

## Review Article

## Homosociality in modern Thai political culture

Craig J. Reynolds

**'Nai nai' samai ratchakan thi 6** [Men of the inner palace during the sixth reign]

By CHANAN YOTHONG

Bangkok: Matichon, 2013. Pp. xxxi + 294. Notes, Bibliography, Plates, Drawings.

'Watthanantham nakrian chai luan khong "wajirawut witthayalai" nai yuk "ron-grian mahat lek luang"' [The all-male student culture in Vajiravudh College when it was the Royal Pages Bodyguard School], *Warasan an* 4, 1 (Apr.–June 2012): 179–87.

One of the most intriguing social spaces in Thai history is the court of the sixth Bangkok king, Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), and the circle of young men he cultivated there. These men were deeply loyal to the king, and he to them. The relationships were emotional, affirming, intense, and physical; for many of the men, these close relationships of their youth lasted into adulthood and marriage, if they married, and many of them did.

It is said, rather too coyly, that the sixth reign was controversial. The more forthright assessment both at the time and in the decades since is that it was a disaster. Vajiravudh became heir to the Siamese throne unexpectedly in 1895, when the Crown Prince, his older half-brother, died of typhoid in his late teens. The king was not all that interested in governing, nor was he very good at it, so the argument goes. He spent extravagantly on his courtiers as well as on himself, and by the end of the reign, the kingdom's finances had fallen into disarray. To avoid personal bankruptcy, a foreign loan had to be raised for the king.<sup>1</sup> 'The prestige and dignity of the throne took a great beating under his irresponsible rule,' says one Thai historian, and 'his reign became a nightmare for those who had spent their lives in strengthening and serving the monarchy.'<sup>2</sup> Cartoonists at the time mocked the king's

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1 Stephen Lyon Wakeman Greene, *Absolute dreams: Thai government under Rama VI, 1910–1925* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999), p. 142.

2 Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Kings, country and constitutions: Thailand's political development 1932–2000* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 27.

competence, tastes, and appearance mercilessly; a British official writing back to London towards the end of the reign reported that the local press referred to Vajiravudh as 'Baldy' and 'Fatty'.<sup>3</sup> The king was powerless to put a stop to the ridicule. So much for royal absolutism. It would not be stretching the evidence to say that much of what King Bhumiphol, the incumbent monarch, has done in his six decades on the throne has been aimed at recovering from the disaster of the sixth reign. Successful dynasts have long memories and are haunted by the poor reputations of their predecessors.

Vajiravudh's preference for the company of men, indeed his insistence on the company of particular young men, led to the appointment of favourites who had neither the experience nor the rapport with the bureaucracy and senior members of the royal family to manage the affairs of state.<sup>4</sup> About the male favourites and what intimacy with them might imply for modern Thai political culture, discretion has been the better part of frankness. It is only recently that historians writing in English, let alone in Thai, have felt able to say that the king was homosexual.<sup>5</sup> Public discussion of sex in the lives of the high and mighty is taboo, a private matter, particularly for members of the royal family. Many Thai people over a certain age find such discussion offensive.

Benjamin Batson, who offers a constructive verdict on the reign, said guardedly that the king surrounded himself 'with male courtiers from relatively obscure backgrounds'. A thesis written by Stephen Greene in the early 1970s devoted a section to 'royal favourites', but did not explore the connections between these men, their careers, and the king's personality, except to say that they wielded much power.<sup>6</sup> Another historian was forthcoming about criticism of the king's homosexual lifestyle at the expense of the nation, yet could not gauge the extent to which this was public knowledge and what it might have meant for the emerging public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson was possibly the first modern scholar to break the taboo and use the 'h word' in 1978, saying that the 'politics, style, and mistakes' of the reign cannot be understood without taking into account the king's homosexuality. The king's practice of appointing male sexual partners to high office caused political competition and aroused resentment. Such favouritism had cost two English kings their lives, said Anderson, implying that Vajiravudh was lucky to die by natural causes albeit prematurely.<sup>8</sup> In direct contrast to this position, a Thai historian writing in English on Thai absolutism insists that in order to fully understand the structural changes taking place

3 Greene, *Absolute dreams*, p. 163. A tough press law was issued in 1923 in an attempt to curtail the name-calling. Scot Barmé, *Man, woman, Bangkok: Love, sex and popular culture in Thailand* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), chap. 4, discusses the cartoons.

4 Léopold Robert-Martignan, *La monarchie absolue Siamoise de 1350 à 1926* (Cannes: Robaudy, 1939), p. 281.

5 Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 106.

6 Benjamin A. Batson, *The end of the absolute monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 14; Greene, *Absolute dreams*, is a lightly revised version of the thesis.

7 Barmé, *Man, woman, Bangkok*, p. 116.

8 Benedict R.O'G. Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai state: The state of Thai studies', in *The study of Thailand: Analyses of knowledge, approaches, and prospects in anthropology, art history, economics, history, and political science*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens, OH: Southeast Asia Program, Center for International Studies, 1978), p. 208, n. 24.

in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is necessary to separate the king's preference for young men and what she refers to as his 'psychological make-up' from his problems with the bureaucracy. 'Personal inclination' is this author's euphemism for the 'h word'.<sup>9</sup> Walter Vella in his 1978 monograph on Vajiravudh, for more than thirty years the standard work on the reign, adopted the same strategy and said absolutely nothing about the topic, barely alluding to 'courtiers' and 'favourites' of the king.<sup>10</sup>

Early in 2013 Chanan Yothong, a young Thai researcher, published *Men of the inner palace during the sixth reign*, in which the relationships between the king and his male courtiers are spelled out in detail.<sup>11</sup> The monograph originated as an M.A. thesis in Thai under the supervision of Dr Chalidaporn Songsamphan in the gender studies program at Thammasat University. 'Men of the inner palace' is my wordy rendition of the more economical and euphonious term in Thai, *nai nai*, which Chanan uses to contrast with *nang nai*, the women who lived in the inner palace of the polygynous Thai kings.<sup>12</sup> What had once been the domain of women and staffed by women became in the sixth reign an exclusively all-male world staffed by men. Chanan brings to life the world of the *nai nai*, the king's relationships to the men, and the *nai nai*'s relationships with each other. He discusses this world in such a compelling way and with such mesmerising detail that after reading his book, I find it impossible to put to one side Vajiravudh's 'psychological make-up' in explaining what happened during the reign and after.

The private life of King Vajiravudh has long been a topic of conversation and speculation. The Thai public is hungry for gossip about the royals, and some people have fun mocking the royal institution by circulating unflattering stories. So the stories about this king are not all that newsworthy. What is newsworthy is that this is the first time in Thai language that an author has dug down to document the stories, with one reviewer declaring Chanan to be a very brave person indeed for daring to tip-toe across the minefield of censorship, banned books, and lese-majesty law. Books written by Westerners, such as *The king never smiles*, have provoked consternation and outrage in the Thai establishment.<sup>13</sup>

9 Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *The rise and decline of Thai absolutism* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 127.

10 Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the development of Thai nationalism*, assisted by Dorothy B. Vella (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1978).

11 Chanan Yothong, *Nai nai samai ratchakan thi 6* [Men of the inner palace during the sixth reign] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2013).

12 *nai* (นาย) = male boss, term of address for Mr; *nai* (ใน) = inside, inner. Chanan's wordsmithing is useful here, and I prefer to use the term *nai nai*, rather than 'male courtiers' or 'male favourites', or 'gentlemen-in-waiting', another translation that misses the point.

13 Nawin Wannawet, 'Nai nai kap panha "khwamjing nai ruang lao" lae "rang song khong adit"' [*Nai nai* and the problem of 'truth from oral evidence' and 'the spirit of the past'], *Songkhla nakkharin* 19, 2 (Mar.–June 2013): 248–50. Paul Handley, *The king never smiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Another review by Phinyaphan Photchanalawan, 'Nai nai royan ime "jin" khommiwniti' [*Nai nai*: A royally imagined community], *Prachatai*, <http://prachatai.com/journal/2013/06/47344> (last accessed 21 Oct. 2013), also pointed out the dangers of publishing such a book in the face of current prosecutions under the lese-majesty law. The referent is clearly Benedict Anderson's coinage of 'imagined communities' in his book now translated into Thai, but in addition to this allusion, '*jin*' in quotation marks is shorthand for English 'to imagine or fantasise something'.

Indeed, in early August 2013 Asia Books in Bangkok withdrew the book from sale, citing ‘political sensitivity’.<sup>14</sup> One wonders why Asia Books bothered, because the chain sells mostly English-language books. The book was not officially banned, and in the Thai-language trade, it was flying off the shelves. At the Kinokuniya book chain and at Bookmoby, an online supplier, *Nai nai* was among the top ten best-sellers in May and June. One estimate is that by mid-October 2013 almost 20,000 copies had been sold, not bad for an academic book, albeit one about the monarchy, which crossed over into the mass market to compete with titles on investing, personal development, Buddhism, and *feng shui*.<sup>15</sup> There is a *nai nai* fan club on Facebook, and it is said that the book is a special treat for teenage ‘Y girls’, who like to see boys expressing affection for one another. The stunning cover photograph of three beautiful young men in their royal pages uniforms, the purple-hued design, and an enticing back cover blurb are calculated to stimulate sales in particular readerships.

One reviewer cited these marketing ploys as criticism of the book. Heaven forbid that an academic book should be readable and popular! Still, the clever packaging provokes a serious question: What is this book trying to tell us?<sup>16</sup>

### Marriage politics and the throne

Until the sixth reign the Thai rulers had been polygynous. King Mongkut, Vajiravudh’s paternal grandfather, had 54 wives; King Chulalongkorn, his father, had 152<sup>17</sup> (Chanan, p. 7). Many, but not all, of these women bore the king children. To expand their influence and to facilitate their commercial activities, the kings accepted wives from provincial governors and rulers of vassal states as well as from the Chinese merchant class. Some women were hostages, residing at the royal base to guarantee the loyalty of the tributary rulers and provincial lords who had offered them to the king (Chanan, p. 4).

In such a political system, ‘the type of masculinity associated with political power defined a man without wives as incomplete — not fully a man’.<sup>18</sup> As understood by Chanan, Vajiravudh turned this proposition upside down. Masculinity associated with political power defined a man without wives as complete; this man, Vajiravudh, was fully a man *only* when women were kept out of his life or largely excluded from his life. Chanan explores the kinds of masculinity manifest in the sixth king’s court and proposes different masculinities, alternative masculinities, for there seems to have been more than one. As one reviewer put it, the king’s love of men may have been of a kind quite different from what we are familiar with today.<sup>19</sup> In his foreword that takes the reader on a wild gender-bending ride from Hollywood he-men to cultural practices in Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia,

14 *Prachatai* (English) online, <http://prachatai.com/english/node/3666> (last accessed 14 Nov. 2013).

15 For estimates on sales and popularity I am grateful to Anuk Pitukthanin, personal communication, 22 Oct. 2013.

16 Nawin, ‘*Nai nai* and the problem’, p. 250. ‘Y girls’ (from Jap. *yaoi*, sometimes translated as boys’ love) refers to female-oriented fictional media that originated in Japanese *manga* cartoons in which boy–boy affection is open and valorised; Preedee Hongson, personal communication, 16 Dec. 2013.

17 Tamara Loos, ‘Sex in the inner city: The fidelity between sex and politics in Siam’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 64, 4 (2005): 883, gives different statistics for the number of wives, 50 and 153 respectively.

18 Loos, ‘Sex in the inner city’, p. 896.

19 Nawin, ‘*Nai nai* and the problem’, p. 251. If there were any doubt from reading the book, and I had



Figure 1. Front Cover of Chanan Yothong, *'Nai nai' samai ratchakan thi 6*.

Thanes Wongyannawa of Thammasat University points out that in many societies homosociality is not equivalent to homosexuality (Chanan, pp. 16–27). Cultural

no doubt, Chanan affirmed in a discussion in Chiang Mai on 3 Apr. 2013 that his main theme is alternative masculinities.

practices, such as men holding hands or touching, do not necessarily signal homosexual relations between the men. Chanan's book forces us to ask questions about gender relations at the apex of the Thai power elite and about the legacy of those relations, the alternative masculinities, in Thailand's public life today.

King Vajiravudh's personality and approach to the business of ruling were shaped by the circumstances in which he found himself. For one thing, it was no longer imperative for the king to protect the gene pool. Apart from being a residence for the king's many wives, the inner palace had been an institution that kept unwanted genes out and reserved privileged women for the male monarch's genes. There had been strict rules regulating contact between the palace women and men to limit the chance of producing 'mutinous biological offspring', as one historian colourfully put it.<sup>20</sup> Half-brothers, always rivals in this political system, would no longer be able to assert their claims to the throne, because in the future there would be no half-brothers under monogamous kings. With primogeniture enshrined in law by his father, the succession was now straightforward so long as the king produced a male heir, something, as it turned out, he found difficult to do. Vajiravudh was not interested in women either romantically, politically or for business reasons. In any case, the political advantages of polygamy had been rendered unnecessary in the previous decade. Treaties with France (1904) and Great Britain (1909) had fixed Siam's borders, and the kin networks fostered by polygamy were no longer required to bind the bits and pieces of the realm together. Not needing women in his personal and public life, Vajiravudh also did not want them, one of Chanan's many insights in this landmark book.<sup>21</sup> Vajiravudh married late in the reign and tried to reproduce the royal line with several women, and finally, one bore him a child. The king died the following day, and the child was a daughter who could not inherit the throne according to the Palatine Law of Succession at the time.

A second circumstance is that Vajiravudh inherited the throne from a spectacularly successful father, who had extensive kin, perhaps 500 of them. Yet Vajiravudh, despite his high status as the offspring of one of the three chief queens, felt alone. Because he had spent nine years abroad, followed by eight years back in Siam in the shadow of his uncles and other senior members of the family, and possibly because of his personality and preoccupations with drama, literature, and the arts, he had few allies in the family. Most of these royals did not know him very well, and many of them thought they knew better than he how to rule, so his political base was weak. Some of his uncles thought he was weak. From the outset, even as Crown Prince, he found it necessary to build his own entourages and constituencies, hence the *nai nai* he drew around him while he bided his time waiting for the throne. The patronage of gifts and promotion to rank he granted to the *nai nai* through the years created not only a distinctive group of men loyal to him, but also an affluent coterie of refined gentlemen (*phu di*) who shared his tastes and values (Chanan, p. 218).

The third circumstance was the insecurity of his throne and the possibility of usurpation and a coup. In 1909 Vajiravudh was personally involved in flogging an

20 Loos, 'Sex in the inner city', pp. 887–8.

21 Loos, 'Sex in the inner city', pp. 903–4, argues a strong case that a major change took place in the sixth reign in the regulation of the sexuality of men who worked in or near the palace.

army cadet, one episode among several that injured the dignity of the army whose proud officer corps had been trained in Europe. Within two years the rift between the army and the king broke into the open, and a coup was attempted in 1912 by officers who planned political alternatives to absolute monarchy.<sup>22</sup> Even before the coup, which was easily crushed, there had been rumours within hours of King Chulalongkorn's death in 1910 that the throne would be denied Vajiravudh, or, once acquired, taken from him. Advocates for a constitution and democracy grew more strident in their demands. Feeling vulnerable and fearing rebellion, Vajiravudh ventured into the more public areas of the palace only when duty required and sought refuge from danger in the inner palace or in his private quarters. In Chanan's explanation of the king's worries, the inner palace was like a fortified bunker where, surrounded by those he loved and trusted, he felt safe from his enemies (Chanan, p. 233).

### *Nai nai*

Chanan discusses homoeroticism among the *nai nai* and hints at homosexuality by writing about circumstances in which men must have had physical relations, but he is more interested in the love of men and their deep and abiding companionship. For most of the book, his focus is on homosociality, 'the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex' that may or may not involve 'explicitly erotic sexual interaction'.<sup>23</sup> More than once Chanan explains that Vajiravudh's and the *nai nai*'s masculinity was a manifestation of gender and power relations irrespective of whatever sexual relations the men might have had (Chanan, p. 244). In fact, the women's world of the inner palace in the previous reigns was homosocial as well; the homosocial world of the *nai nai* in the sixth reign was analogous to the all-female world and not its replacement.

Vajiravudh extended his patronage to several groups of men: those who served him, the royal pages in training for government service, the Wild Tiger Corps, and the Tiger Scouts. The *nai nai*, who were involved in all these activities and who give the book its name, attended to the king's personal needs.<sup>24</sup> No more than ten of these men cared for the king in his private quarters, bathing and dressing him and serving his meals, just as women had done for kings in past reigns. The king rose in the early afternoon and had a Thai lunch according to Thai custom, eaten with the hands. The *nai nai* were seated on the floor in two rows according to seniority, with the eldest closest to the king. In the evening the king sat at table for a Western meal. The men were on duty for twenty-four hours continuously until the king retired, often at dawn. Their job was to provide for his comfort and relaxation,

22 The best accounts of the coup attempt are Thaemsuk Numnonda, *Yang toek run raek kabot ro. so. 130* [The first Young Turks and their 1912 revolt] (Bangkok: Ruangsinn Press, 1979) and Atcharapon Kamutphitsamai, *Kabot ro. so. 130 kabot phua prachathippatai naew khit thahan mai* [The 1912 revolt for democracy: New military thinking] (Bangkok: Amarin Academic Publishing, 1997).

23 Jean Lipman-Blumen, 'Toward a homosocial theory of sex roles: An explanation of the sex segregation of social institutions', *Signs* 1, 3 (1976): 16. Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 35, gives a definition from modern cultural theory of 'reciprocal bonds of masculine interest, affection, and obligation'.

24 Greene, in *Absolute dreams* (pp. 73–74), states that there were 50 royal 'favourites', which he divides into various subgroups, but I do not see that Chanan uses or endorses this statistic.

and this included massage, so the *nai nai* were intimate with all parts of the king's body. During dinner one man worked under the table massaging the king's feet; if the royal temper flared, the royal feet would beat furiously in the *nai nai*'s lap. At the end of the meal the king would rest his legs on the man's shoulders for more massage on his abdomen. In 1900 Vajiravudh had an emergency appendectomy and suffered for the rest of his life from intestinal discomfort that was relieved by massage (Chanan, pp. 29–30, 42).<sup>25</sup>

Chanan emphasises throughout the book how up close and very personal these men were to the Lord of Life, in such proximity that they were witness to the noises and odours of his bodily functions (Chanan, p. 176). Familiar, and most intimate with the king's body and needs, they were sometimes treated like friends as much as like servants, as least in the king's private quarters. The *nai nai* shared the king's tastes and enthusiasms, and in the evenings they would rehearse plays and masked drama, exercise, play bridge or hide and seek, or tell ghost stories. The evenings might be entirely devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment such as a Japanese film in the king's private theatre, or a play. The king may have had up to seventy of these men in his entourage for these activities. When he stayed at the seaside and went swimming, he was accompanied in the water by thirty to forty men who fanned out around him to keep away the sharks and stinging jellyfish (Chanan, pp. 28–31). Vajiravudh liked to relax, he needed to relax, and he liked to have the company of many *nai nai* when he did so.

In return for their devoted service, the *nai nai* were clothed and housed by the king, who would grant almost every favour asked. He provided scholarships for many of them to study abroad and paid for their elaborate military uniforms. When presented with a tailor's bill for 2,000 baht to cover the cost of four suits from a European emporium, a small fortune in those days, the king paid up without question (Chanan, p. 37). Vajiravudh was vigilant in looking after the men and would occasionally step in and assign an older *nai nai* to look after a younger one if circumstances required. Promotion to noble rank for special favourites was astonishingly rapid, over and above what personnel elsewhere in government service were awarded. One *nai nai* was promoted to *phraya* noble rank at the age of 25, and at 27 became a privy councillor, unthinkable today when the average age of privy councillors is in the late 80s (Chanan, pp. 81–82).

The carnality of these relationships, which is impossible to document in any case, is less important to Chanan than the re-creation of the social world of the young men who lived and worked in physical proximity to the king and to each other. They worked together, played together, and gossiped together. One pair, scheduled to keep watch during the night outside the king's bedchamber, collapsed in such a fit of laughter that they had to move out of the king's earshot lest they woke him with their giggling (Chanan, p. 183). The *nai nai* were family, Vajiravudh's family. He was 'raising them' (*chup liang*), and he thought of them as his children. His first words in the morning were, 'Daddy is up and awake now.'<sup>26</sup> At the same

25 Worachat Meechubot, *Phrabat somdet phraramathibodi sisinthara mahawachirawut phramong-kutkhiao jaoyuhua phaendin sayam* [King Vajiravudh, monarch of Siam] (Bangkok: Sangsan Buk, 2010), p. 30, tells the story of Vajiravudh's appendectomy while he was studying in England.

26 'I (*kha*) regard you as my (*jao*) children, and you must think of me as your father', quoted in



time, they tended to him as a subservient wife would look after her husband. Some scenes sketched in Chanan's account evoke domestic tranquility. One man could be seen darning Vajiravudh's threadbare Chinese pajamas, mildly outraged that the lord of the land preferred to clothe himself in inferior sleepwear (Chanan, p. 80).

Evenings in Vajiravudh's palaces were often devoted to theatrical activities — rehearsals, discussions about scripts, performances. The king loved the theatre and is known in Thai letters for his translations of Shakespeare, Sheridan, Molière, and Gilbert and Sullivan. He attended performances often when he was in England. He wrote and directed many plays, spent extravagantly on their props and costumes, and was fastidious in what he expected of the productions. I've always thought there was something theatrical about the reign as a whole — the activities the king sponsored, the way he conducted himself, and the way he organized the lives of those in his care.<sup>27</sup> What happened on stage was a manifestation of how he saw himself; his dramatic scripts were an expression of his beliefs and values. There was hardly any male–female love in his scripts, for example. The male and female protagonists were distant for much of the play, and their marriage was a rather functional affair (Chanan, p. 149).

In the ethos of Vajiravudh's court, the open expression of male-to-male love did not diminish a man's masculinity, but instead encouraged a particular kind of masculinity that was tender and caring. The theatre stage was a place where a man, playing a woman or a man, could give full expression to this masculinity, and the king's character and upbringing was a key to the freedoms allowed in this space. From early in his life, talk in the royal family contrasted Prince Vajiravudh, who was quiet, gentle, and a little timid, with his older half-brother, Prince Vajiravunhis, who was strong, athletic, and full of energy. Vajiravudh was the Moon, while Vajiravunhis was the Sun. Vajiravudh looked more like his mother than his father, and it was said that he lacked 'manly bearing', leading one senior prince to recommend that Vajiravudh could use rigorous military training, which in due course he received at Sandhurst Military Academy (Chanan, p. 246). Eighteen months at Sandhurst failed to toughen him up, however, although the experience had practical application later in his activities on the mock battlefield and in his camp-outs in the countryside. With a younger brother, Prince Chakrabongse, who held a number of ministerial and military appointments during the reign, Vajiravudh had a tense relationship born of male sibling rivalry that tested his particular masculinity (Chanan, p. 232).

Foremost among the *nai nai* closest to the king were two brothers in the Phoengbun na Ayudhya family. Their mother had been Vajiravudh's wet nurse, and their great-grandfather, a prince, had been executed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The formal charge was rebellion, but the prince was known to be sleeping with male members of a dramatic troupe under his patronage rather than his wife.<sup>28</sup> The triumvirate of the king and the two brothers, his constant companions

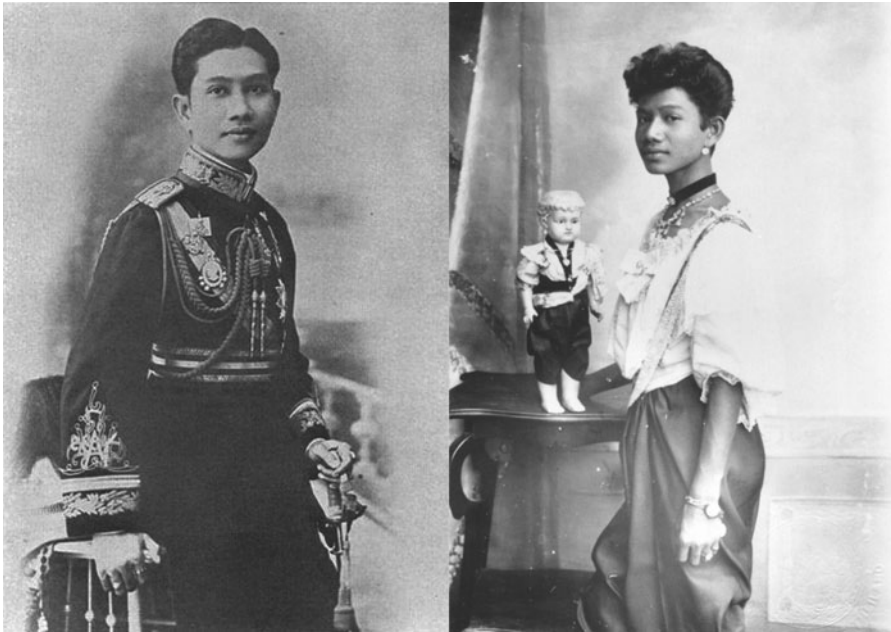
Worachat Meechubot, *Kret phongsawadan ratchakan thi 6* [Historical anecdotes from the sixth reign] (Bangkok: Sangsan Buk, 2010), p. 61.

27 Craig J. Reynolds, Review of Walter F. Vella, 'Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 13, 1 (1982): 193.

28 Out of deference to the Phoengbun descendants, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the Jakri dynasty historian and Vajiravudh's uncle, declined to publish the chronicle of the third Bangkok reign while

wherever he travelled, were known among the *nai nai* by a wry Buddhist moniker: Vajiravudh was the Buddha; Ramrakhop was the Dhamma; and his younger brother was the Sangha. To get ahead, the *nai nai* needed to have one of the Triple Gems as a patron (Chanan, p. 42).

The two brothers acted in the palace dramas and cross-dressed for women's parts. The younger of the brothers, Phraya Anirutthathewa (Foen Phoengbun), was naturally gifted for women's roles.



**Figure 2. Phraya Anirutthathewa (1893–1951) in uniform and cross-dress**

The king preferred to cast him and other men who had effeminate manners as women, sometimes for deliberate comic effect. There was much hilarity in this cross-dressing as well as competition in who could dress up with the most panache. Cross-dressing made permissible male-to-male flirting, touching, and cuddling in the context of the play (Chanan, 194). No stranger to Shakespeare, Vajiravudh had his own ideas about exploiting the cross-dressing in traditional Siamese theatre. In masked dramas and dances, women had played the parts of men, allowing eye and body movements to signal attraction between lovers. Lesbian relationships were not uncommon in the inner palace of previous reigns.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this is yet another example of Vajiravudh up-ending convention, and in turn, up-ending the values of certain kinds of manly love. The plays allowed the men to 'come out' as women and enabled them to freely express the feminine side of their personalities. In effect,

Vajiravudh was on the throne; Pramin Khruathong, 'Revealing the secrets of the Mom Kraison case', *Sinlapa watthanatham* 31, 5 (2010): 88–103. See also Greene, *Absolute dreams*, pp. 75–6; Chanan, *Nai nai*, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Loos, 'Sex in the inner city', pp. 882, 895–6.

the play afforded the men an altered state of being, a phenomenon familiar to scholars of Burmese spirit possession. The male shaman is temporarily inhabited by a female spirit and acts out the feminine aspects of his personality by behaving effeminately.<sup>30</sup>

Of all the *nai nai*, the elder brother, Ramrakhop, who had become a royal page when he was thirteen, was the most powerful. He dined with the king every evening and greeted him when he woke the next day. He was the king's right-hand man and the gatekeeper to a royal audience. His presence was felt in the bureaucracy and in the military where he was resented for his meddling and for rudely belittling a senior general as well as the Young Turks involved in the 1912 coup (Chanan, pp. 236–8). As if to stamp forever on the brothers their dependence on the monarch for their station in life, Vajiravudh gave them the family name *phoengbun*, 'dependent on the king's grace'.

### Royal pages and Vajiravudh College

A second male group, overlapping somewhat with the first group, were the royal pages who worked in the outer precincts of the court and were being trained for official service. In contrast to previous reigns when young men were presented by their fathers or influential senior family members and attached to any prince of the reign, under Vajiravudh the men were required to have an audience with the king. Having interviewed and selected them personally, he could trust them when they were appointed to government service. The men entered in their mid-teens; family pedigree was not important in their selection, although certainly no farmers or dock workers would be found in his court. In selecting the men, the king looked for intellect, politeness, a gentle and sweet disposition, seriousness of purpose, discretion, wit and earthy humour. The men had to be good-looking and not sexually promiscuous. One of the famous *nai nai*, said to be 'the youngest and most handsome nobleman in the kingdom', had entered royal service when he was 14 years old (Chanan, pp. 22–4). In 1925, at the end of the reign, there were almost 1,000 of these royal pages under the king's patronage. A bureaucracy of considerable size and budget looked after their needs; there were more of these male pages than personnel in the ministries of commerce, foreign affairs, and the navy combined (Chanan, p. 21).

King Vajiravudh transformed the academy that had trained the royal pages in previous reigns into a modern school, renamed Vajiravudh College in the following reign, an elite institution that continues to educate boys today. Its graduates have entered all walks of public life — the civil service, the diplomatic corps, the armed forces, business, and academia. The king's vision was that graduates of Vajiravudh College would be instantly recognisable because of the education and grooming the college provided them. They acquired a pedigree for life. Such entanglements and networks through family, marriage, school, academy, and university illustrate why Thai elites are so difficult to parse. Such connections allow people to leap across class and status cleavages and interact with people in other social worlds. Nowadays the college still mixes up these cleavages in the way it strips incoming students of their family and

30 Melford Spiro, *Burmese supernaturalism* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1967), p. 220.

status markers and rebuilds its own meritocratic hierarchy based on seniority in the student body and performance in sport (particularly rugby), academics and music.<sup>31</sup>

The curriculum and regimen reflected the king's values and manifested his philosophy about personal relationships, including gender relationships. In speeches the king exhorted the students to refrain from foolish behaviour. They should stay away from alcohol, going out at night and hanging around with girls. They might catch a disease! The school was both an educational institution and a home for the boys; a home-away-from-home if they were boarders. One teacher, an effeminate man, was referred to as 'Mother' (Chanan, p. 209). The boys and young men sometimes shared beds, and embraced and comforted each other when they were afraid or anxious. The scene in the communal bath, all those sleek young bodies on show to one another, is homoerotic. Desire (*saneha*) is close to the surface in many of Chanan's passages. The intensity of these relationships bonded some boys for life. In one case, boys deliberately failed a grade three years running because they could not bear to part from their friends in the same class and did not want to progress to the next grade (Chanan, p. 207).

Some of the young men paired off and remained close for the rest of their lives. Chanan suggests that these deeply affective relationships were try outs for adult pairings, including marriage, later in life. Some of the *nai nai* married and had children, or married and did not have children. Some did not marry. One *nai nai*, M.L. Pin Malakul, married the sister of his partner and was childless. The reader can assume nothing about what the pairings meant in intimate terms, and it would be a mistake to guess. Ramrakhop, of all the *nai nai* the most intimate of Vajiravudh's intimates, had 34 children and gave them all rhyming names.<sup>32</sup>

### The Wild Tiger Corps

Yet another group of men were the Wild Tigers, a paramilitary unit founded by the king to promote martial values and loyalty to authority — the king and the nation. The Corps was not part of the regular army which looked on the Wild Tigers as hopelessly amateurish and inept.<sup>33</sup> The king spent lavishly on rifles and uniforms for his Wild Tigers. Many of the *nai nai* and royal pages were members of the Wild Tigers corps, and so were civil servants who lived with their families and attended training on weekends and special camping expeditions in the countryside. Men were strong and naturally powerful, so they should take up arms to defend the kingdom (Chanan, pp. 138–9). Men also do not give birth or nurse, so they are expendable in war, and this expendability is a measure of manhood, a possible explanation for why risk-taking is evidence of manliness.<sup>34</sup> There is a lot of discussion about war

31 Preedee Hongsaton, personal communication, 25 Nov. 2013.

32 *Thiraluk nai ngan phrarathchathan phloeng sop phon ek phonrua ek jaophraya ramrakhlp (m. l. fua phoengbun 26 thanwakhom 2510* [In memory: Royal cremation for General Admiral Ramrakhop 26 Dec. 1967], no pagination. Chanan does not mention Ramrakhop's family, and I thank Preedee Hongsaton for bringing this interesting fact to my attention.

33 Thaemsuk, *The first Young Turks*, p. 151. For a consolidated account of the Wild Tigers Corps and its place in the history of Thai paramilitary units, see Desmond Ball and David Scott Mathieson, *Military redux: Or Sor and the revival of militarism in Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), pp. 4–10. Vella, *Chaiyo!*, discusses the Wild Tiger Corps on pp. 27–52.

34 David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the making: Cultural concepts of masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 121.

and manhood, which might be described as Thai *machismo*. The king believed that one was only truly alive when fighting, and to fight well it was important to be strong, not sickly, and of robust physique. As a student, when he accompanied the king on outings to the seaside, M.L. Pin Malakul increased his body mass by running along the water's edge, horse racing, cycling, and swimming. When Phraya Ratanaratchamanit, a mere slip of a man, came under Vajiravudh's patronage, he was told to bulk up to be able to defend himself, so he dutifully worked out on dumbbells, Indian clubs, and strength training (Chanan, p. 180). One keen student at Vajiravudh College rose at 4 a.m. to run around the school before returning for calisthenics and morning parade.<sup>35</sup> The war and manhood theme was reflected in the educational programs of Vajiravudh College where sport was a proxy for war (Chanan, p. 195). It was important to instil martial, manly values in youth. In the king's speeches to the Wild Tigers loyalty was conflated with bravery and masculinity (Chanan, pp. 140–41). The overnight camps in the Thai countryside were an opportunity for Wild Tigers to test themselves against the rigours and dangers of the jungle. The ordeals were staged, but the play was impossible to distinguish from the 'real' (Chanan, p. 200).

A feature of Vajiravudh's camps intended to give his Wild Tigers experience in struggling with nature's hardships was that no women were allowed to stay overnight in the camp, although they could visit during the day. The men needed to be self-reliant and should not depend on women to cook, sew, and look after their personal lives. Chanan attributes to Vajiravudh unflattering views of women's character generally. Women were subject to hysteria, and they tended to be shrill. Close association with women led to weakness and illness. Women belonged in the home, whereas men belonged at work and in the public sphere. Women were indiscreet, gossipy, nagging, emotional, quick-tempered, fawning, fickle, and spendthrift (Chanan, pp. 144–56). Women were a waste of time; football was good because it kept men from wasting time with women.

In public, Vajiravudh's views were quite different, and he advocated many reforms for the improvement of the status of women. 'The king's desire that women be given freedom to meet and mix with men socially was evidenced in word and deed,' Walter Vella declared.<sup>36</sup> During the reign, debate grew in the public sphere about female equality, education, polygyny, and prostitution.<sup>37</sup> In 1920 a woman's unit was established in the Wild Tiger Corps, although membership was confined to the royal family (Chanan, p. 201). In what ways Vajiravudh's upbringing might explain his attitudes towards women is difficult to say. Chanan tells us nothing of the king's relationship with his mother, other than to say that he visited her only two or three times a year, or with his father. He rebuffed his mother's numerous attempts to find him a wife. Given the number of women carers in Chulalongkorn's court, it is probable that Vajiravudh grew up at an emotional and physical distance from both parents. Whatever his public pronouncements and

35 Chanan, *Nai Nai*, p. 200, and his 'The all-male student culture', p. 181.

36 Vella, *Chaiyo!*, p. 154.

37 Scot Barmé, 'Proto-feminist discourses in early twentieth century Siam', in *Genders and sexualities in modern Thailand*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), pp. 146–51.

policies on women might have been, in his private life women made him uneasy, and not just because he was shy.<sup>38</sup>

### The Victorian ecumene

When he was in England Vajiravudh was known as the ‘Victorian Siamese Prince’, and towards the end of the book Chanan makes a case that Siamese elite culture during the reign, particularly in the court, can be described as ‘localized Victorian’ (Chanan, p. 247). Maurizio Peleggi has shown in his book on the fashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s modern image that the Victorian ecumene had been fixed in the elite’s imagination sixty years earlier during the reign of Vajiravudh’s grandfather, Mongkut.<sup>39</sup> Encompassing Great Britain, the United States and India as well as other places, the Victorian ecumene evolved from globalising trends and came to be expressed in a variety of local settings. Chanan says Vajiravudh brought an aspect of the Victorian ecumene, a particular kind of masculinity, from England. It suited the king’s tastes and interests, and it strengthened and deepened the all-male world of the inner palace (Chanan, p. 164). Many inferences are made about resemblances as well as contrasts between Siamese court culture and Victorian culture, and many inferences are made about Vajiravudh’s homosociality in light of Victorian England. Chanan has reached out to the vast literature in English on male friendship, intimacy, sexuality, and masculinity to explain how the values, attitudes towards gender, and family politics of Victorian England in the age of empire were transformed or simply transplanted in Siam. But I feel the empirical material from the cremation volumes and other sources is assimilated a little too facilely into the Victorian ecumene without enough nuance about how, exactly, this happened. There is little, if any, explanation about the roots of the king’s homosociality, either in his early upbringing in Siam (1881–1894), or in his schooling in England (1893–1897), or during his two years at Sandhurst and a period in the Durham Light Infantry, or during his studies at Oxford (1900–1901).<sup>40</sup>

Vajiravudh’s homosociality did not come directly from his time at English public school, because contrary to history books in English that say Vajiravudh was educated at Eton, he did not attend Eton or any other English public school. For more than three years after he first arrived in England, he was privately tutored.<sup>41</sup> Chanan describes things that resemble or are similar to the gender relations in England at the time, and he has absorbed an impressive amount of the scholarly literature on gender relations in late Victorian and early Edwardian times. My reading of the book is that Chanan has found in this literature not the origins of the king’s habits and aspirations, but a vocabulary or language to describe what he detects in the

38 Chanan, pp. 104, 148, suggests comparisons with Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell (1857–1941), founder of the Boy Scouts, who married late in life at 55 and saw the physical rigours of scouting as a way of controlling the libido. Vella, *Chaiyo!*, p. 29, discounts the influence of Baden-Powell on the founding of the Wild Tigers Corps on chronological grounds.

39 Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of things: The fashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s modern image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), pp. 13, 15.

40 Kullada, *Rise and decline*, p. 128, gives these dates, but no two historians Thai or foreign agree on the dates.

41 In various passages, e.g. p. 209, Chanan states that Eton was the model for Vajiravudh College, although just how and why the king used Eton as a model is not clear.

Thai-language sources. His historical method is to perform a ventriloquist's illusion. A paragraph based on the Thai-language sources is followed by a paragraph drawn from the European scholarship about relations between men, or homosexual values, or the meaning of friendship, male love, and intimacy. The reader at first assumes that this discussion is in the Thai material, but upon checking the footnotes, discovers that the conceptual discussion comes from the English secondary literature.<sup>42</sup> It is an illusion, because Chanan puts forward the English-language scholarly literature to express what he wants to say, a strategy whereby he can say things that are taboo by letting the *farang* scholars do the talking.

The last years of Vajiravudh's time in England were spent at Oxford, which had long been a monastic university. The celibacy requirement had been overturned as recently as 1884, but the ethos of the all-male residential society lingered. A movement of cultural revival known as Hellenism, which had been under way at Oxford for several decades, valorised the intensity of male friendship as a form of spiritual communion. Male love was closely related to the inspiring warrior ideal so prominent in many of Vajiravudh's writings. For the king, this communion meant that only in male-to-male friendships could truth and honesty be found (Chanan, p. 160).

To make the case for the relevance of Victorian culture more persuasive, Chanan might also have considered the life of Oscar Wilde (1852–1900), the playwright, public personality and man of erudition and wit who was alive most of the time Vajiravudh was in England. An aesthete and hedonist, Wilde was said to be at his best 'lying on a sofa thinking'.<sup>43</sup> Although he was prosecuted and convicted in 1895 of criminal sodomy, he is now regarded as a cultural hero more than as a homosexual martyr. Wilde was very much a part of the Hellenism movement, and in the peroration he gave at his trial for sodomy in 1895, he spoke so eloquently about manly love as 'the noblest affection' that he received a standing ovation.<sup>44</sup> It is difficult to imagine that by 1900, when the prince was nineteen years old and studying at Oxford, he had not brushed up against Hellenism and at least some news of Wilde's life-work to legitimate homosexual love. Certainly, Vajiravudh's ideas about friendship and male affection resonate with the values and ideas espoused in Hellenism.

### The end of the reign and beyond

Not all the *nai nai* reciprocated the king's generosity with unbounded devotion. Towards the very end of the king's life, discipline and routine deteriorated, and the *nai nai*'s failure to perform duties to their utmost may even have hastened the king's passing. Dr Ralph Waldo Mendelson, who attended the gravely ill king in 1925, reported that the private quarters, including the bathroom, were filthy. Lying under the royal bed, the royal dog gnawed on the king's surgical dressings and snarled

42 Examples of book titles are *Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire, and the imagining of masculinities*; *Love, sex, intimacy and friendship between men, 1550–1800*; *Mapping men and empire*; examples of articles are 'Welcome to the men's club: Homosociality and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity'; 'Educating boys to be queer: Braddon's Lady Audley's secret'; 'Sex and the single boy: Ideals of manliness and sexuality in Victorian literature for boys'; 'Medicine, male bonding and homosexuality in Nazi Germany'; 'The Boy Scouts and the "girl question"'; 'Romantic friendship: Male intimacy and middle class youth in the northern United States, 1800–1900'.

43 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 306.

44 Dowling, *Hellenism and homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*.

whenever the physician approached. No one seemed responsible for maintaining proper hygiene at such a critical moment. The doctor had forbidden the *nai nai* to smoke — the fumes were unsanitary for a patient with a hole in his abdomen — but the *nai nai* were defiant. Instead of following doctor's orders and caring for their dying liege, they played cards in an adjoining room, laughing loudly and smoking with abandon (Chanan, pp. 238–40).

When the king died and the reign came to its tragic end, in one sense the curtain fell on the *nai nai* stage. One of those closest to Vajiravudh and totally devoted to him was noted for his peerless skills in massage, the only masseur who could relax the king. Phraya Ratanaratchamanit had wanted to study medicine, but his father, a district officer, prevailed on him to learn about public administration and enter government service where he caught Vajiravudh's eye. At the king's urging, he later became engaged to be married, but postponed the marriage so that he could serve Vajiravudh unencumbered by family. Shattered by the king's death, he ordained as a monk, broke off his engagement and remained in the monastery for the rest of his life (Chanan, p. 178). Ratanaratchamanit, known colloquially as Jaokhun Nor, took monastic asceticism as seriously as he did service to the king. He was a vegetarian and kept a skeleton and coffin in his monastery quarters so he could concentrate his mind on death. His ascetic ways predated his ordination. When the royal party vacationed at Bang Pa-in palace near Ayutthaya, Vajiravudh had to summon him from a local cemetery where he would be found meditating on life's corporeality.

Vajiravudh's death was a turning point in the lives of the *nai nai*. When it happened, the younger brother who succeeded him issued a strong statement of disapproval about the many things that had gone wrong in the reign. The new king moved immediately to release the *nai nai* from royal service and to dismantle the bureau of entertainments, the Wild Tigers corps, and Dusit Thani, the miniature model city that the king had built to play-act his vision for modern Siam.<sup>45</sup> The Lord of the Land had fallen into the clutches of bureaucrats, said the new king, referring to the *nai nai*, and government officials were now looked upon as embezzlers who indulged in factional politics. The monarchy had been brought into disrepute (Chanan, p. 240).

Has there been no legacy of the *nai nai* establishment in modern Thai political culture? Was it all only the momentary aberration of a man who did not have enough 'manly bearing' and lived the life of an aesthete while ruling, more or less, as the last real absolute monarch? My sense is that just as the *nai nai* world was not hermetically, spatially sealed off in the palace, so it cannot be confined temporally to the fifteen years of the reign as history has unfolded after it. The following are some possible lines of future inquiry.

### **New elites — Gentlemen in 'civilized' Siam**

Vajiravudh disestablished the old aristocracy by ignoring it, because it ignored him, and through his patronage of the *nai nai*, he sought to create a new elite that would come not from the families (*trakun*) and networks at the pinnacle of political

45 Vella, *Chaiyo!*, has a good description of Dusit Thani (pp. 75–6). Founded in 1918, it had a constitution, a bank, a post office, several newspapers, and public services. Chanan, *Nai nai*, pp. 117–27 and 247, explains Dusit Thani as an example of localised Victorian.



and social life, but from commoners. Only some were of noble or royal blood, and if they were, the blood ran thin in their generation. Members of this new elite raised under Vajiravudh's patronage were to be 'refined people' (*phu di*), educated people of taste, proper deportment and good manners (Chanan, pp. 216–18). Ministers of state later carried this project forward and broadened it nationally. Particularly influential were M.L. Pia Malakul and Jaophraya Thammasakmontri who produced education materials to instruct the new people on how to behave (Ibid.).<sup>46</sup> In this sense, the 1932 event that toppled the absolute monarchy was much less a revolution than an effect of changes that had already taken place in Thai society.

### **Vajiravudh's masculinity**

Vajiravudh fostered a kind of manhood that is a cross between the robust self-reliant warrior and the tender, considerate man who cares deeply for those who depend on him. These latter qualities are what the teenage Y girls find so attractive about the young men in the book. I resist the temptation to say that this tender, caring man is an expression of the feminine side of Vajiravudh, because I think Chanan is showing how this kind of stereotype should be broken down. Although he does not discuss androgyny, he does state that Vajiravudh's masculinity was not clear-cut (Chanan, p. 251). Vajiravudh was masculine, he just was not Hollywood Alpha-male masculine. Positioned at the apex of the Thai social and political hierarchy, Vajiravudh has authorised a particular type of male leader. He has made it possible for a single, unmarried or never-married man to be the most powerful person in the country. A military man, for example, does not have to be a brutal fighter. He can be firm and even tough (*phra det*), qualities essential in effective leadership, but he also needs to be 'a refined person' (*phu di*), caring, generous, and considerate of others (*phra khun*). The theme of homosociality applies in any attempt to understand other male-only social settings in Thailand — the army and police, sporting teams, boxing camps, Boy Scout troops, boarding schools, bandit gangs, prisons, monasteries, coup groups, and the Privy Council.

### **Personalised loyalty to the king and martial values**

Vajiravudh advanced Siamese nationalism by debating advocates of the populist nationalism rising up in the public sphere. What historical writing has missed is what Vajiravudh's so-called play-acting on the battlefield with his volunteer army bequeathed to Thai military culture. Soldiers entered into a pact with the king, pledging their fealty and vowing to lay down their lives not only for the nation but also for the king. By his example, Vajiravudh authorised a model of male behaviour. This code of male honour with elements of masculine self-control and service is found in many societies and is not unique to Thailand.<sup>47</sup> Vajiravudh's Wild Tiger Corps has a place in the paramilitary heritage of Thailand's modern history, and the loyalty oaths he required of the Tiger Corps members have become an essential element of modern

46 See also Patrick Jory, 'Thailand's politics of politeness: *Qualities of a gentleman* and the making of "Thai manners"' (n.p.). The term translated as 'gentleman' is gender neutral in Thai language and could include women.

47 Gilmore, *Manhood in the making*, p. 189.

Thai military culture.<sup>48</sup> The conflation of fighting for the king and fighting for the nation was initiated in the sixth reign, a martial code that was eagerly co-opted by the military governments and military-aligned governments that came to power after 1932. On occasion, these governments have asked Thai soldiers to restore order by force of arms in a civil political disturbance. Thais have been called upon to kill Thais, be they communists or opponents of the government of the day. To achieve this end, the Thai army employs a code of mateship. Fatal injury to a soldier arouses in his mates 'intense feelings of revenge' and induces them to cut down their fellow citizens.<sup>49</sup> F.M. Plaek Phibulsongkhram, no supporter of the absolute monarchy, inherited these militaristic values from Vajiravudh and passed them on to all Thai governments since his time. The willingness to die is proof of loyalty to the king.

### Alternative patriarchy

In royalist mythology today, the idea that the king's subjects are his children is traced back to the first Thai inscription of the thirteenth century. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat capitalised on this mythology of paternal rule when he was prime minister from 1957–63.<sup>50</sup> In the present reign the king is referred to as 'father', as in Father King Bhumiphol, an honorific that has passed into common parlance and graces the covers of innumerable books about Bhumiphol's achievements since his enthronement in 1946. During the political violence of 2010, when the stand-off between the Red Shirts and the government had become intractable, a banner hung from a Bangkok bridge exclaiming, 'Father, where are you?'<sup>51</sup> Was the question plaintive? Were the protestors really asking for the father-king's intervention? Or was the question ironic, a joke among the Red Shirts in the knowledge that the king was powerless to stop the imminent violence? Chanan reaches out to English clubs and the masculinity described there by researchers on Victorian England, but Victorian patriarchy was wholly different from Vajiravudh's patriarchy, which did not involve authority over the nuclear family. The *nai nai* were his family, and he thought of them as his children. This particular kind of alternative patriarchy also applies to idioms of leadership in other institutions, such as the army, where a powerful unmarried general on the Privy Council referred to himself early in his career as the father (*pa*) of his junior officers, who in turn happily referred to themselves as his children (*luk*). These appellations are still current.

### Biography as historiography

Chanan's book has been criticised as gossip history. As the first serious attempt in Thai to document what circulates as anecdote, it is bound to attract this comment. Now and then Chanan says something like, 'the story is told that ...', a narrative

48 Ball and Mathieson, *Militia redux*, p. 48.

49 Nidhi Eoseewong, 'The culture of the army, Matchon Weekly, 28 May 2010', in *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a divided Thailand*, ed. Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Aekapol Chongvilaivan (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), p. 13.

50 Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007), chapter 4.

51 Claudio Sopranzetti, *Red journeys: Inside the Thai red-shirt movement* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), p. 124.

style that understandably feeds the prejudice that his historical interpretation lacks adequate documentation. But he always has a footnote that cites a source, always. As the *nai nai* have passed away, their families have published accounts in cremation volumes containing a wealth of information about Vajiravudh's court and private life. Chanan cites about a dozen of these cremation volumes as well as M.A. theses, documents in the National Archives of Thailand, and works in Thai and English on the sixth reign.

The book immediately reminded one Thai reviewer of the memoir of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, *Skeletons in the closet*, in which the former prime minister, a noted novelist, shared hitherto unpublished family and palace lore.<sup>52</sup> For some readers, memoirs are not good enough sources, because they are written long after the events they purport to relate. The argument is that oral history, even in print, is suspect and cannot trump a document from the archives for veracity. Participants in a public discussion of the book in Chiang Mai in June 2013 found fault with Chanan's sources for this reason: there were too many secondary sources and not enough primary sources.<sup>53</sup> This distinction is fussy, and ignores the grey area between the 'oral source' category and 'the document' category. Documents — from archives, correspondence, or verbatim transcripts of conversations — have epistemological problems of their own. Their truth value is as open as oral testimony to questions about authorship, context, intent, authenticity, and reliability.

In a brief, conventional assessment of the reign, Chanan takes it for granted that the king did not have much ability and was not really interested in government and administration, but in a book otherwise packed with facts, he offers no evidence for this judgement (Chanan, p. 232). Domestic political history and the affairs of state are not the book's strengths. Chanan leaves the evaluation of the sixth Bangkok king's performance as a ruler to other scholars, just as he leaves the earth-shaking events of the first two decades of the twentieth century for others to narrate. The founding of the Chinese republic in 1911? The Great War of 1914–1918? The Russian revolution in 1917 and the execution of members of the imperial family? This news was worrying; some of the Siamese aristocracy, including one of his brothers, were married to Russians. We know these events rattled the Siamese monarch and forced responses from him, but in Chanan's book they merit barely a mention. Towards the end of World War I, Vajiravudh did dispatch troops to Europe and eventually sided with the Allies after the United States declared war on Germany.<sup>54</sup> Generally, however, such events are not important to what Chanan wants to tell us.

For a long time and under difficult circumstances, Thai historians have been doing their best to humanise the country's rulers, and Chanan's book, an impressive work of scholarship in any language, contributes to this effort by enlivening the monarch's personality. Vajiravudh was talented in the dramatic arts, and a skilful writer and polemicist. In contrast to Oscar Wilde, he was less likely to be found lying on a sofa thinking than sitting at a desk writing, even when on manoeuvres with his beloved Wild Tigers, as one of the book's many photographs eloquently illustrates.

52 Phinyaphan, 'Nai nai: a royally imagined community'.

53 <http://prachatai.com/journal/2013/06/47387> (last accessed 23 Oct. 2013).

54 Vella, *Chaiyo!*, explains the realpolitik of this move, pp. 92–108. Batson, *The end of the absolute monarchy in Siam*, credits the move as a signal accomplishment of the reign, p. 19.

But he was also short tempered, single-minded, and had a sharp tongue if the *nai nai* were lax in their duties. He liked having his way (Chanan, p. 42). In November 2013 there was talk that some alumni of Vajiravudh College might report Chanan for defaming the monarchy by writing about Vajiravudh, even though the sixth reign ended almost a century ago.<sup>55</sup> Such a strong reaction to the book is a tribute to the power of historical writing. But rather than initiate a lawsuit, the aggrieved graduates of the college should congratulate the young author for demonstrating the inseparable connection between the private and public lives of the king and his *nai nai*. With this study, Chanan has pulled gender from the margins into mainstream Thai historical writing. The past does not stand still, and the decades leading up to the 1932 revolution and beyond will never be the same again.

55 <http://prachatai.com/english/node/3751> (last accessed 3 Dec. 2013).