Epilogue

> *There is no need to harm you, however, because no matter what, you must disappear in time. Sooner or later, all the old things will be confined to museums, one after the other …*
>
> *much time has elapsed already, and your world and mine are getting further apart. I'm the ghost that time has fashioned to scare those who live in the old world, to give nightmares to those who hold to the old ways of thinking, and nothing can comfort you, just as nothing can stop the march of time, which will produce more and more ghosts like me …*
>
> *but there's no way this can happen because the ghost is even more invulnerable than Achilles or Siegfried as he is protected by the shield of time … We're worlds apart. Mine is the world of ordinary people.*
>
> Seinee Saowaphong, *Pheesart* (1957),
> translated into English by Marcel Barang, *Ghosts* (2006)

In conclusion, as the ninth king regnant of the Chakri dynasty, HM King Bhumibol was extremely successful in constructing a neo-monarchy with extensive *barami*. However, according to Theravada Buddhist concepts, personal *barami* is untransferable. His successors must work to achieve it for themselves.

Just as HM King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), another successful absolute monarch whose *barami* vanished with him, HM King Vajiravudh, Rama VI (1910–25) and HM King Prajadhipok, Rama VII (1925–35) had to develop it on their own. Absolute monarchy ended in Siam in 1932, only twenty-two years after the death of King Rama V. King Rama IX's successor will face the same problem of how to maintain, or adapt, the new monarchy to suit new contexts.

As mentioned before, in 1927, Prince Damrong, a chief minister and historian, gave a resoundingly influential lecture about the Thai people and their nation. At one point, the prince said, "The Thai people have three important virtues that sustain Siam to the present day: one, love of national independence; two, tolerance; and three, the power of assimilation."

At the height of Anglo-French colonialism, Chulalongkorn's Siam managed to survive external threats and remain semi-independent. During the Second World War, the new 1932 government of Thailand, the People's Party or *Khana Ratsadon*, collaborated with the Japanese as well as the Allies with even-handed results. From the start of the Cold War, Thailand became a close partner of the United States of America and the Free World, including Japan, fighting external and internal communist threats. Thailand emerged as a leading Southeast Asian nation economically and politically.

Now confronted by more immediate internal, rather than external, uncertainties, will Thailand successfully cope and survive an extended crisis of proxy political conflict between the old *barami* (power-money-idea) against the new *barami*? Will the reputed Thai virtues that had good results once for Siam function again for Thailand today?[1]

The previous two coups, in 2006 and 2014, against Thaksin and Yingluck respectively, did not restore the nation to normalcy. HM the King's health slowly declined, and he died on 13 October 2016 at the age of eighty-eight. His only son, HRH Prince Vajiralongkorn, born in 1952, became King Rama X at the age of sixty-four.

On 24 March 2019, Thailand had another election, followed by the new king's coronation in early May. The question remains, *Quo Vadis?* a Latin phrase meaning "Where are you marching?" supposedly addressed by Saint Peter to the risen Christ during their encounter along the Appian Way, according to Christian tradition.

As a Thai and Southeast Asian academic, I noted with interest that during the March 2018 Association for Asian Studies conference in Washington, DC, a guest post was published on the University of California Press blog. Written by Claudio Sopranzetti, a postdoctoral research fellow at Oxford, it began:

> In 1848, Karl Marx opened his manifesto with an eloquent sentence: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism."
>
> One hundred and seventy some years later, Laos and Vietnam are among the fastest growing economies of twenty-first-century capitalism and the Chinese Communist Party somewhat abandoned the post-Mao doctrine of putting its assembly above any individual leader. Communism, which once materialized so prominently in East Asia, is little more than a faded ghost, haunting no one. Yet another specter has taken its place in Asia—the specter of authoritarianism.

Sopranzetti went on to elaborate:

> Whether in terms of China's attempts to establish a life-long chairmanship, Philippines' systematic dismissal of habeas corpus or … Thailand's new forms of constitutional dictatorship, a new wind of authoritarianism is blowing over East Asia. Contrary to existing theories of the "end of history" or of "democratic transition," this wind does not waft against the wish of the middle classes, but rather with their support. And it is not a temporary breeze, destined to die out, but rather a stable wind, one that carries forward an alternative system of governance … the growing popularity of authoritarian ideology among local middle class, a popularity that finds its roots in the shifting local meaning of words like corruption, good governance, and rule of law.

As an academic, teaching and observing in and around Thailand, I tend to agree with Sopranzetti. After the general election of 2015, Myanmar had high hopes of a democratic transition. Now those hopes are quickly declining. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, is omnipresent with no sign of civilian good governance.

Laos and Vietnam are functioning rather well with one-party autocratic systems. In Cambodia, multiple parties and elections are more like window dressing. The exception is Malaysia, where a nice cool democratic breeze is blowing, at least for the time being. Meanwhile, Singapore is thriving singularly well. Further along the islands of Southeast Asia, the Philippines is in a troubling condition, while in Indonesia, democratic decentralization has turned out admirably.

Back to Thailand: yes, a spectre of authoritarianism is haunting us. As of now, with the passing of HM King Bhumibol, Rama IX, and the coronation of HM King Vajiralongkorn, Rama X, Thailand faces an uncertain future. After the disappointing 2006 coup, the subsequent coup of 22 May 2014 made the situation even more worrisome. Of course, coups are not novelties in Thailand, yet the ones of 2006 and 2014 were especially disruptive.

Now, Rama X's Thailand confronts many unprecedented problems. For example, royal succession from King Rama IX to King Rama X ran smoothly, but what happens next? More importantly, will HM Rama X follow the example set forth by his father of a democratic governmental regime with the king as head of state? Or he will innovate by transitioning to a non-democracy with the king as head of state? The answer remains to be seen.

And what of King Bhumibol's *barami*, the all-encompassing term for reverence, awe, and moral authority? Will it be transmitted to the newly crowned king and help him to become a force of balance and stability for Thailand?

Meanwhile, beyond Bangkok, especially in the North and Northeast, rural discontent is disquieting. The South Thailand insurgency, with political unrest in Malay-Muslim majority areas, is also worrisome.[2]

Thailand of HM King Rama X can no longer expect to routinely enjoy uncritical evaluation from international academics, human rights groups, and the international press. Students of the new generation born around the year 2000 appear to have unique individualist ideas about the nation and its destiny. Sporadic student activism in Bangkok and up-country is ubiquitous. Has change really arrived in Thailand?

In addition, innovative high-tech underground activism in cyberspace on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Line and Clubhouse increasingly targets the venerable establishment as well as long-revered *barami*, the monarchy and military. Electoral campaigns and proposals about republicanism and federalism, especially among Thai citizens living overseas, are seen as causes worth fighting for, to ensure the nation's future.

Will present-day Thailand manage to survive these existential crises? Only time and history may tell.[3]

NOTES

1. See Human Rights Watch, "Descent into Chaos: Thailand's 2010 Red Shirt Protests and the Government Crackdown", 3 May 2011. See also a critical view on Thai monarchy by Andrew MacGregor Marshall, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Zed Books, 2014).
2. See Patrick Jory, ed., *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand: Essays on the History and Historiography of Patani* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2013).
3. See Paul M. Handley, "Getting into Seclusion: Can the Monarchy Survive Bhumibol?", in his *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); also, his "Revisiting the King Never Smiles", in Pavin Chachavalpongpun, ed., *Coup King Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, Monograph 68 (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2020). See Suchit Bunbongkarn, "Democracy and Monarchy in Thailand", and Kavi Chongkittavorn, "The Future of Thai Monarchy", in *Monarchy and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Bhutan: Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, 2009). See a provocative treatment on King Bhumibol in his twilight years by Serhat Unaldi, *Working Towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2016). See See also Peter Conradi, *The Great Survivors: How Monarchy Made It into the Twenty-First Century* (London: Alma Books, 2013).

   In addition, see Benedict Anderson's last article, published posthumous, "Riddles of Yellow and Red", *New Left Review* 97 (January–February 2016). In his last words about the contemporary Thai politics and the long conflict and fight of the last two decades. The late academic saw it as rather like the great Chinese literature of the *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*:

   > Over the past fifty years, almost every Thai prime minister has been a *lukchin* [literally a son of a Chinese], like the monarchy itself. But this shared "Chinese ancestry" conceals bitter rivalries between the Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka and Hailamese. The positive side of this phenomenon is that Thailand has never experienced the kind of anti-Chinese mobilizations that have characterized the modern histories of Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma, and the Philippines. Capable, wealthy and ruthless

Sino-Thais have been able to climb upwards—on condition that their "Chineseness" remains very low-profile, especially under Rama IX. There are echoes here of the status enjoyed by wealthy Jews in Habsburg Vienna or Hanoverian London. In the last election, it turned out that 78 per cent of the seats in Thailand's parliament were occupied by ethnic Chinese, even though they accounted for just 14 per cent of the population.

Against this backdrop, the question now is who will be President of the Republic of Thailand? Nobody will say so explicitly, but that is exactly what is in their minds. With the system of petty warlords in each of the territories, that creates frustration for everybody: they can be sure of winning in one place but not in another. The Reds can't penetrate the territory of the Yellows, and the Yellows can't penetrate the territory of the Reds; the south is Yellow, and the north is Red. Another difficulty is that nobody can talk publicly about their Chinese identity because it would be absurd to declare that one is Chinese but plans to be the President of the Republic. Everyone knows that they are, but it's not considered appropriate to say so. There is no other way out, unless one of them gets killed, or something of that kind. Don't fool yourself that the political contest in Thailand is about democracy or anything like that. It's about whether the Teochews get to keep their top position, or whether it's the turn of the Hakkas or the Hailamese.