Introduction

Monarchy and Modernity

In 1996 the people of Thailand rejoiced in an unprecedented celebration: the Golden Jubilee of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, ninth monarch of the Chakri dynasty and the longest-reigning in the world today. Among the events that punctuated Bhumibol’s jubilee was the October visit of Elizabeth II, herself a long-serving monarch, on the throne since 1953. This exchange of royal courtesy had a notable precedent in the visit that Bhumibol’s grandfather, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), had paid to Queen Victoria, Elizabeth’s great-great-grandmother, on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee (sixtieth anniversary of reign) in 1897. Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 had initiated the fashion for such royal celebrations; her Diamond Jubilee, ten years later, became a touchstone for other monarchs including Chulalongkorn, who in 1908 celebrated with great pomp his fortieth anniversary on the throne.

The unfolding of history is fraught with irony. When one considers the 1996 meeting of King Bhumibol and Queen Elizabeth, both remnants of a bygone era of crowned heads, the former would appear to enjoy today a far more comfortable position than the latter. Apart from his dynastic achievement, Rama IX is regarded by most observers—both local and foreign—as a crucial balancing factor in Thailand’s often tumultuous political arena and by the majority of the population as a man of merit (phu mi bun) endowed with the moral virtues befitting a Buddhist monarch. True, gossip about the royal family is an entrenched feature of Bangkok’s social life; but open criticism of the throne is shunned in virtue of deeply rooted taboos as well as a legal code that still envisages the anachronistic offense of lèse-majesté.

One could only speculate that Queen Elizabeth looked to King Bhumibol, if not with envy, at least with longing for a time past when the authority of the crown would have prevented relentless tabloid exposure of the House of Windsor’s matrimonial tribulations (not to mention their fictionalization in a TV movie).

Feelings of an opposite nature must have animated the encounter
between King Chulalongkorn and Queen Victoria in August 1897. Arriving in England shortly after the celebration in the streets of London of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, the king of Siam was received at Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, in the presence of the Prince and Princess of Wales (the later Edward VII and Queen Alexandra), Prince Charles of Denmark, and the king of Belgians (and Victoria’s relative), Leopold II. The reception made it to the front page of the Illustrated London News, then Britain’s leading weekly, which carried an imaginative sketch of the banquet held in Osborne House’s Indian Room. Yet in announcing Rama V’s imminent visit a few weeks earlier, the British Press Association had somewhat condescendingly pointed out that “the King of Siam is coming to Britain not on an ordinary state visit . . . but with a view of educating himself in the matters of British customs and resources.” In fact, Chulalongkorn’s visit to England was but one stop in a journey that took him throughout most of Europe, Russia included.

The centennial of Rama V’s first European tour, fortuitously coinciding with King Bhumibol’s seventieth birthday, was commemorated by the national media in 1997 as Thailand’s entry into the modern world. To mention only two examples, the widely circulated cultural magazine Sinlapa watthanatham ran a series of articles on the various stages of the tour; and a twenty-four-part TV series, broadcast on Thailand’s Channel 5, documented the places visited during the follow-up to that first tour, ten years later. Academia joined in the celebrations with a colloquium appositely held at Chulalongkorn University. Whether Rama V’s visit to Europe in 1897 marked a turning point in the history of Thailand, then known as Siam, may be a matter of contention. But the direct encounter with Europe’s ruling dynasties and heads of state unquestionably provided a litmus test for the endeavor examined in this book: the fashioning of the public image of the Siamese monarchy as a modern, civilized, and civilizing institution.

Because of the transformation that the Siamese economy and institutions underwent in the Fourth and especially the Fifth Reigns (1851–1868 and 1868–1910, respectively), these periods have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Existing studies, however, are concerned almost exclusively with the reform of the administrative, educational, and financial systems and with foreign relations. Historians have paid hardly any attention to the new material and symbolic attributes that came to define the monarchy despite their visibility as signifiers of both royal status and
siwilai—the condition of being civilized as it came to be expressed by this lexical cast whose signification was distinct from anayatham, the Sanskrit-derived Thai word for “civilization.” And yet, as early as 1966 Fred Riggs proposed, in a study on the modernization of the Thai bureaucracy, that the reforms accomplished in the Fourth and Fifth Reigns “although directed primarily toward transformations in the total polity, indirectly also changed the character and the public image of the monarchy itself.”

This book argues that, far from being a by-product of the wider process of administrative and institutional reformation, the refashioning of the royal elite’s public image was a key element in the project of asserting their “civilized” status and, consequentially, their claim to “national” leadership. An image of the monarchy conforming to contemporary European norms was fashioned and propagated in the later decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, when novel forms of etiquette, dress, habitation, patronage, and pageantry made their way to the court and were manifested by its members in state visits abroad. At a time of imperialist encroachment in Southeast Asia, the demonstration of being civilized individuals and instigators of progress obviously supported the royal elite’s hold onto power. But one would be mistaken to consider this endeavor mere camouflage or “rebranding,” to employ the jargon of spin doctors and image consultants: a makeup operation aimed at manipulating the perception of the threatening colonial powers. I propose, instead, that the royal elite fashioned a new sense of themselves, both as individuals and as a social group, vis-à-vis their aspirations to status and authority in the late-nineteenth-century globalized arena. Self-regard was at least as important a concern as the foreign/farang gaze in the refashioning of the elite’s image. By contemplating themselves in their new clothes, new domestic settings, and new urban spaces, the Siamese court ended up convincing themselves, above all, of being modern.

Part I of this book examines the practices of consumption and self-presentation whereby the modernizing elite fashioned a new sense of self, along with the visual representations whereby this new image was refined and projected outside of the court. Part II focuses on Bangkok’s Dusit district, built at the end of the nineteenth century as the royalty’s modern residential quarter and then endowed with a monumental tableau celebrating Rama V’s reign. Part III discusses public spectacles that, while different in genre and intended audience, were equally important for the diffusion of the monarchy’s image as a national institution under
whose leadership Siam was advancing on the path to progress: the celebrations of King Chulalongkorn’s fortieth anniversary of reign, which saw the restyling of the traditional theater of power; and international exhibitions in Europe and the United States, which were the sites for the fashioning of an image of Siam as one number in the family of modern nations.

It is necessary to state beforehand that the modernization of courtly life and the political theater in the period under review was not all encompassing. The royal harem, to mention a Siamese institution par excellence, became obsolete only in the Sixth Reign as a result of growing public criticism of polygamy as well as King Vajiravudh’s sexual inclinations. Also, the performance of Brahmanic state rituals continued throughout 1932, when the absolute monarchy was finally overthrown; indeed, these rituals underwent a neotraditionalist refashioning in the early years of the Fifth Reign. The scope of the present study is, however, limited to those novel practices, spaces, and spectacles associated with the monarchy from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries that had a lasting effect on both social constructions of modernity in Thailand and popular ideas about the monarchy that have made possible its impressive revival since the 1960s.

Monarchy, Modernity, and Nation-building

The view of the Fifth Reign as a period of momentous change and of King Chulalongkorn as a Prometheus-like figure who bestowed the gift of modernity on Thai society is deeply entrenched in both historical writings on Thailand and in the Thai collective consciousness. Such a view owes a great deal to a number of dissertations submitted at U.S. universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s that documented the establishment in Siam of administrative, educational, military, and ecclesiastic institutions after the Western pattern—a process that goes under the name of Chakri Reformation. The pioneering use of archival materials makes such studies still valuable thirty years after they were written; however, their present-day reader cannot fail noticing the extent to which their analytical framework was informed by modernization theory—the dominant paradigm in the social sciences of the 1950s and 1960s, championed by the likes of Walter Rostow and Shmuel Eisenstadt. From the perspective of
modernization theory, the establishment in late nineteenth-century Siam of a centralized administration, educational system, and transportation and communication infrastructures was per se an index of progress and, indeed, of nation-building. To make its accomplishments even more remarkable, the Chakri Reformation was cast against the domestic opposition of a conservative clique and the menace of Western imperialism. In the words of the foremost historian of the Fifth Reign,

Being firmly committed personally to reform and vitally convinced of its importance to the survival of the nation, he [Chulalongkorn] had to battle and overcome the resistance to change and modernization. This was a slow, painful, and delicate task, to which few men would have been equal. He accomplished it with great skill, consummate patience, supreme determination, and a single-minded dedication to the ultimate good of the nation.¹⁰

This appraisal of King Chulalongkorn’s achievements, originally sketched by David Wyatt in the early 1960s, clearly reflects the view of Asia’s postcolonial governments then prevalent among scholars and policy makers as being characterized by a “blend of nationalism and earnest commitment to modernization,” to quote a self-proclaimed apologist of developmentalist theory.¹¹ In fact, the ultimate result of the studies of Fifth Reign institutional modernization by American scholars was the historiographical institutionalizing of the Chakri dynasty’s role as a nationalist elite. In this respect, Western historians of Thailand were following in the footsteps of the historical narrative outlined almost single-handedly by Prince Damrong Rajanubhap (1862–1943). One of Chulalongkorn’s many half-brothers and a key figure of the Chakri Reformation as minister of the interior from 1892 to 1913, Prince Damrong is commemorated in the national pantheon as the “father of Thai history.” After resigning his ministerial office in 1913, Damrong became the director of the Wachirayan City Library (predecessor of the National Library) and there devoted his energy to the editing of court chronicles and the compilation of biographies of state notables, which were published as mementos on the occasion of cremations.¹² Yet, rather surprisingly, both Damrong’s chronicles of the Fifth Reign and his personal memoirs cover only the first couple of years of his brother’s rule.¹³ Prince Damrong’s historiographic project was thus brought to completion by American historians in more than merely a chronological sense. It is also worth noting, even though this is not the
place to pursue this subject, that Western scholarship's legitimation of the royalist historical narrative coincided with the renewed emphasis placed on modernization in the 1960s and early 1970s by the authoritarian governments of Thailand, which were the recipients of considerable U.S. economic aid with the aim of containing the spread of communism (the so-called domino effect) in Southeast Asia.14

The loosening up of Thai politics in the mid-1970s had important repercussions on historiography, allowing the articulation of dissenting views in the public arena. Exhaustive discussions of Thai radical historiography already exist,15 so I shall limit myself to recapitulating the main objections moved to the view of the Chakri Reformation as the initial stage in the nation-building enterprise. Relying on the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production, the economic historians who in the 1970s animated the Political Economy Group at Thammasat University argued, probably influenced by the dependencia theorists of Latin America, for the parasitic nature of economic relations in the second half of the nineteenth century and the Chakri dynasty's function as a guarantor of foreign economic interests. From this perspective, the motivation for the abolition of bondage, cornerstone of the national myth of Rama V as civilizer, appeared to be the increasing need of manpower for rice cultivation—the single export commodity providing the economic base of Siamese monarchical absolutism.16 Other revisionist historians have considered the development of transportation, the railways system in particular, arguing that its main purpose was to facilitate territorial control and military intervention in Thailand's Northeast (Isan), a region inhabited predominantly by an ethnic Lao population where the imposition of Bangkok's central authority met with considerable opposition.17 Even one of the most enduring nationalist myths, the dynasty's defense of national independence paid for by the territorial losses to Britain and France, has been disputed recently. Thongchai Winichakul, a historian of the generation that came of age in the student uprising of October 1973, has provocatively contended that through the imposition of national-style borders in mainland Southeast Asia, colonialism actually engendered—rather than endangered—modern Siam as a geopolitical entity.18

Notwithstanding the plurality of voices that has emerged within Thai historiography over the past quarter of a century, Thailand's master historical narrative remains locked in a royalist-nationalist discourse that posits the country's experience as a unique case of indigenous modern-
ization and nation-building in the context of colonial Southeast Asia. Two factors in particular may be pinpointed to account for the enduring hegemony of this master narrative: first, the monarchy’s remarkable degree of authority at present, which makes scrutiny of any subject even remotely connected to it highly sensitive; second, the multifaceted, yet for this no less pervasive, Thai cultural nationalism, which nourishes a defensive attitude toward those symbols and institutions, the monarchy above all, that are regarded as the pillars of the Thai identity and heritage. In addition, one could mention the apparent obsession of Thai society with figures of founding fathers, from kings to art teachers, which makes any attempt at critical appraisal equivalent to a symbolic parricide. This insistence on Thailand’s uniqueness in both historical and sociocultural terms has largely precluded the examination of its route to modernity in a comparative framework that might highlight differences as well as similarities with that constellation of phenomena characteristic of modernity in both metropolitan and colonial contexts.

In fact, the refashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s public image did not take place in isolation. On the contrary, it paralleled contemporary trends in Europe and other parts of Asia, where the period 1870–1914 marked the heyday of the “invention of tradition.” This felicitous oxymoron, which served as the title of a seminal collection of essays, indicates the efflorescence of political spectacles along with the creation of a host of new social practices by means of which both national and class identities were forged and strengthened. While the main purpose of royal ceremonies under the ancien régime was to manifest the purportedly divine nature of kingship, the newly invented rituals of the last quarter of the nineteenth century emphasized the bond between the citizens of the modern nation-states and royal figures, whose decreasing power was to be balanced by their new public role as embodiments of the nation and even exemplars of moral and civic virtues.

This shift of emphasis had actually begun in the early nineteenth century, when the dynasties restored to power at the end of the Napoleonic wars realized the necessity for capturing popular favor in order to overcome their weakened legitimacy. The identification of reigning houses with the national destiny was promoted, especially in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (when the only two republics in Europe were France and Switzerland) by both constitutional and autocratic governments. According to Eric Hobsbawn,
Technically there was no significant difference between the political use of monarchy for the purpose of strengthening effective rulers . . . and building the symbolic function of crowned heads in parliamentary states. . . . Both made the ruler the focus of his people's or peoples' unity, the symbolic representative of the country's greatness and glory, of its entire past and continuity with a changing present. 20

Dictating this common response were, for Hobsbawm, two interrelated developments that unfolded in the four and a half decades between the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and the start of World War I and threatened the very basis of monarchical states: the progress of electoral democracy and the emergence of mass politics. 21 Hobsbawm admittedly focuses almost exclusively on Europe, reserving only a passing comment to an extra-European country: “A 'modernization' which maintained the old ordering of social subordination (possibly with some well-judged invention of tradition) was not theoretically inconceivable, but apart from Japan it is difficult to think of an example of practical success.” 22

The reinvention of the symbolic attributes of the Japanese emperor as part of the modernizing project carried out in the Meiji Restoration (1868–1910) is examined in a recent study whose author advances the following argument: “Japan's modern political leaders, not less than their counterparts in the liberal nation-states of Europe and the United States, conceived of the entire cultural apparatus of the modern state as a mechanism for enlightening the masses.” 23 Drawing a parallel with the French Revolution, Takashi Fujitani argues for the Meiji Restoration as an equally revolutionary project in the specific sense of being “propelled by a faith in human plasticity and a new civilizing mission for the state.” 24 Most importantly, however, the invention of new imperial traditions in Meiji Japan was accompanied by “a change in the praxis of politics,” whose obvious results were the promulgation of the constitution in 1889 and the election of the Diet in 1890. 25 The formalization of novel rituals and cultural practices occurred also as part of the modernization attempted during the last hundred years of the Ottoman Empire, particularly under Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), defined as “an autocrat with no time for experiments with democracy.” 26 Although the Young Turks' constitutionalist insurrection in 1908 makes it impossible to consider Abdulhamid’s a politically successful instance of invention of tradition, the chronological concurrence with Europe is worthy of note.
In fact, the Eurocentric periodization of 1870–1914 as the heyday of the invention of tradition can be held valid for Siam as well. Stanley Tambiah has argued, in relation to the Fourth and Fifth Reigns, that “never before did the ceremonies surrounding kingship reach such an elaboration in Thailand as in this era; but then never before had the kings exercised so much real and effective power as in this era.” According to Tambiah, “Thailand is a conspicuous example of traditional features—of historical continuities that modify modernization—and also of transformations based on tradition.” Similar to most national and colonial projects of the later nineteenth century, the Chakri Reformation sought to impose control and discipline over society as a necessary condition for the creation of a modern state—an enterprise that is not directly addressed by this book. Unlike Western Europe and Meiji Japan, however, changes in the administrative sphere and the political theater of Fifth Reign Siam were neither a result of, nor a reaction to, increasing popular participation in politics. Apologists of the dynasty have often deemed “revolutionary” the import of the Chakri Reformation, but hardly in the same vein as the qualification of revolutionary attributed to the Meiji Restoration by Fujitani for its faith in the power of the state to enlighten the masses and make them into “knowledgeable and self-disciplined subjects.”

I would argue that primary goals of the Chakri Reformation were the establishment of the monarchy’s authority over a newly bounded “national” territory and the uplifting of its prestige in the international arena. The overlap of dynasty and government characteristic of the latter half of the Fifth Reign (1892–1910) proves the success of the Chakri Reformation in this sense but also makes it highly problematic to talk of it in terms of nation-building. In other words, it would be hard to sustain that the aim of the reforms implemented in the Fifth Reign was to make “peasants into Siamese,” to paraphrase the title of Eugene Weber’s book on the nation-building project in Third Republic France. When compared against the yardstick of European history, the modernizing policies of Fifth Reign Siam bear a much closer similarity to the creation of the absolutist state in the seventeenth century than to the emergence of the modern nation-state in the nineteenth. At the same time Chulalongkorn, alert to the changed rhetoric of European monarchies, projected increasingly in the last decade of his reign an image of himself as the king of the Siamese rather than the king of Siam. The imposing celebrations of the final years of his reign inscribe Siam on the list of countries struck by the turn-of-the-century fever
for political spectacles. Hobsbawm's contention that monarchical rhetoric “made the ruler the focus of his people’s unity, the symbolic representative of the country’s greatness and glory, of its entire past and continuity with a changing present,”32 holds true for Rama V, too, by the time he celebrated his fortieth anniversary of reign in 1908. The development of the transportation system in Bangkok and the presence of that quintessentially modern phenomenon, “the growing armies of the state’s employees and the growing captive public of schoolchildren,”33 conferred a novel resonance to the Siamese theater of power and provided it with a novel audience as well.

There were, however, inherent hazards in the culturally innovative yet politically conservative project of a demotic refashioning of the monarchy that upheld the sociopolitical status quo of royal absolutism. This project might have been viable in the latter decades of the Fifth Reign, when the throne’s authority was more or less undisputed and the Siamese public sphere still in its formative stage. Still, the increasing symbolic proximity of sovereigns to their subjects eventually entailed, as in Europe after 1815, a desacralization of the former to be balanced, in theory at least, by the popular legitimation conferred on them. But such a balancing act was by no means in the natural order of things, as Chulalongkorn’s sons and successors, Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and Prajadhipok (Rama VII), were to discover in the long crisis of legitimacy that eventually resulted in the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, in June 1932.34 The Western-educated commoners who replaced the royal elite at the country’s head had their own vision of how to make Siam a modern nation, and their vision involved bridging social disparities and improving in particular women’s condition.35 And although in the following years, especially under the premiership of Luang Phibun Songkhram (1938–1944), a nationalist ideology complete with racialist overtones replaced the democratic ethos of the 1932 coup’s promoters, national progress and civilization continued to be preeminent catchwords in the rhetoric of the successive regimes in power.

Still, if one agrees with Craig Reynolds’ contention that the mastering of modernity constitutes the leitmotif of the last one and a half centuries of Thailand’s history,36 the need becomes obvious for a reappraisal of the monarchy’s role as a civilizing agent in order to understand Thai modernity (than samai). It would be tempting to argue that the selective import and promotion of Western culture, from geography to photography and the Grand Tour, by kings such as Mongkut and Chulalongkorn made
the throne a mediator of modernity intimately associating the two and endowing the Chakri dynasty with a lasting aura of authority. Besides, the intellectual ability of these monarchs to appropriate those elements of the culture of the Western “other” they saw as conducive to their political project is evidence of an agency that, independently from what judgment is passed on the nature of that project, runs counter to the Saidian idea of the East as the passive object of the West’s imperial domination and ideological representation.37

The comparison recently advanced by some Thai academics between the modernizing thrust of the Fifth Reign and the recent fascination of the most cosmopolitan segment of Thai society with globalization should not come as a surprise. There are, indeed, significant parallels in the way in which the royal elite at the fin de siècle and the new middle class in the 1980s appropriated the perceivably global markers of civilization to assert their group identity as the country’s arbiters of taste and vanguard of modernity. We shall return to this analogy in the Epilogue. In the remainder of this Introduction I intend to discuss globalization as a conceptual framework for examining the reinvention of the Siamese elite’s self- and public image. According to Jonathan Friedman, a necessary precondition for globalizing processes is the existence of a global arena resulting from the interaction of central and peripheral structures—what Friedman calls in its entirety a global system.38 Because such global systems have existed since antiquity in the form of both territorial empires and trading networks, globalization would appear a viable conceptual framework for studying phenomena of cultural diffusion and assimilation independently of the taken-for-granted linkage to modernity, the defining attributes of which remain largely grounded in the historical experience of the Euro-American world.

**Globalized Identities and Localized Modernities**

In the debate about globalization (translated in Thai as *lokhanuwat* or, alternatively, *lokhaipiwat*) that animated the media and academia of Thailand in the early 1990s, three positions emerged: supporters and opponents at opposite poles and, in between, those who saw no reason to either worry or bother too much about globalization given Thai society’s long experience in successfully reworking outside imports.39 This perceived ability to
adopt and adapt foreign cultural influences is, indeed, deeply internalized to the point of being a leitmotif in the elite’s own discursive self-representation; Prince Damrong articulated it in the following terms: “The Tai knew how to pick and choose. When they saw some good feature in the culture of other peoples, if it was not in conflict with their own interests, they did not hesitate to borrow it and adapt it to their own requirements.”

A similar viewpoint informs the concept of localization put forth by the late O. W. Wolters, a pioneer historian of early Southeast Asia. Localization, the combined process of adoption and adaptation of Indic cultural materials, is for Wolters the unifying trait of Southeast Asia’s diverse cultures. By shifting emphasis from the imposition of an exogenous cultural matrix, as denoted by Cœdès’ concept of Indianization (or hinduisation, as he had it), to indigenous agency, the notion of localization highlights the interactive nature of cultural exchange in early Southeast Asia as a resultant of the globalizing thrust of the Indian Ocean’s trading networks, which long predated the emergence of an integrated world system around the mid-nineteenth century.

The authority and prestige of early Southeast Asia’s ruling elites was predicated upon a common cultural idiom of Indian origin that, through interaction with indigenous values, beliefs, and practices, resulted in an elite culture, at once distinctive and cosmopolitan, that encompassed courtly civility, self-presentation, monumental architecture, and, perhaps most notably, political theatrics. Long before the assertion of Europe’s political and cultural hegemony in the region, the identity of Southeast Asian elites had resulted from the localization of what were arguably global cultural and symbolic forms—forms that, to paraphrase Friedman, were “either produced by or transformed into globally accessible objects and representations.” In other words, drawing from external sources to cast their social identity and public image was not unprecedented for Southeast Asian royalty, especially not for the royalty of Ayutthaya and early Bangkok. Like elites in most time and place, the Siamese aristocracy would have regarded themselves as carriers of novelty and models of sophistication, and such self-perception would have provided, in turn, a degree of self-esteem as well as “international” prestige. Wolters himself, in a gloss to his initial formulation of localization, has spoken of the “opportunistic and pragmatic attitude towards the present” of Southeast Asia’s precolonial elites, their “sense of being an integral part of the whole of the known ‘world,’” and their “remarkable propensity for being ‘modern.’” The
pursuit of siwilai can therefore be conceptualized as a later instance of earlier globalizing trends such as Indianization and (notwithstanding its narrower scope) Sinicization, in whose milieu the Siamese royalty’s social and cultural identity had been forged through a creative process of selection and adaptation. Military uniforms, oil portraits, and suburban villas played, in this sense, a function similar to silk robes, Brahmanic rituals, and Indic architecture in proclaiming the Bangkok royalty’s association with a foreign civilization whose potency was manifested by means of trade, diplomacy, and proselytizing, as well as military might.

Social anthropologist Carol Breckenridge has written an astute essay on the cultural flows that occurred in the globalized space of the latter half of the nineteenth century, which she terms “Victorian ecumene”: “This Victorian ecumene encompassed Great Britain, the United States, and India (along with other places) in a discursive space that was global while nurturing nation-states that were culturally highly specific.”

In pointing out what she sees as the “cultural paradoxes of imperialism,” Breckenridge goes on to argue,

The formation of national cultures in the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the development of transnational practices that recurred in the creation of a global class united by their relation to newly invented rituals, newly constructed metropoles, newly naturalized objects. Though all classes and ethnic groups, both in Britain and in India, were implicated . . . in these constructions, some benefited more than others. The greatest beneficiaries of the newly constructed colonial edifices were those members of the ruling elite of the respective nations who, through their associations, practices, and consumption patterns were also members of a global and increasingly cosmopolitan elite.

Breckenridge’s argument contains in nuce an understanding of globalizing processes that, unlike most sociological formulations, does not posit a contraposition between globalization and national cultural identities but, rather, underscores the relationship between their formation in the late nineteenth century and the emergence of a transnational elite whose cosmopolitan identity was predicated upon shared tastes and cultural practices spanning East and West, colony and metropole. The new self-perception of the House of Chakri as members of the fraternal order of world royalty was a distinctive trait of the modernizing project pursued in the Fifth Reign.
King Mongkut’s way of addressing Queen Victoria as (in his own English), “Our most respected and distinguished Friend, and by race of royalty Our very affectionate Sister,” was an early intimation of the claim to equal status with European royalty pursued to much greater effect by King Chulalongkorn. Also, Breckenridge’s contention that the web of interrelationships put in place by imperialism benefited not only the British but the Indian elite as well can be safely extended to Siam’s ruling elite, who from the colonial pacification of Southeast Asia derived the geopolitical conditions and financial resources necessary to assert their “national” political authority.

The political theatrics of fin-de-siècle Europe, discussed above in terms of “invention of tradition,” is another prime example of such transnational cultural flows. Majestic pageants performed on vast open spaces against a backdrop of imposing edifices represented a potent expression of modernity that the rulers of countries such as Japan and Siam imitated in order to claim equal status to Europe’s governing elites. It was, of course, not an accident that the appearance of a globalized political theatrics followed the emergence of a global marketplace as a result of the worldwide diffusion of capitalist modes of production and exchange, which furnished imperialism’s prime rationale. While the monumental expansion of capital cities and the effusion of public commemorations in Europe aimed to rekindle the ashes of the royal mystique with the rising breath of nationalist fervor, other newly invented spectacles—international exhibitions above all—revolved around (indeed celebrated) what Karl Marx famously termed “the fetishism of the commodity.” In his study of consumer culture in Victorian Britain, Thomas Richards incisively argues, “As political theater the spectacles of the early and mid-nineteenth century bore only a superficial resemblance to the royal progresses, public pageants, and elaborate rituals of the eighteenth. Display, extravagance, and excess survived—but less for the sake of those who staged the spectacle than for the sake of the spectacle itself.”

Needless to say, the association of kings and things long predated the modern period. As regalia and royal paraphernalia, clothing items whose use was restricted by sumptuary laws, and even holy relics show, the connection between conspicuous ownership and personal and political authority lay at the very root of the institute of kingship in both Europe and Asia. As Clifford Geertz and others have shown, the rulers of precolonial Southeast Asia had nothing to learn from the likes of Elizabeth I and
Louis XIV on how to project a superhuman image of themselves by means of their sartorially enhanced personae, material possessions, and the physical setting of their courts. In Europe, however, the industrial revolution, the rise of romantic love, and the fall of the ancien régime combined to bring about by the end of the eighteenth century a modern mode of consumption that broke away from the political regulation and the fixed notion of wants of preindustrial society to become a means of self-construction available to an ever-increasing segment of society. It is also an intriguing coincidence that major political developments in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the demotion of ruling dynasties and the rise of nationalism, were accompanied by the advent of mass consumerism.

As already argued, the political and socioeconomic institutions of Fifth Reign Siam were not analogous to Victorian and Edwardian Britain’s, or even Meiji Japan’s. It is important to remember that, until 1932, Siam had neither an elected house of representatives, however few the voting-rights holders, nor a written constitution of any sort. But the reconfiguration of the Siamese monarchy’s public image testifies to the ruling elite’s appreciation of visuality as the dominant trait of the culture of modernity, as well as to their ability to make use of its globalized political theatrics. King Chulalongkorn’s keen interest in photography (characteristic of the incumbent sovereign, too) bears aptly upon the elite’s manifest preoccupation with the image they projected; and it is hardly surprising that even the origins of Thai cinema go back to one of Rama V’s brothers, who made a series of short films documenting the king’s public activities and royal ceremonies in the early 1900s. Most significantly, the large number of photographs of the Fifth Reign in circulation allows for a visual memory of that period that helps explain its grip on the Thai collective imagination today.

In conclusion, I propose to conceptualize the early formation of Thai modernity not according to a “nationalist/anticolonialist” paradigm, but as the localized product of globalizing trends occurring in the late-nineteenth-century global arena that I shall call, after Breckenridge, Victorian ecumene. If, economically and politically speaking, the most powerful of these globalizing forces were capitalism and colonialism, equally
important in engendering localized modernities were globally circulating ideological constructs such as “progress,” and even technological inventions such as photography. From this perspective, the fashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s modern public image can be understood as the result of the localization of perceivably global markers of civilization. In examining the appropriation and localization in turn-of-the-century Siam of social and cultural practices and material culture from the West, it is important to bear in mind that the attitude to borrowing and reworking foreign imports was embedded in the elite’s cultural identity. It could thus be expected that Western imports too acquired new or additional meanings or, at the very least, new nuances. Sorting out this question is the task of the following chapters.