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*Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn,  
Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*

Reviewed by Luke Schmidt

University of California, Riverside  
laschm002@gmail.com

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# A Review of *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*

Luke Schmidt<sup>1</sup>

*Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class.*  
By Irene Stengs. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009, xii + 316 pages, ISBN 978-0295989174 (paper), US \$35.00.

In *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*, Irene Stengs employs detailed ethnography at specific sites in Bangkok and Chiang Mai to explore the Thai cult of King Chulalongkorn. Stengs draws a distinction between “popular Thai religiosity” and what she calls “official Buddhism,” which she considers as doctrinal religiosity focused around Theravada monasteries. She frames her work around two separate anthropological debates, one spearheaded by the works of Stanley Tambiah and his analysis of Buddhist kingship and the second revolving around modernity and globalization in Thai society, which Stengs connects with Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles Keyes’s, *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory, Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*. Stengs shows how the reign of Rama IV focused on the modernization of Thailand; today, the cult of Chulalongkorn remains largely about modernization and globalization, while simultaneously attempting to navigate the pitfalls of these

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<sup>1</sup> University of California, Riverside. Email: laschm002@gmail.com

processes in order to maintain a sense of national identity. After using the vast amounts of material items and visual culture that fill Thai society as points of departure—e.g., portraits, coins, wreaths, television programs and museum exhibits—Stengs focuses on individual beliefs and responses related to mass produced and priceless items to show the influence of the Chulalongkorn cult and discuss the narratives created by the cult members. In employing the material and visual aspects of the Chulalongkorn cult, Stengs's primary conclusion is that the cult is a lay movement centered on the idea of prosperity for the self-employed working and middle class. The various visual and material items bring forth a narrative that depicts King Chulalongkorn as a problem solver, not only for the nation as he was in the past, but also, currently, for individuals as well. By examining the Chulalongkorn cult alongside other Thai beliefs and cults this work provides a good introduction to the complex world of Thai religion. The book also brings to light the important role played by material objects in influencing people's lives and actions, and how all material objects have their own history grounded in the Thai "social imaginary" (5).

During Chulalongkorn's reign, the use of portraiture was promoted as the King saw it as a means to modernity. This has led to a plethora of images available to followers of the cult. Stengs focuses on the various narratives perpetuated by the mass media on the portraits presented to the public; these predominately feature the king as a problem solver and caretaker of his subjects. Moreover, these narratives are often centered on Theravāda concepts of kingship, combined with a modern nationalist ideology that unifies ruler and state. The narratives of the images, along with other types of media, contribute to individual and group religious practices venerating specific images. Importantly, these public narratives are then reworked by members of the cult. Through interviews conducted with devotees, Stengs identifies three common themes that show how individuals have been influenced by

King Chulalongkorn. First, the king manifests himself to non-believers; second, the king or his image is involved in a highly emotional incident; and finally, a material item where the king's likeness shows a special relation to the devotee. The images, according to Stengs, demonstrate the dynamic and ever-changing concepts of the Thai notions of kingship as well as the power of sacred images.

While at the time of King Chulalongkorn's reign the idea of modernism that he promoted was an elitist concept during his reign Chulalongkorn was seen as modern to due abolishing slavery, avoiding colonization, and embracing western ideas and technology, now it has become a popular idea, put into practice predominately by the Thai middle class. Chulalongkorn cult members firmly believe in making the processes of modernization and globalization work in their favor in order to gain various types of success. The large following of female devotees is a phenomenon, according to Stengs, not seen within monk cults and certain other Theravada ceremonies held at and centered on monasteries. Stengs sees firsthand women participating greatly in the operation of the cult and participating in its various rituals such as wreath laying ceremonies, spirit possessions, and amulet wearing. The devotion of women in the Chulalongkorn cult reflect the attempts at modernization and advancement of an ever changing Thai society.

*Worshipping the Great Moderniser* introduces the reader to many major components contributing to the Thai religious repertoire. The work should also be lauded for maintaining a focus on material and visual objects, thereby making it a work that should be read in the fields of visual culture, anthropology, art history, and religious studies. I think this is a text that should be used when trying to understand the complexity of Thai religiosity and the role of Buddhist ideals in this religiosity.

There are two minor issues within the text. First, Stengs throughout the work moves back and forth from these vary different regions; a fluidity of the Thai “social imaginary” is portrayed between Chiang Mai and Bangkok. However, both locations embody different social and religious landscapes, and are informed by different religious texts and rituals – aspects that would most likely influence the cult members and their practices, and which Stengs does not address. If there is a consistency between these two geographic areas, it would be worthwhile to discuss how this has come to be the case, and how Stengs interprets this phenomenon. A second minor issue is with the last chapter that lays out the similarities between King Chulalongkorn and the current king, Rama IX (King Bhumibol), comparing the ubiquity of both sets of images of the kings, which are likewise accompanied by specific narratives. While Stengs rightfully concludes they are both the epitome of what a “modern Buddhist King” is, this chapter seems to take the focus away from the centrality of the argument of the Chulalongkorn cult in Thai society and points simply to the similarities between the two kings. When developing her conclusions about the two kings, Stengs no longer draws from the rich interviews and material sources used to demonstrate her main argument.