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Book Reviews

***King Bhumibol Adulyadej, A Life's Work: Thailand's Monarchy in Perspective.* Edited by Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulder. Singapore and Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2011. Hardcover: 383pp.**

One assesses this book with an inescapable sense of what might have been. As is typical of the sponsored publications of Singapore's Editions Didier Millet, the production quality of *A Life's Work* is of the highest standard. The volume features hundreds of fascinating photographs. Given the wealth of detail introduced, its prose is generally beyond reproach. The editorial and writing team, led by Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulder and featuring such names as Chris Baker, David Streckfuss, Porphant Ouyyanont, Paul Wedel and Joe Cummings, has clearly worked with considerable diligence and intelligence to bring this book to the reader. Much about *A Life's Work* will thus give pleasure to anyone with an interest in Thailand. The volume's largely corporate sponsors can be satisfied with the results of their investment in this project. And yet by other standards, standards amply justified by these times, this book fails, and it fails in a number of rather troubling respects.

The appearance of *A Life's Work* coincided with King Bhumibol's completion of his seventh twelve-year birth cycle in December 2010. At the time of its publication, the king had been an inpatient of Siriraj Hospital for some twenty-seven months, since September 2009. His reign, dating to 1946, has seen the revival of the Thai monarchy after decades of decline, widespread respect for his work to integrate the farthest reaches of the country into the national mainstream, and a startling record of economic growth that transformed Thai society beyond recognition. Nevertheless, the king's reign has lacked one thing: a realistic strategy for a soft landing, for a conclusion that

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will make possible the survival of monarchy in a country far more complex than that of the late 1940s or even the mid-1980s, and for future sovereigns very different from King Bhumibol.

This book — its preparation overseen by such stalwarts of the liberal wing of what Duncan McCargo has so astutely labelled Thailand's "network monarchy" as Anand Panyarchun, Pramote Maiklad, Sumet Tantivejkul, and Wissanu Krea-ngam — presented an excellent opportunity to promote the likelihood of that soft landing. Had *A Life's Work* proved a volume that one could read rather than just peruse; had it really focused on Thailand's monarchy, rather than just on the life of King Bhumibol; had it in fact offered the perspective promised in its subtitle; and had it more wisely taken the measure of its intended readership, the book might have served this important purpose. Instead, in its manifest failure to do any of these things, the book casts doubt on the prospect that the ninth Chakri reign will beget a tenth reign responsive to the times and their demands.

A Life's Work is divided into four sections: a brief "History of Kings" in Siam and Thailand; "The Life", a biography of the king by twelve-year cycle; "The Work", on his activities in the areas of health and education, on his attention to rural Thailand, and on his doctrine of "sufficiency economy"; and "The Crown", treating such matters as the Crown Property Bureau, the Privy Council, succession and *lèse majesté*. Like those of a coffee-table book, the size and weight of *A Life's Work* themselves suggest that it will serve as an object of display, to be casually flipped through, rather than a book that is actually read. Not least in view of the considerable research that has gone into the volume, this likelihood is a shame. Its physical form ensures, likewise, that it will have less impact than Paul Handley's landmark work *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulaydej*, which *A Life's Work* includes in its bibliography and to which it so obviously seeks to offer a rebuttal that is — as Thailand's never elected former premier Anand terms it in his foreword — "factual" and "objective" (p. 11).

The new book compares unfavourably with Handley's in other ways, too. While pitched as a biography, *The King Never Smiles* in fact offers a brilliantly argued interpretation of the revival of monarchy in post-1945 Thailand. With great effectiveness, it puts that revival in perspective and thus leaves the reader with an understanding of what King Bhumibol has achieved, of how he and others have achieved it, and of why the future of Thai monarchy must be different from its recent past. The first section of *A Life's Work* lays an adequate

foundation for, first, a book on the Thai monarchy and, second, one that might draw — as does Handley — on the life of the current king to put that institution into perspective. But the following two sections achieve neither of these ends. Instead, they chronicle, often in very great detail, the life of King Bhumibol. They do so, however, with no clear distance from their subject, no vantage point other than what the writing team seems to have imagined to be that of the times in which the events related unfolded. And events unfold and unfold as years pass, with little sense that there is a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end — a narrative with any thematic coherence or even thematic interest. Again, the contrast with Handley is clear, and it serves this anti-Handley volume poorly. Perhaps this outcome is the result of authorship by team, but surely the guiding hands of Anand, Grossman and Faulder could have corrected for the problem.

The failure of *A Life's Work* to live up to the promise of its subtitle relates very directly to another failing, one rooted in its confusion over its target readership. The book is physically hard to hold and read. It lacks all narrative and interpretive thrust. It celebrates a man and his unquestionably remarkable life without putting that life or its achievements into any perspective. Instead, it assumes that readers will come to the volume with all the perspective that they need — with, that is, an appreciation of King Bhumibol's self-evident greatness. This assumption made, all that remains is for the book to be "factual" and "objective". Finally, the book is in English. Who, then, is meant to read this book? Or, better, who is supposed to buy it or receive it as a gift and then put it on his or her coffee table? The answer is straightforward: foreigners, and also Thais determined to revel in and to share with their foreign friends the self-evident greatness of their aging sovereign and to do so without thinking troubling but necessary thoughts about what the future will hold, either for the monarchy in Thailand or for the country in which King Bhumibol made that institution so important once again. Such readers will, as Anand seems to want, know more *facts*. But they will benefit from little greater *understanding*. This is not the course towards a soft landing for the reign.

Further, serious observers of Thailand will find *A Life's Work* unsatisfying for several reasons. First, the volume notes Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's devotion to monarchy and to the king; his role in promoting the revival of royal ceremonies, the king's domestic and foreign travels, and the increased visibility of the monarchy after 1958; and the king's visit to Sarit's deathbed in

1963. But it studiously avoids the scholarly consensus that Sarit and King Bhumibol enjoyed a partnership (marked by what Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian has called the "strong chemistry existing between these two pole-apart characters"), one that laid the basis for the enduring stature of the king and for the later success of his reign. King Bhumibol perhaps unwittingly acknowledged that basis in establishing, a quarter-century after Sarit's death, a foundation that he called "Chaiphatthana" in a clear echo of the field marshal's own emphasis on depoliticized "development" or "kanphatthana".

Then there are matters of detail rather than interpretation. *A Life's Work* attributes General Prem Tinasulanond's replacement of General Kriangsak Chommanand as Thailand's prime minister in 1980 to the latter's loss of support in the military without suggesting the palace's active hand in the matter. In treating the death by gunshot of King Bhumibol's older brother and predecessor, it complacently notes that the event "has never been clearly explained" (p. 83) and submits the reader to a paragraph on the outlandish theory of a Japanese assassin retailed in William Stevenson's authorized and widely ridiculed 1999 biography of the king. Yet it addresses none of the careful research into the death undertaken in recent years by the Thammasat University historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul. And the account of the confusing and dramatic events of 2006 makes no mention of the meeting between the king and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra directly following the 2 April polls, a meeting that vitiated Thaksin's triumph in those polls and precipitated his extra-legal "leave of absence" from the premiership. Such flaws and omissions can only undercut the credibility of *A Life's Work* with serious students of Thailand.

While the chapters in the penultimate and ultimate sections of the book on, respectively, the concept of "sufficiency economy" and Privy Council are muddled, the final section's chapters on the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) and on the law of *lèse majesté* are without doubt the best material in *A Life's Work*. The first camouflages its observations in apparently neutral prose. But those observations — relating, for example, to the CPB's increasing reliance on revenues from its land portfolio in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis and the challenges of living up to its philosophy — are canny indeed. Again, however, Anand and the other putatively liberal royalists who oversaw preparation of *A Life's Work* need to realize that its credibility suffers for omission of any mention of what Porphant Ouyyanont has elsewhere called the "unique deal" that the Ministry

of Finance offered to the CPB and the Siam Commercial Bank as they sought to recover from that crisis.

David Streckfuss's chapter on *lèse majesté* also merits careful reading. While it fails to address the often terrifying witch-hunts conducted in the name of protecting the monarchy, the chapter invaluably directs attention to the lack of prosecutorial discretion that characterizes the Thai legal system and the implications of this lack for the handling of *lèse majesté*. The chapter also exposes the thread-bare, ahistorical culturalism to which legal scholar Bawornsak Uwanno and the specious, all-Thais-love-the-king logic to which Anand Panyarachun resort, respectively, in their defence of the country's draconian punishment of alleged *lèse majesté*. Finally, in repeating the affirmation that "there is a real threat to the [royal] institution that cannot be ignored" (p. 312), the chapter usefully highlights the conviction that speech and other forms of expression in themselves constitute threats rather than means of transmitting perspectives on a central political institution to be countered and rebutted by those who disagree with such perspectives. The chapter thus suggests that Thailand's law of *lèse majesté* reflects the impossibility of reconciling modern Thai monarchism with liberal politics.

Rather than with a conclusion or an epilogue affirming the perspective on Thailand's monarchy that the book promises to offer, *A Life's Work* ends with a backward-looking chapter on royal ceremonies and regalia. Having developed no perspective on Thailand's monarchy, it is sadly in no position to offer a forward-looking conclusion.

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