suffering a defeat and entering the condition that Lieberman calls an interregnum.

However, the fall of Ayutthaya resulted in a reversal of fortunes. The Burmese state fell apart after Bayinnaung's death, largely because its political institutions and military strength were inadequate to support the empire of Bayinnaung's ambitions. Meanwhile Ayutthaya recovered strongly from the wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by a major reform of the state apparatus. The leadership found it imperative to consolidate power at the center by reducing the power of the nobles (*khun nang*) and provincial rulers. One method was to replace provincial rulers who were senior princes with humble commoners who had no legitimacy to claim a right to the throne. Further, in the reign of King Prasat Thong, the court summoned the major rulers from the outer provinces to reside in Ayutthaya, while appointing officials in the middle and inner provinces.<sup>51</sup>

Several conditions were favorable for consolidation of power at the center. The nobles and provincial rulers were in decline because many had been killed or swept away as war prisoners. The inner provinces faced acute instability as a result of warfare. In the reigns of Naresuan and Ekathotsarot, *phrai* who had lost their overseer became *phrai* of the king, thereby strengthening the monarchy which waged a successful war to drive out the Burmese, and won a victory over Cambodia. With the increase in the number of royal *phrai*, as well as more concerted

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49 Ibid., pp. 254-258.

50 Ibid., p. 214.

51 Ibid., pp. 274-277.

registration of other *phrai*, Ayutthaya became more powerful than in the earlier period.

In sum, war and crisis created conditions for leaders to consolidate power at the center. But success depended on the economy, that is external trade with the world economy. Trade with Europe and China generated the resources for revival of state power.

After the crisis of the Narai reign in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship of Siam to the world economy underwent a major change.<sup>52</sup> Europe withdrew from Siam, while the economic role of China in the region expanded.<sup>53</sup> We see this as a regional change. Chinese immigrated to invest in production of goods demanded by the world market elsewhere in Asia as well. The Ayutthaya economy grew as never before, prompting the development of tax farms on fruit orchards, markets, and gambling. *Phrai* paid dues in cash or export goods rather than labor. This view differs from that of Anthony Reid who argues that the late Ayutthaya economy shrank because of the withdrawal of the Europeans.

The expansion of the trading economy resulted in a reduction of state power. In order to expand production for internal and external markets, the noble class competed to regain control over labor (as *phrai som* and *that*) from the control of the king (as *phrai luang*). Creditors ensnared peasants in debt which they could not repay in order to convert them into *that* slaves. Nobles forced royal *phrai* to produce goods for the market, accumulated *phrai som* illegally, and demanded money from royal *phrai*. Nobles competed among themselves, and with the king, to control the labour needed to expand production for the market. Various factions of nobles and royal family members competed to control manpower, undermining loyalty to the king, and spilling over into factional conflicts that eventually led to the fall of Ayutthaya as the capital was in no position to repel a Burmese attack.

Lieberman points out that Burma underwent a similar process of internal conflict in the 18th century which erupted as a struggle between north and south in which Thaungoo was victorious. But in the case of Siam, an external power (namely Thaungoo) intervened and caused the collapse.

But Lieberman argues that Siam recovered strongly and rapidly

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52 Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World* (London: Collins, 1984), pp. 21-45; and Kullada, *Wiwatthanakan rat angkrit lae farangset nai krasae setthakit lok*, pp. 35-39.

53 Ibid., pp. 3-21, 35-76.

from this collapse to become the dominant state in the region in the 19th century because late Ayutthaya had better foundations for change than Burma.<sup>54</sup>

Lieberman stresses the important role of leadership in the post-Ayutthaya period. Although Taksin came from a Chinese family and was a provincial noble, he was able to suppress all other factions and establish his power at the center. His successor as king was an Ayutthaya noble who won acceptance by other leaders and thus was able to defeat external enemies with their co-operation.

In the establishment of early Bangkok, Lieberman stresses three factors: the role of the economy, the construction of a strong state, and cultural integration. However, we focus on economic expansion and the development of the state.<sup>55</sup> Lieberman portrays the Chinese role in the economy of early Bangkok as a resumption of the pattern of late Ayutthaya. However, at the fall of Ayutthaya, the Chinese numbered 30,000, while by 1825 they numbered 230,000, more than seven times. This difference reflects the new role of Chinese capitalism in investment towards the end of King Rama I's reign.<sup>56</sup>

The expansion of trade from the late Ayutthaya era may have been significant due to the Chinese investment into the region to produce for the world market, but early Bangkok saw a significant change of scale. This escapes Lieberman's analysis.<sup>57</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese entrepreneurs settled in the various river basins of the central region with capital, technology and labour to produce sugar, which was in greater demand by the world market than in the previous century. This major new industry changed the structure of the economy. Sugar became Siam's major export. Chinese immigrants, who were mainly labourers in the sugar industry, became consumers of various goods and services. Thai peasants responded to rising demand by producing for the local markets, and also became consumers.

Economic changes in early Bangkok enriched both the monarchy

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54 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vol. 1, pp. 299-302.

55 Lieberman's analysis of cultural integration, in comparison with other South East Asian states, goes far beyond that of Nidhi. See *Strange Parallels* Vol. 1, pp. 313-335.

56 For the discussion of this phenomena see Carl Trocki, "Chinese Pioneering in South East Asia" in Anthony Reid (ed.), *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse World of South East Asia and Korea, 1750-1900* (New York: Macmillan, 1997).

57 See his description of economic expansion in Lieberman, *Strange Parallels* Vol. 1, pp. 299-302. For the impact of the new role of the Chinese on the economic and politics in Siam, see chapter 1 of Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*.



and the great nobles. Credit could be given to the monarchy for the way that King Rama III did away with mercantilism, and opened up free trade on liberal principles. However the change was dictated by the economic situation. The heart of the royal trading monopolies had been the Royal Warehouse (*phrakhlang singkha*), the department controlling export and import of certain goods reserved for royal trade. Lieberman explains how the Chinese began to negotiate directly with producers to secure goods in larger volume and at lower prices than were available to the king's factors.<sup>58</sup> Hence the monopoly of trade collapsed and was replaced by tax farming. Whereas goods such as elephant tusks had been reserved for royal trade, now they were taxed instead. Many new tax farms were introduced in the reign of King Rama III, reflecting the expansion of production for export and of consumption by Chinese laborers and Thai peasants who were involved in the commercial economy. This was the distinctive feature of early Bangkok.

In terms of political power, Rama III relied on the tactic of divide and rule, balancing the nobles who controlled manpower against those with power in the new economy. The Singhaseni family had control over manpower while the Bunnags were prominent in the economy. Within the Bunnag family there were two factions. The younger Bunnag had control over 38 new tax farms under the Royal Warehouse department, while the older Bunnag controlled only nine tax farms under the Great Treasury (*phrakhlang mahasombat*). In the succession following the death of King Rama III, the older Bunnag supported Prince Mongkut, who was the legitimate heir by birth but lacked a power base because he had spent most of the prior reign in the monkhood. The older Bunnag faction was also responsible for concluding the Bowring Treaty with the British. Hence, after this event, power shifted from other great nobles and from the king to that particular faction of the Bunnag.

Besides the shift in political structure, there were also institutional changes. The monarchy as an institution was separated from the king as an individual, a starting point for a key principle of capitalism, namely private property. When King Rama III passed away, King Rama IV showed his respect for this principle by not touching the Privy Purse funds accumulated from King Rama III's trading activities. This principle was clearly evident after the Bowring Treaty, which made land a major source of wealth. The king announced that he would use his

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58 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels Vol. 1*, p. 304



personal money to buy land for his sons, so that, after his death, his successor would not be able to seize the said land as royal property following the end of his reign.

The signing of the Bowring Treaty turned the Chao Phraya plain into the third major area of rice production in the world after the Mekong and Irawadi basins. It also saw the role of export producers pass from the Chinese to the Thai who became the tax-payers and the major power base of the state. Sugar exports declined because Siam lost comparative advantage to colonial territories in the region. Expansion of rice land became the economic base on which the absolute monarchy was constructed in the reign of King Rama V.

Thus these changes affected the structure of state power. The Thai state expanded its resource base, namely taxes collected from peasants producing rice for the world market. This base allowed the state to extend its power over a wider area, and to tighten its grip over the provinces more and more. The question is who would take control over these newly expanded resources. When King Chulalongkorn acceded to the throne, the Bunnags had almost complete control. Under the logic of capitalism, the old manpower system needed to be adjusted in order to produce for the world market. Hence the Bunnags allowed King Chulalongkorn to embark upon reforms. The young king only gradually changed the manpower system but used reform to take control over state resources. In a decade the king managed to gain supremacy over the great nobles at the centre.<sup>59</sup> As for the feudal lords in the periphery the process of consolidation took longer, yet it was accomplished within his reign.<sup>60</sup>

The control and management over resources and territories needed an instrument, the modern bureaucracy which was an essential element of the absolutist state. However, it rested on different principles from those of the former sakdina state. Education instead of birth became the standard for selecting officials. Remuneration came from salaries paid in money rather than official positions that could be leveraged to extract income. Yet before long, conflict arose within the absolutist state. A new bureaucratic bourgeoisie of high and mid-level officials challenged the power of the king and royalty. In particular, mid-level bureaucrats bristled at the continued importance given to birth and

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<sup>59</sup> Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, ch. 2.

<sup>60</sup> For the discussion of this process see Chaiyan Rajchakool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy*.

patronage, which thwarted their own prospects. This was a major cause of the demise of the absolutist state in 1932.<sup>61</sup>

## MAJOR DEBATES

### *Thai feudal state*

Lieberman does not describe Southeast Asian states as sakdina states but includes Ayutthaya in his category of “decentralized Indic” states which emerged from the charter states. He also classifies early European states as charter states, but in their subsequent evolution, for example in France, he argues that the society takes the form known as feudalism, equivalent to sakdina, and then undergoes a “feudal revolution” in the 11th century due to economic expansion.<sup>62</sup> But we differ from Lieberman in classifying Ayutthaya as a sakdina state from the beginning, similar to a European feudal state, even though most academics studying Southeast Asia argue that the Ayutthaya sakdina state was not the same as European feudalism. Though the form of the state differed between Europe and mainland Southeast Asia, we argue that the rationale of the state was the same. In both cases, the bulk of the economy was a subsistence economy, and the king allocated the most valuable resource – which in Europe was land and in Southeast Asia was labor – to the nobility on two conditions: first, that they acknowledged that the king retained ultimate ownership of the resource, and second that they would assist the king in war. The limitation of this type of state is that its stability depends on the power relations between king and nobility at each time and place.<sup>63</sup>

When feudal states emerged in Europe in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the main condition determining the structure of power relations was the subsistence economy, which meant that any superior (such as a king or city ruler) had no money income to reward his servants, and hence had to allocate the important resource (land or labor) to win their loyalty. In Europe, where the key resource was land, local rulers kept some land to

61 See Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, chs. 3 and 4. For the process of change in the bureaucratic system which led to dissent in Java, see Heather Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong: Heinemann Education Books, 1979).

62 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vol. 1, pp. 154-156, 163.

63 For the feudal system in Europe, see Kullada, *Wiwatthanakan rat angkrit lae farangset nai krasae setthakit lok*, pp. 3-21, 35-76.

maintain their own status, and distributed the rest to nobles who undertook to provide military services, either for defense or expansion, for not more than 40 days in a year. Thus the most important feature of the early feudal state in Europe was the devolution of power to a noble class, especially the great nobles, who might challenge the power of the king. The difference in power between the king and noble was not great. The king was seen as the first among equals, but had a greater symbolic role because of support from religion.

This situation changed when Europe was no longer a subsistence economy. Production of an agricultural surplus was the impetus to increased exchange of goods internally, while at the same time Europe became involved in long-distance trade, especially the spice trade. In various power centers, kings were able to consolidate central power. Revenues generated by economic expansion were used to hire soldiers to man the army, reducing the king's dependence on his nobles, and enabling territorial expansion.

We argue that the Thai state in early Ayutthaya had the same structure as a feudal state in Europe, namely a subsistence production system which meant the king could compensate the noble class only by allocating the key resource, which in this case was labor, and only in the close vicinity of the capital. Although the Ayutthaya state was involved with the money economy from an early period, the extent was limited, and hence the early Ayutthaya state had the same decentralized character in which local rulers could challenge the power of the king.

Early feudal states were based on a subsistence economy with no market. When agriculture produced a surplus, market exchange increased. In western Europe, there was also long-distance trade, first inland and later maritime. Feudal states in Europe then developed in two stages, first with only limited trade, and second with a large expansion of the economy. In its first 100 years, Ayutthaya resembled the early European feudal state, but later developed along the same lines as the later stage of the feudal state in Europe when trade increased.

#### *The bourgeoisie and change in Thai society*

Nidhi argues that the bourgeoisie in early Rattanakosin was in part derived from those members of the aristocracy who engaged in trade and acquired bourgeois beliefs. These beliefs were manifested in the literature of the time. But apparently, the new class then disappeared. We find difficulties with this reading of history. First, the notion of

bourgeois origins is misleading, and second, members of the aristocracy continued to enjoy the social and cultural privileges of their class so far as they were able, and otherwise participated in capitalist development no differently from the bourgeoisie in general.

The fact that some nobles now traded in a similar style as the Chinese traders does not mean that they had entirely jettisoned their traditional cultural identity and become bourgeois, even if they had cherry-picked some aspects of bourgeois culture. We agree with Nidhi that Chinese traders were the first element of Siam's bourgeoisie, and that they were not independent from sakdina and hence were not a major force for changing the state in the later period. But what interests us is the role of the bourgeoisie in changing the nature of the state. Here, the Chinese traders had no part. Neither did the great nobles play that role. Only the monarch changed the form of the state. Whether he acted as a bourgeois or as a feudal lord is debatable.

If a new class of aristocratic bourgeois had indeed evolved, surely we should be able to find evidence of its struggle to create a new identity. For example, they might have sought to influence economic and political policies that touched on their interests – as was the case in Great Britain when the bourgeoisie began to flex its muscles there. In fact, those in Siam who did exert influence by supporting a trade treaty or arguing for the abolition of slavery were members of the monarchy and the great nobility. Chaiyan identified them as sakdina-turned-bourgeoisie because the state became part of peripheral capitalism. Accordingly, he argues that the feudal system was long gone when the revolution occurred in 1932.<sup>64</sup>

We offer a different perspective. The sakdina class reacted to opportunities arising from contact with capitalism, and managed to transform the feudal state into an absolutist state. In this respect, Perry Anderson's perception of the absolutist state as the final stage of the feudal state makes sense.<sup>65</sup> This perspective differs from that of Seksan Prasertkul who saw the Thai transformed into a capitalist state after the Bowring Treaty.<sup>66</sup>

According to this perspective King Chulalongkorn acted as a member of the sakdina class in reaping benefit from opportunities

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64 Chaiyan Rajchakool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy*.

65 Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*.

66 Seksan Prasertkul, "The Transformation of the Thai State and Economic Change (1855-1945)," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1989.

arising from contact with capitalism to consolidate his power and transform the feudal state into an absolutist state. Although the absolute monarch consolidated his political power, he maintained the feudal mode of production. This analysis counter's Chaiyan's argument that this aspect of the sakdina system was eroded and long gone by 1932.

What was eroded was the sakdina power relationship between the monarch and the newly created social class, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie that emerged with the new education system, engineered by the absolutist state to respond to the need of capitalism. Such bureaucratic bourgeoisies, whether in the Thai state or in a colonial state, are part of the apparatus of a modern state. The absolutist state did not collapse because sakdina had lost its dynamism, as argued by Chaiyan, but because it was challenged by a new social class.

The 1932 revolution marks the end of the absolutist state, the final stage of the sakdina state, and the birth of the capitalist nation state. The key point is that the bourgeoisie now determined policy in lieu of the sakdina class.

Nidhi argues that the economic and political changes in early Bangkok paved the way for a smooth transformation into the new Siam; had there been no bourgeois culture or bourgeois class in early Rattanakosin, the signing of the Bowring Treaty and the transformation into new Siam might have been difficult. We disagree. The lack of a new bourgeois force ensured that the transformation from old Siam to new Siam through the trade treaty with the British and the establishment of the absolutist state was not a smooth process, but full of conflict.

First, as earlier pointed out, conflict arose when King Rama III selected one Bunnag noble faction to manage 38 tax farms under the Royal Warehouse, while another Bunnag faction managed only nine under the Great Treasury. The Bowring Treaty was a victory for the latter faction that benefited from the expansion of production by the Thai peasantry, while the former faction lost out because the British demanded reduction in tax rates.<sup>67</sup>

Second, the three forces that were important in the establishment of the absolutist state had conflicts among themselves. Conservative Siam, meaning the senior nobles who rose to power after the signing of the Bowring treaty, was challenged by Young Siam led by King Rama V, who initiated reform in the manpower system in order to increase

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67 Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, pp. 3-21.

production for the world market. Both Conservative Siam and Young Siam benefited from this reform, but the nobles of Old Siam, whose economic base lay in the old system of manpower, were the losers. Then when Conservative Siam understood that King Rama V intended to take control of financial resources which they had enjoyed in the past, they provoked the incident known as the Front Palace crisis.<sup>68</sup>

These two conflicts were complex. The faction that had been behind the Bowring Treaty and the reform in the manpower system opposed the king's strategy to establish an absolutist state. The elites that emerged in early Rattanakosin did not share the same world view. Nidhi did not take this into account in his discussion of the development of New Siam.

#### *Colonialism and the Thai state*

In response to Thongchai's article on "The legacy of absolutism for the present day,"<sup>69</sup> Nidhi argued that the Thai state should be viewed in comparison with colonial states,<sup>70</sup> using Harry Benda's classification of Southeast Asian states into those under direct colonialism and those under indirect colonialism or protectorate. It should be noted that Benda's classification was designed to analyze only colonial states, but Nidhi includes the Thai state on grounds it was indirectly under colonial rule. Nidhi labels the modern states that emerged in Southeast Asia as absolutist states, or absolute monarchy in the case of Siam. He then adds, "Another strange thing about Siam, which is more interesting than whether or not it fell under colonialism, is that though it was not subject to direct colonial direct rule, yet the ruling class of Siam copied the administration and economy from states under direct colonial rule."<sup>71</sup>

We would argue that if Nidhi used a different framework, namely the working of capitalism, the "strangeness" he finds can be dealt with. Capitalism defines a difference between direct colonialism, where capitalism exploits land to produce for the world market, and indirect colonialism, where capitalism plays virtually no part in changing the structure of production. To explain what happened in Southeast Asia, we should start by analyzing the workings of world capitalism, which

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-75.

<sup>69</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, "Moradok khong khrai" [Whose legacy?], *Fa dieo kan* [Same Sky], 9, 2 (2011), p. 59.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

affected different areas differently. Southeast Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be divided into areas such as Burma, Vietnam, Java, and Siam where capitalism operated and reaped great benefits, and areas such as Cambodia, Laos and the northern (Unfederated) Malay states where capitalism was less active. In the former areas, economic expansion created a tax base which allowed rulers to hire salaried bureaucrats and install a modern bureaucratic system. The rulers of these states, except Siam, took decisions to invest in creating the manpower systems and apparatus to facilitate the working of capitalism. The French invested in irrigation in the Mekong delta, but the British left Burmese entrepreneurs to invest in leveling land for growing rice themselves. Colonial rulers modified the production system at the basic level of land use in order to produce agricultural output for the world market. But in Siam, the decision-making power rested with the king who was not interested in investing in infrastructure, most probably for fear of creating a new social class of landlords, who could challenge his newly found power.<sup>72</sup> Colonial rulers allowed capitalism to operate fully, resulting in the development of landlordism in Burma and Vietnam. In Java, the Dutch colonial officials imposed a *sakdina* mode of production on the peasantry known as the Culture System, but in the late 19th century capitalist forces from Holland transferred local people to produce in the capitalist system. They introduced the ethical policy in which modern education was the main component.<sup>73</sup>

Thus we cannot apply the colonial framework to understand the Thai state of King Rama V along the lines that Nidhi (and Thongchai) propose. We argue that the modern state which evolved in Southeast Asia in the 19th century can be classified into two types: those under colonial rule, termed colonial states, and those under monarchy, termed absolute monarchies. Laos and Cambodia are excluded as they were not transformed into modern states.

Most argue that there was no nationalist movement in Thailand simply because the country remained independent in the era of colonialism. Two scholars have advanced different arguments. Nidhi (apparently following the argument of Nakkarin Mektrairat) counter-argues that the people's uprising before 1932 was a mass nationalist movement.

<sup>72</sup> Han ten Brummelhuis, *King of the Waters: Homan Van Der Heide and the Origin of Modern Irrigation in Siam* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> David Joel Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), pp. 211-235.



But this movement was very limited, as the majority of the people did not participate, and proves nothing. Anderson argues that Siam was unusual in having no mass nationalist movement equivalent to those in colonial territories. From comparing the Siamese state with European examples, Anderson argues that the absolute monarchy was too short-lived to become embedded in society. However, if we compare absolute monarchy with the colonial state in Southeast Asia, we find that the two types appear in the same time frame and both collapse to become national states in a similar way. From a comparative perspective, the reason why a nationalist movement did not arise in Thailand is to be found in economic policy. In colonial society, capitalism penetrated to the lower rungs of society and was the cause behind the rise of popular nationalist movements. In Siam, the kings did not pursue policies which would have changed the production system and brought about change in the countryside. The changes which occurred were limited, namely a frontier of crop production in one project, the Rangsit Canal, after which King Rama V stopped all similar projects for fear that landlordism would become a force challenging royal power.<sup>74</sup> An unintended consequence was that capitalism did not take root in society. Siam after Bowring did not have a landlord class or wage laborers. For this reason, peasants did not become a force behind a revolution to topple the absolute monarchy. The task was left solely in the hands of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, unlike colonial states where the peasantry joined with the bourgeoisie in nationalist movements.

In sum, in states where capitalism rearranged the rural economy, peasants participated in nationalist movements, but in Siam the nationalist movement was backed only by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Popular movements are not absent, but belated. The uniqueness of Thailand's political development lies in the fact that the army, one element of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, formed an alliance with the monarchy that it had helped overthrow in 1932. Together, army and monarchy formed the bulwark of conservative forces against subsequent social changes, propelled by capitalism.

## CONCLUSION

Social conflicts in the Thai state reflect those in other Southeast Asian states where change was propelled by capitalism. The shift from absolutist

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74 Seksan Prasertkul sees landlordism appearing after the Bowring Treaty.



or colonial states to nation states was a common phenomenon, arising from common causes.

In terms of state formation, the 1932 revolution was a defining moment, as suggested by Songchai na Yala and Chaiyan. The shift to a nation-state means that sovereignty rests with representatives of the nation, namely the bourgeoisie. One crucial feature is that the bourgeoisie take the decisions on the direction of capitalist development. Thai leaders (such as Phibun) shared with Indonesian leaders an aspiration to develop indigenous industries to challenge Western domination.<sup>75</sup> This was the beginning of industrial capitalism in Southeast Asia, before the Americans introduced import-substitution industrialization to non-communist countries.

Finally, if we look around Southeast Asia, all countries are moving haphazardly in the direction of democratization. This process takes time. In the Thai case, the change which began in 1932 has run for only a short time in the perspective of history. The fact that by the beginning of the 21st century, democratic process produced a capitalist prime minister shows that Thai democracy has come quite a long way. Lieberman's framework suggests Thailand was on a certain linear path of development. If we extend his logic to the present, it seems there is no chance of reverting to an earlier state formation. This shifts emphasis from Thongchai's argument that the present Thai state is laden with characteristics of absolute monarchy – a conclusion reached because of the prominent place of monarchy and military, the major social forces of the absolutist state, in the present day. The monarchy has been allowed to slowly but consistently build up its position since the American era through a revival of feudal ceremonies and practices and the expansion of its economic interests through capitalism,<sup>76</sup> while the army expanded its power during the Cold War era.<sup>77</sup>

We suggest that, apart from focusing on those forces, the impact of capitalism on changing social structure should also be taken into consideration. In any case, Thongchai misunderstands the nature of state transformation in Thailand. Under the absolutist state many state

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<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of Phibun's nationalism with respect to industry see Matthew Phillips "Oasis on a Troubled Continent: Culture and Ideology in Cold War Thailand," Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2012, pp. 120-32.

<sup>76</sup> Nattapoll Chaiching, "Thai Politics in Phibun's Government under the U.S. World Order (1948-1957)," Ph.D. thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, "Thai Democratisation and the Cold War," in Albert Lau, *Southeast Asia and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2012).

ceremonies were rationalized or scaled back. Prostration was forbidden. Only during the Cold War era were these revived. In our opinion, the Thai state is a capitalist nation state which is in a period of interregnum marked by conflict between conservative and liberal capitalists as well as greater participation of the lower classes in the political process. The liberal capitalists and lower classes, the new social forces in the political process, demand further study.

What we have today is absolutely not an absolutist state but a nation state which undergoes an interregnum quite frequently as a result of a military coup d'état or popular revolt. With the increasing role of new social forces and the growing strength of a belated popular nationalist movement,<sup>78</sup> the end of the present interregnum can be expected. However, before that happens, a showdown between the old and new social forces may be inevitable.

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<sup>78</sup> When Kullada presented a paper at the Thai Studies Conference in London in 1993 she argued that democratization in Thailand is still at an early stage for the lack of mass participation in the political process. See Kullada Kesboonchoo, "Thai Democratisation: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives."