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*Thailand's Buddhist Kingship in the 20th and 21st
Centuries: Power, Influence and Rites*

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A Review of *Thailand's Buddhist Kingship in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Power, Influence and Rites*

Patrick Jory¹

Thailand's Buddhist Kingship in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Power, Influence and Rites. By Marie-Sybille de Vienne. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2022, viii + 278 pages, ISBN 978-1-03-204555-9 (hardback), \$170.00, 978-1-00-319376-0 (e-book), \$52.95.

It is hard to imagine that twenty years ago scholarship on the Thai monarchy was relatively sparse and largely positive in its depiction of the institution's contribution to Thailand's modern historical development. This dearth of critical scholarship on the monarchy may be attributed to the fact that the polarization of the Cold War had receded, the military had been pushed out of politics over the course of the 1990s, Thailand appeared to be one of Southeast Asia's most open, democratizing societies, King Bhumibol (r. 1946-2016) was at the zenith of his popularity, and, not least of all, Thailand's strict *lèse majesté* law that forbids criticism of the monarchy went unchallenged.

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But as Marie-Sybille de Vienne points out in her new book, *Thailand's Buddhist Kingship in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Power, Influence and Rites*, mainstream scholarship today is rather hostile to the monarchy (vii). This hostility can, in turn, be attributed to the politicization of the monarchy due to military coups against democratically elected governments in 2006 and 2014, which the monarchy effectively endorsed. During this same period the conservative establishment lost its virtual monopoly on Thailand's media because of the development of the internet and especially social media. And Thailand is today a much more globalized society, where a greater number of people can more easily compare their monarchy and society with those elsewhere in the world. In this book, written for a general readership, de Vienne aims to go beyond both the conservative "propaganda" and the ephemeral media reporting to produce a new interpretation of Thailand's monarchy "from 'within' the Thai society" (vii, 1).

At the outset one might acknowledge the book's contribution to making French-language scholarship on Thailand available in English. As de Vienne suggests, since the Second World War, the study of monarchy in Southeast Asia has been heavily influenced by "Anglo-Saxon inspired political science" (3). Chapter one, cowritten with Grégory Mikaelian, which considers the concepts of "monarchy" and "kingship", makes heavy use of the French-language scholarly literature. This is, however, less true of subsequent chapters, because they tend to rely mainly on the "Anglo-Saxon" academic literature in the English language, which dominates the international study of Thailand. The book consists of translations of twelve chapters written originally in French. For the most part the translations flow well, but in places the reader senses the French original. This is not a criticism, but a reminder of how the English language sets the standard for international scholarly discourse today.

The book is divided into four parts. The first considers notions of monarchy and kingship; the second is essentially a narrative of the monarchy under the current Chakri dynasty dating from European colonial

encroachment in the early nineteenth century through to the present; the third part analyzes the current workings of the Thai monarchy, focusing on the Privy Council, the monarchy's finances—in particular the Crown Property Bureau, and its use of royal ritual and symbols; and the final part deals with the political crisis dating from the latter part of the reign of King Bhumibol to the present.

Readers unfamiliar with the field, who are looking for a general overview of Thailand's monarchy, will find much that is of interest gathered in one place. The book traces the Khmer-Angkorean origins of much Thai royal ritual, though surprisingly Buddhist theories of kingship receive relatively little attention. The modernization of the monarchy in the nineteenth century is dealt with summarily; as the book's title suggests, the focus is on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The book covers the pivotal event of the overthrow of the absolute monarchy by the progressive nationalist People's Party in 1932, the complicated politics of the 1930s and 1940s, the restoration of the monarchy's position in the late 1950s under a developmentalist military dictatorship, and Thailand's turbulent politics from the 1970s to the present. There are cameo discussions of numerous important aspects of the monarchy, for example, the royal projects and foundations (131-136), the Crown Property Bureau (122-145), the monarchy's sponsorship of Buddhist amulets (163-167), and the controversy over the royal succession (209-214).

For those readers familiar with the subject of Thailand's monarchy there is relatively little in this book that will surprise. The book is based heavily on secondary literature, which is rather well known to scholars in the field. For a work that claims to explain "the working of the Thai royal institution from 'within' the Thai society" (1), some readers may be disappointed at the lack of reference to the burgeoning Thai-language scholarship on the monarchy. Despite the strict limitations on what scholars can say under the *lèse majesté* law, the last two to three decades have seen a jump in critical Thai-language scholarship on the monarchy, in particular the writings of Somsak Jeamteerasakul, Thongchai Winichakul, Natthapol

Jaijing, Worajet Phakeerat, Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, and other members of the progressive *Nitirat* (“Rule of Law”) group of legal scholars based at Thammasat University, and the work of other scholars published in the highly influential Thai politics and society journal, *Fa Dio Kan*, for example.

When reviewing a general survey of Thailand’s monarchy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it might be pedantic to single out individual incidents for attention, but occasionally the text does brush over historical events that are so significant they deserve more detailed treatment. For example, the discussion of the 1946 regicide (46), arguably one of the most important turning points in modern Thai history, is dealt with in just a few lines. Unfortunately, the narrative of this incident almost hints at a discredited royalist interpretation that implicates Pridi Phanomyong (then Prime Minister and progressive leader of the People’s Party) in the death: “after a difficult interview with Pridi, who became prime minister in March 1946, [the king] was found dead on June 9, 1946 from a bullet in the head” (56). The author does note that some royal factions considered passing over the king’s younger brother, Bhumibol, in favor of another branch of the royal line, but does not say why: the view held by some—not just in the Thai aristocracy—that the younger brother was in fact responsible for the death. The work (in Thai) of the exiled historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul would have been helpful in providing a much fuller understanding of the regicide.

Finally, for a book on Buddhist kingship, there is little detailed analysis of how the relationship between Buddhism and the monarchy has changed over the period under consideration. Here one might have hoped to have learned a little more about the monarchy’s centralization of the *saṅgha* in the early twentieth century; how the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 affected the relationship between the king and the monkhood; the resacralization of the monarchy from the 1960s; even the current monarch’s resumption of absolutist powers over the *saṅgha* following amendments to the Sangha Act in 2018. The latter is dealt with, but

very briefly (98). There is no overarching argument about Buddhist kingship. The book is rather a narrative of political events.

Nevertheless, readers of *Thailand's Buddhist Kingship in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Power, Influence and Rites* will find a rich and multifaceted overview of the recent history of what is surely the world's most powerful Buddhist monarchy.