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Farang as Siamese Occidentalism

Pattana Kitiarsa

Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore
aripk@nus.edu.sg

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Asia Research Institute

National University of Singapore

Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7, Level 4

5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

Tel: (65) 6874 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

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*Farang as Siamese Occidentalism*¹

Pattana Kitiarsa

Introduction

In a recently-released film, *Thawiphop [The Siam Renaissance]* (Surapong Pinijkhar 2004),² Manee, a young Thai woman from the 21st century who grew up and was educated in France, happens to travel back and forth through a ‘time-machine-like’ magical mirror between the Siamese worlds of the early modern past and the postmodern present. In responding to a query proposed by Dhep and Tri, two high-ranking nobles from the court of King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868), she offers her harsh critical narrative intended to remind her audiences of the encompassing Western influence in the making and shaping of Thai identities. Manee describes Siam-now or Thailand in the early twentieth-first century as follows:

Our country is very modern. There are many skyscrapers. Everything has changed. We have cars, electricity, movie theaters. We dress in a Western style. We accept foreigners more than we accept one another (*rao nabthue farang makkwua phuakdiew kan*). We have everything the Westerners have. We are everything the Westerners are. We eat everything the Westerners eat. We prefer anything the

¹The original version of this paper was presented in the International Workshop on “*The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Power, Aesthetics and the Role of ‘Cultural Others’ in the Making of Thai Identities*,” jointly organized by Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University; School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London; and Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, November 5-7, 2004. It was also re-presented twice in the seminar series at the Southeast Asian Studies Program, National University of Singapore, March 2, 2005 and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, March 29, 2005. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the following colleagues and friends, who allowed me to share this paper and learn from their criticisms on various occasions and at places: Davisakd and Chanida Puaksom, Rachel Harrison, Allen Hickens, Peter Jackson, Reynaldo Iletto, Michael Montesano and Aaron Stern. Davisakd and Chanida Puaksom have inspired me with their prolific knowledge, critical insight, and passion for Thai history. Kuan-Hsing Chen, my colleague at ARI, has delighted me with his thesis on “*Asia as Method*” and encouraged me to come out of my psychological “coconut shell.” Geoff Wade edited this paper with his sharp skills and resourceful knowledge on the subject. All persisting factual errors and other shortcomings are my sole responsibility. The author is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore [Email: aripk@nus.edu.sg].

²This film is based on a novel of the same title written by Thommayanti (Wimon Chiemcharoen 2536), one of Thailand’s leading popular novelists. Thommayanti is widely known for her ultra-royalist, right-wing nationalist, and conservative stances. This novel was adapted into several popular TV drama series and movies. I thank Davisakd and Chanida Puaksom for bringing this film to my attention and allowing me to use its DVD version with English subtitle from their home entertainment collection.

Westerners tell us to. We want to be them and refuse to be ourselves. (Surapong Piniikhhar 2004)³

Manee's view reflects in a very overt way the Thai public discourses which hold that Thailand's path to modernization since the so-called 'Siamese Renaissance' period has been under the *farang*'s heavy influence and dependence. She apparently criticizes the contemporary Thai people including herself for being too submissive to the *farang* ways of life and for refusing "to be ourselves." She uses the terms *farang* (Westerners) and *tawantok* (the West) interchangeably to mark Siam's powerful outsiders, who were single-handedly blamed for threatening the Kingdom's independence and destroying genuine Siamese cultural identities.

The young Manee is not alone in adopting this typical Thai conservative and nationalist standpoint. Positioning herself as a representative of contemporary Thai women's voices, her criticism of Thai-self is shared by generations of Thai social critics, who have targeted *farang* as one of the evil roots of the country's economic, political and cultural woes.⁴ 'To blindly follow the *farang*'s ass' (*tam kon farang*) has been for generations a very provocative and sensitive comment to the common Thais, the officials, as well as to the intellectuals regardless of their ideological stances and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵

My initial purpose in this paper is to draw a sketch map locating the *farang* in contemporary Thai intellectual and popular thought. I intend to recapture the *farang* influences on the making of Thai national and cultural identities.⁶ I wish to re-read the Thai historical and cultural constructions of *farang* and to take them as a reflexive subject to recapture its impacts on the making and remaking of Thai-self as a historical and cultural project. Working primarily from Thai-language publications on Thailand's contemporary history, literature, and ethnography, I

³I quote an original English subtitle provided in the film.

⁴Wright (2004:32-33) comments that criticizing and accusing *farang* of causing Thailand's troubles has become a trend as well as a method for a large number of leading Thai public intellectuals, including Nidhi Aeusriwongse, Prawet Wasi, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Theerayuth Boonmi. *Farang* has become the wicked Other for the Thai. From time to time, the West has been represented as the giant, tricky wolf, while Siam the little helpless and innocent lamb (see also Copeland 1993; Tuck 1995). Wright convincingly argues that Thai intellectuals have been trapped comfortably in the cage of "self-indulgent nationalism," in which they are robbed themselves of opportunities to produce thoughtful self-criticism and to search for possible solutions to their existing problems.

⁵In his recent article criticizing the Thai government's approach to handling the bird flu epidemic, Nidhi Aeusriwongse (2004a:6), a noted historian and influential social critic, describes Thailand as a country, which "blindly accepts the *farang*" (*nupthue farang yang muamao*) and tamely follows *farang* knowledge and method, many times even without a common-sensical scrutinization.

⁶I do not mean to explore a whole body of scholarship concerning the history of Westernization in Thailand, which is too broad and too large a subject, and thus, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

ask the following questions. Who are the *farang* in the Thai construction of knowledge? How have *farang* become parts of the discourses of Thainess? What are the effects of the *farang* on Thai national and popular cultural identities?

In this paper, I argue that *farang* is far from being a mere Thai identification marker of the West produced primarily by the Siamese and other indigenous Tai-speaking population living in the boundaries of Thai state and its neighbors, nor is it a blurred ethnocultural reference of Western otherness. In the light of Said's influential thesis on *Orientalism* (1978)⁷ I propose in an opposite direction that *farang* is an Occidentalizing project conceived and proceeded with through Siam's historical and cultural experiences with/against the West. The most productive ways to understand the discourses of *farang* in the making of Thai identities are (1) to read *farang* as a 'Thai production system of power/knowledge concerning the West'; and (2) to take it as a 'reflexively tactical method' to produce the Thai-ized version of the West as the superior but suspicious other, based on specific historical and cultural encounters with/against them. In other words, *farang* is hardly a matter-of-fact representation of the West. Rather, it represents an ethnocultural mirror measuring and projecting the hierarchical distance and otherness between the imagined Thai 'We-Self' and the constructed 'Western Other' among many non-Thai 'They-Selves.'⁸ *Farang* has emerged in the worlds of Thai intellectual and popular cultures as a crucial part of Siam's cultural constructs manufactured under its historically-rooted Occidentalizing project.

Regarding my position in the reading of *farang* as a Siamese Occidentalizing project, I have benefited from arguments on the 'Other Within' put forward by Thongchai Winichakul (2000a:38-62) and the 'American Orientalism' outlined by Thanet Aphornsuvan (2004a; see also 2004b:96-107). I agree with both of them that the Occidentalizing projects launched by Siamese rulers/elite and American missionaries in Siam, respectively, have produced some profound

⁷Said (2003:2-3) defines Orientalism as "(1) academic label, (2) a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and ... "the Occident", (3) a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." It is predominantly a European [mainly British and French] invention based on their historically specific experiences. In this similar line of reasoning, I treat *farang* as Siamese or Thai Occidentalism. It is historically and culturally constructed ways of knowing, dealing with, criticizing, condemning, consuming, or imagining the West as a powerful, yet suspicious Other.

⁸Other key markers of non-Thai "They-selves" identities or what Thongchai Winichakul (1994:3-6) calls 'negative identification' which have contained some sociocultural and political connotations are *Chek/Jek* (Mainland and Oversea Chinese, Sino-Thai), *Khaek* (Persian, Indo-Malay, South Asian and Middle-East and most Asian Muslim), and *Lao*.

effects in the redefining and remaking of Siam's national and cultural selves. However, in dealing with the superior Western counterparts, Siamese rulers have adopted an elusive and reflexive approach, compared to their hierarchical and fixed stances to define their multi-ethnic subjects and the geopolitical boundaries of their empire.

I accept Thongchai's invitation to rethink and reconstruct the 'Western Other,' which is left unexamined in his work (Thongchai Winichakul 2000a:57), while I contest Thanet's thesis of "American Orientalism." I see parts of intercultural experiences in the journal accounts and reports which he presents in his work as possible to be read as "Siamese Occidentalism," especially those produced through outward-looking eyes of Siamese elite and intellectuals. It may be true that the difference between Thanet's approach and mine is primarily a matter of looking 'outside in' or 'inside out,'⁹ but what I intend to do here is to return the historical agency and subjectivity to Siam. In its intellectual enterprise to define *farang*, Siam has demonstrated its active and articulated faculties and authority as an "acting self" (Giddens 1993). Like anyone else in the world, Siam or Thailand as a nation as well as diverse groups of individuals are far from passive or submissive non-actors. Through their historical and cultural structuring processes, they are capable of producing, articulating, and imposing their versions of contested meanings upon their immediate worlds and beyond.

My proposition on Siamese Occidentalism is not a plain reversal of Orientalist logics and discourses of power/knowledge relations produced by the West. Siamese Occidentalism, I maintain, is the historically and culturally-rooted system of knowledge and tactical methods

⁹These approaches are known in the Thai historiographical debates in the last two decades as the determinisms of external vs. internal factors (*patchai phainok vs. patchai phainai*) in understanding historical changes and transition in Siam. The overall external influence is presumably known as *farang* or the West. Nidhi Aeusriwongse (1995:21-23) contends that an over-emphasis on the external influences on the Thai historical transitions is a flaw. It fails to make sense of why 'New Siam' (after the reforms initiated by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn since 1855) resembled neither 'Old Siam' (1767-1855), nor the West "Paying too much attention to the differences between the Old and the New Siam does not help us to adequately understand the monarch-led reforms" (Ibid.:22) or "selective modernization," to use Thongchai Winichakul's (1994:3) terms. For Nidhi, the key to solving this dilemma lies in a careful examination of internal factors and processes which have produced or determined historical and sociocultural consequences. He calls the internal determinants 'the germs of change' (*cheua haeng kan pleanplaeng*) (Ibid.:22). This approach is also evident in his other works (Nidhi Aeusriwongse 1980, 1994) and some of his students' works (see Attachak Sattayanurak 1995; Saichon Sathayanurak 2003a). While I am inclined to agree with Nidhi's overall approach, I see the limitations of a too-obvious polarization between external and internal factors. Indeed, the borderlands between the two domains and the border-crossing phenomena have been very much active and lively as a force to push forward the wheel of history. I see the discourses of *farang* as a strong candidate to bridge this aforementioned dichotomy and to exemplify the border-crossing identities and their compelling meanings from the Siamese side. This is what I intend to call the Siamese Occidentalizing project.

employed by the Siamese rulers and elite to turn *farang* and their othernesses into ambiguous objects of their desire to be modern and civilized. Davisakd Puaksom (1997, 1998, 2003a, 2003b) is among the earliest of Thai historians to deal with Occidentalism as complex power/knowledge relations between Siamese elite and their ethnocultural other (including *farang*) through his analysis of an ethnography in the “University in Stone” at Wat Phra Chetuphon. Following the Orientalist line of thought, he argues that the representations of the Other, as depicted in *Klong Tang Phasa [A Poem Concerning Various Ethnic Groups]*, are not different from the discourses on the Other produced by the West. Based on their Buddhist principle and morality, the West and the Muslims among others are classified as the barbaric, exotic, and religiously out-caste, much like the Orient in Said’s studies. Siamese elite employed similar logic and values to judge and define their non-Siamese others in order to “self-consciously insist that We-Siam are not uncivilized or barbaric” (Davisakd Puaksom 2003a:137; 2003b:104). Through a genealogical glance at *farang*, I wish to demonstrate that Siamese or Thai deserve to have their own version of Occidentalism established and heard.

Defining Siam’s Western Others

Farang, as a Thai representation of “the West,” is perhaps as old as the history of the Thai state itself.¹⁰ However, the academic discourse and the public understanding of this term does not appear to be as deep or complex as what is implied by its genealogical and cultural connotations. Most widely-accepted definitions of *farang* do not go beyond the West or Caucasian people and their stereo-typical cultures and images. *Farang* is usually defined as “a generic Thai word for a white foreigner/Caucasian” (*Photchananurom Chabab Matichon* 2004).¹¹ Seni Pramroj and

¹⁰ Thanet Aphornsuvan (2004a:2) outlines a brief history of the early contacts between Siam and *farang* and other countries as follows. “The Portuguese were the first *farang* nation to come to Ayutthaya in 1511, followed by the Japanese in 1589. The Dutch arrived in Ayutthaya in 1604, followed by the English and the Spaniard. King Ekathosarot (r. 1605-1611) sent the first Siamese envoys to the Netherlands in 1604. King Songtham (r. 1611-1628) established relations with Denmark. France and Siam exchanged envoys during the reign of King Narai (r. 1656-1688)...The first American ship arrived Bangkok in 1821 during the reign of King Rama II (r. 1809-1824)...”—My own translation.

¹¹An encyclopedia available on the internet defines that “*Farang*, sometimes pronounced *falang* or *falong*, is the generic Thai word for a white foreigner. Africans or African-Americans will be occasionally referred to as *farang dam* (black *farang*). While generally *farang* is a neutral word, it can be used as an insult depending on its context” (<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Farang>).

Kukrit Pramoj (1987:46), for example, suggest that “*Farang* is a term employed in Siam to denote members of the white race.” Suchit Wongthet (2004:34) explains that “*farang* is originally derived from the term “*frangi*,” which the Persian and Arabian anciently used in reference to the European. The Siamese during the Ayutthaya period accepted this term and used it to denote Westerners in general.” For an academic explanation, Thongchai Winichakul (1994:5) takes *farang* as an example of Thai “reference to otherness,” which “is made by identifying it as belonging to another nation” and “usually ill-defined.” “In Thai...,” argues Thongchai (Ibid.), “*farang* is a well-known adjective and noun referring to Western people without any specification of nationality, culture, ethnicity, language, or whatever.” These definitions and understandings of *farang* are apparently limited to white, western people.

In general, *farang* is used as a classifying genre to refer to some specific Western-originated ‘things’ (fruits, plants, animals, material inventions, or goods, such as *man farang* (potato), *nomai farang* (asparagus), *mak farang* (chewing gum), or *nang farang* (Western movie). Sometimes the term *thet* (foreign) or *thang* (hybrid) are also used to describe the *farang*/foreign-originated plants, animals, and other inventions of genetically or technologically improved qualities, in contrast to the indigenous ones (*thae, phuen ban*).¹² Excluding *farang* fruit (guava), these *farang*-objects often indicate not only their foreign origins and characters, but also the allure of *farang*-ness, which signifies some superior qualities comparing to the indigenous Thai counterparts.

In his memoir, Prince Damrong (2003[1946]:27) mentions his childhood desire for a *farang* pen (*pakka farang*), which was made of metal and, thus, distinguishable from the Siamese or Oriental wooden pen or brush. He was then a young boy surrounded by royal secretaries and pages employed in his father (King Mongkut)’s palace. The young Prince was also grateful when his half-brother and newly-crowned King Chulalongkorn gave him a green *farang* jacket upon his first royal audience. He was so happy because His Majesty the King allowed him to possess “a modern thing” (*khong samai mai*) (Ibid.:28). *Farang* things (such as, clothes, drums, food,

¹²For example, *Matichon Sudsapda* (*Matichon Weekly*), a popular news magazine, has a news review section called “*Thet Mong Thai*” (literally, the Foreigners [Media] Look at Thailand). In this section, one hot topic of news pertaining to contemporary Thailand by leading foreign news agencies or news magazines is selected and reviewed to show the readers how the world looks at Thailand. Writing mostly for *Matichon* and *Silapawatthanatham*, Michael Wright, a Briton and long-time resident/ independent scholar of Thailand, has been widely known for his “*Farang Mong Thai*” [*Farang Gazing at Thailand*] column, which reflects his criticisms on Thailand’s history, literature, religion, and culture from a comparative perspective.

textbooks, household utensils) and *farang* ways (language, social manners) are constantly evident in a series of eventful scenes in *Si Phaendin [Four Reigns]*, the famous periodical novel by Kukrit Pramoj (1998[1953]). This novel recreated dramatic events of Siamese royalty and the emerging Sino-Siamese elite at the dawn of modernization beginning in the reigns of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) until the death of King Ananda (r. 1935-1946).

Adopting certain *farang* ways of life and consuming *farang* things had formed crucial methods to civilizing or building the ‘New Siam’ empire. They are parts of highly-valued “westernized modes of consumption and self-presentation” (Peleggi 2002: back cover) employed by the royal elite since the Reign of King Mongkut in their ‘quest for *siwilai* [civilized status]’ (Thongchai Winichakul 2000b: 528-549). Indeed, these royal elite considered themselves “civilizing agents” (Peleggi 2002:10), who had largely “refashioned” (Ibid.:3) themselves after *farang* civilization and projected their desired status and image away from being ‘traditional’ Siamese rulers. They, in turn, had self-consciously initiated a political mission to turn “peasants into Siamese” (Ibid.:9) by embracing *farang* ways. Ironically, the royal elite were also held responsible as elitist agents, who had established lasting social norms, tastes, and consciousness, that “the *farang* things are superior or highly valued, while the native ones are inferior, lowly valued, or looked down upon” (*khong farang sung, khong phuen muang tam*) (Wright 2004:110).¹³

Attempts to trace the genealogy of the word *farang* are well-recorded and contested by Siamese elite. In *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang* [The Law of Three Seals], a collection of Siamese classical laws compiled in 1804 during the reign of King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), *farang* was always mentioned as a generic reference to westerners, e.g., “*farang, angkrit, wilanda*” (literally, Westerner, English, Dutch) (KTSD 1978:79). In *Ratchakitchanubeksa Ratchakan Thi 4* (2540: 181), the term *farang* was recorded as following: “when Siam’s capitals were located in Ayutthaya and Lopburi, there were Europeans of many origins such as British, Dutch, French, Spaniard, and Portuguese. We called these Europeans *farang*, borrowing an Indian term, which was assigned to

¹³Wright (2004:114) reminds his readers that Siam prior to the reign of King Chulalongkorn had always opened itself to the world, and was not a closed Kingdom as proposed by some historians. The Siamese, especially ruling elite, had been highly cosmopolitan and self-conscious of their own positions as well as images of themselves and their empire in the eyes of the world (see Atthachak Sattayanurak 1995; Davisadk Puaksom 2003a; Saichon Sattayanurak 2003a). Somrak Chaisingkananon (2001) examines how *farang*-modeled ‘taste’ (*rotmiyom*) has been culturally constructed through the consumption of goods by the Thai elite as parts of their civilizing and nation-building project. Taste has been employed as a passage to social distinction, class consciousness, and material and symbolic power.

mark the Europeans. The Portuguese entered and settled in Siam before other Europeans.”¹⁴ In one of the famous correspondences between Prince Damrong Rajanuphap and Prince Naritsara Nuwattiwong (a.k.a. Prince Narit), which is published under the title “*San Somdet*” [Correspondence between the Two Princes], Prince Narit in his letter dated November 25, 1942 complains about some irregularities in Thai transliterating words from foreign languages. Prince Narit wrote:

There are some foreign words which were already Thai-ized such as *Farang*, *Angkrit*. As they are widely known, *Farang* comes from *Frank* and *Angkrit* from English. [I am] rather unsatisfied when *Angkrit* is used for the British. The term *Farang* refers to any White people in general, including those of other national origins. It would be nonsensical to think that *Farang* comes from *Farangset* or France. (Naritsara Nuwattiwong and Damrong Rajanuphap 1962:46)¹⁵

Prince Narit was apparently irritated and concerned with the ongoing usages of the Thai transliteration of some foreign words in 1930s and 1940s. He wanted to consult the scholarly and respected Prince Damrong and wished to provide some correct understandings of those given terms. Five days later, Prince Damrong, who was then an expatriate living in Penang, British Malaya as a consequence of the 1932 Revolution, replied as follows:

We the Thais follow the Indians in using the term *Farang*. I once read an account concerning the origin of this term, *Frank*, which refers to a group of European people who once occupied the land of today’s France. This name then spread to Asia, where the Asians misunderstood it by addressing all European people as “*Frank*,” which later on had become “*Frenghi*.” The Portuguese arrived at India before any other Europeans. The Indians addressed them as “*Frenghi*.” Despite having contacted with many European nationalities, the Indian have still retained this name for the Portuguese and their [racially] mix-blooded descendants. (Naritsara Nuwattiwong and Damrong Rajanuphap 1962:59-60)¹⁶

¹⁴My own translation.

¹⁵My own translation.

¹⁶My own translation.

Farang, according to these accounts, derives from the Indian reference to European contacts, especially the Portuguese. The Thais have adopted the Indian marker of the West and redefined it to suit their own experiences encountering the West. In a way, it reinforces the royal elite's projection of strong religio-cultural ties between Siamese and Indic civilizations. Wright (2004:115) recently noted that there is no *f*-sound in Sanskrit and *farang* is registered in most Indic languages as "*parangi*."¹⁷ What both scholar Princes obviously neglected in their correspondence is the Arabian or Persian traders, who did play their part together with the Portuguese in transporting this word to Ayutthaya in the sixteenth century.

More than half a century after the royal dialogues over the genealogy of *farang*, a similar question was raised once again in an internet discussion on the websites, <http://www.soc.culture.thai> and <http://www.linguistlist.org> in 1993-1994. It was a multi-party discussion forum in cyberspace among the professional *farang* working in or having connection with Thailand. They had encountered the Thai usage of this marker and wished to learn about its origin and routes. Williams (1994), then a linguist at Thammasat University, summarizes their prolifically informative discussions as follows:

A widespread belief in Thailand is that the word "*farang*" (Caucasian) is derived from the French word "*français*".¹⁸ This derivation is implausible on phonetic and historical grounds. It is in fact a popular misconception. It is true, however, that these words have the same ultimate source.

The word is attested in various forms in languages in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. It is clear that the word originated as "*Frank*" in Europe and spread eastwards along Muslim trade routes.

Thai most likely borrowed the word from influential Muslim Persian or Indian traders in the 17th century or even earlier. The Persian word was "*farangg*". The term

¹⁷The term "*parangi*" could be a Tamil word.

¹⁸Some popular perceptions among Thais and foreigners who predominantly believe that *farang* is derived from French or France. Examples of their perception could be found in <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Farang>;
<http://www.praphansarn.com/webboard2/QAview.asp?id=2350>.

probably was used to refer to early Portuguese traders and subsequently to all Europeans (ie., non-Muslims).

It is possible that the Thai word "*farangset*" ("French") is a blend of the word "*farang*" and the French word "*français*", i.e., "*farangset*" is actually derived from "*farang*", not vice versa. Certainly, the word "*farang*" existed prior to, and independently of, "*farangset*."¹⁹

While the origin of the term *farang* is uncertain, the Germanic *Frank* and the Persian connection are mentioned. Some other comparative linguistic and cultural sides of the term are also proposed by many discussants. Key features from the internet discussions can be summarized as follows: (1) the *farang*- equivalences could be found in a number of languages, e.g., *farangg* (Persian), *farengi* or *farangi* (Hindi), *pirangi* (Tamil), *palangi* (Samoan/Polynesian), *frangi/ifrangi* (Turkish and Arabic), etc.; (2) the term *Frank* is originally from Germanic language and has been widely used in Egypt, Greece and other Mediterranean areas referring to Western Europeans, especially the French; and (3) while it is agreed that *farang* in Thai is one of the loan words from Muslim Persian and Indian traders during the Ayutthaya period, this word is also used to refer to the Westerners in some of Thailand's neighboring countries like Laos (*falang*) and Cambodia (*barang*) (see also Harris 1986:9-12; Thion 1993: 18-23).

It is implied in these internet discussions, that *farang* is a linguistic as well as cultural signifier of cosmopolitanism. It represents one of the pan-Orientalist identification markers towards the West and Western counterparts. In the Thai context, it demonstrates Siamese experiences of intercultural contacts and exchanges and how they have made sense of their cultural encounters with Western otherness before, during, and after their modernization project. Indeed, *farang* is a product of intercultural and international contacts emerging in the pre-colonial "age of commerce" (Reid 1988). *Farang* were positioned as movers, travelers, and intruders into the Oriental lands, while the natives, e.g., Siamese, were primarily stationed at home and prepared to deal with *farang* from their cultural bases.

Dubious Strangers:

¹⁹<http://www.faqs.org/faqs/thai/language/section-5.html>

Farang in the Empire of Ayudhaya, 1569-1767²⁰

On August 7, 1925, Prince Damrong delivered his famous speech on the history of Siam's contact with other nations before dignitaries at a dinner of the Rotarian Club in Bangkok (The Executive Committee of the Eighth Congress 1930: 29-41).²¹ He understandably sketched a history of Siam's four-century international relations, starting from the arrival of the Portuguese in Ayutthaya in 1511, the Dutch in 1604, the English in 1612, the Danes in 1621 and the French in 1662, to the American missionaries coming to Bangkok in 1818. He emphasized the beneficial aspects which Siam had gained from the contacts with each of these foreign powers and ended by concluding how Siam became a civilized, prosperous kingdom at the end of the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

The contacts between Siam and *farang* are highly intensive, but far more problematic and difficult than indicated in the Prince's speech. Wyatt (1984:105) sums up the place of *farang* in Ayutthaya history that the kingdom (following the reign of King Naresuan) was characterized by "uneven institutional development exacerbated by increasing relations with Western European powers." *Farang* had very significant roles to play. They did not come to Siam as pure benefactors or saviours. In the mean time, Siamese rulers and elite did not always welcome or embrace the Western strangers with ease.

Travelers, traders, mercenaries, and missionaries were the European *farang*'s formally known identities in Siam during the Ayutthaya period. These *farang*'s dubious identities were highly interconnected, or even inseparable in certain periods. They usually maintained close relationships within their own ethnoculturally-bounded communities, even though they were on different missions. They were among foreigners of different origins, e.g., Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Javanese/Malay, Mon, and Persian, who formed the international community in Ayutthaya in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The presence of *farang* and other

²⁰I follow Wyatt (1984)'s periodization to trace the origin and route of *farang* in the making of Thai/Siamese identities. Wyatt reconstructs Siam/Thailand's modern history from Ayudhaya to the 1980s through these following periods: the Empire of Ayudhaya, 1569-1767, the Early Bangkok Empire, 1767-1851; Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, 1851-1910, the Rise of Elite Nationalism, 1910-1932, The Military Ascendant, 1932-1957, Development and Revolution, 1957-1982. While retaining most of these periodizations, I readjust some of them to fit the changing/moving cultural images and discourses of *farang* in different contexts.

²¹See the Thai version of his speech in Damrong (2002:Chapter 10). A portion from his speech also appears in his memoirs (Damrong 2003).

foreigners was evidence that Ayutthaya was one of the major maritime trading ports and cosmopolitan Kingdoms in Southeast Asia during its heyday in the seventeenth and early part of eighteenth centuries (see Charvut Kasetsiri 1976; Reid 1988; Wyatt 1984, Chapter 5). Nidhi Aeusriwongse (1980: 38) calls these foreign settlements “*prachakhom tang chat*” or “*prachakhom tang dao*” (the communities of foreigners/aliens). These foreigners were also frequently mentioned in *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang [The Laws of Three Seals--KTSD]* as “*Farang, Angkrit, Wilanda, Chin, Yuan, Yipun, Khaek Prethet Malayu Lae Tang Prathet Thang Puang*” (literally, French, English, Dutch, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Malay, and the rest of the foreigners) (KTSD 1978:84).

Like other foreigners, *farang* came to the Kingdom of Ayutthaya for their own purposes and with their own interests. Although the imperialist intent (if any) of the *farang* in the 16th and 17th centuries was not apparent, during the two subsequent centuries, the Dutch, French, Portuguese and the Spaniards, competed against one another using Ayutthaya as a battleground for their trade, military, and religious interests. As traders and travelers, extending their powerful arms from regional bases such as Batavia, Bombay, Colombo, Malacca, or Manila, *farang* and other foreign traders were attracted to trade with Ayutthaya and its vassals/seaports for its abundant rice, spices, wild produces, and other goods despite the monopoly and control of trade by the King and his powerful nobles. They brought their manufactured goods to Ayutthaya and bought local produces to the international market.

Farang traders were apparently supported by their governments under the guise of the trading companies, such as the Dutch’s Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (V.O.C) (see Manop Thawarasakun 1993:208-212) and the English East India Company (Wyatt 1984: 109). Together with missionaries and mercenaries, *farang* traders were recognized as benefactors who introduced new inventions and technologies to Ayutthaya. Prince Damrong (cited in the Executive Committee of the Eighth Congress 1930:30), for example, notes that the Portuguese “brought to the Siamese three things, namely, the art of making firearms, the way to use firearms in warfare, and the adoption of fortifications against firearms” (Ibid.: 30), “the Dutch brought the art of shipbuilding,...the English taught navigation to the Siamese” (Ibid.: 31), and the French “built the palace and fortifications of Lopburi...and two forts at Bangkok” (Ibid.:32). Indeed, as recorded in the Ayutthaya Chronicles, one of the reasons that King Narai sent his mission to “the

Municipality of Farangset” was to find out whether technological inventions and other French advancements or “wonderful treasures” reported by Phraya Wichayen (Constantine Phaulkon) were true or false (*The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* 2000: 270).²²

While *farang* traders were regularly noted in the Ayutthaya records (see *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* 2000; Van Vliet 2003), their other two dubious identities, mercenaries and missionaries, had been more controversial and colorful. *Farang* mercenaries and missionaries had been involved closely with Ayutthayan internal and external politics soon after they arrived and settled in the Kingdom. Nidhi Aeusriwongse (1980:32) argues that foreign mercenaries, especially Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, and Persian, were hired by Ayutthayan kings (e.g., Ekathosarot r. 1605-1610/1611; Songtham r. 1610/1611-1628; Prasatthong r. 1629-1656; Narai r. 1656-1688) in their power struggles with/against factions of nobles in administering the pre-modern kingdom, and especially in dealing with the politics of succession to the throne. They were the most important part in the kings’ ‘balancing acts” strategies. Hiring foreign mercenaries was proven effective because they were specialists and commanded up-to-date military technologies and, most importantly, they were trusted for their loyalties to their employers since they were not involved in the local politics, nor were they authorized to control local troops or other interests. They were allowed to control troops of their own national origins and given noble ranks and statuses (see Nidhi Aeusriwongse 1980; Manop Thawarasakun 1993). Some of them, such as Greek adventurer Constantine Phaulkon (1647-1688), the Japanese Yamada Nagamasa, and the Persian Sheik Ahmad, continued to rise to influential positions (see So. Plainoi 1995:158-164, 187-321). In the reign of King Narai, Nidhi Aeusriwongse (1980:49) concludes that most foreign nobles like Phaulkon, who commanded military and some other key technical skills, “were able to effectively respond to his royal policy to oppress or punish Thai [rival] nobles” and thus helped weaken their political rivalries to the King.

²²Phraya Wichayen was reported as saying that “In the Municipality of Farangset, there are artisans who make clocks, air guns, fire-arms, tubes reflecting distant things far away to be seen close up and can even produce all sorts of other special things. Of both silver and gold there are large quantities and in that holy royal palace enclosure of the Holy Lord of Farangset they have melted silver into octagonal sections about three kam in diameter and with a length of seven or eight sok and have piled them along the edge of the roads in large numbers just like sections of pillars...” (*The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* 2000:270). King Narai then commissioned Kosa Pan “...to investigate and observe whether the treasures of the Holy Lord of Farangset exist and conform to the description narrated by Phraya Wichayen or in what fashion they do not conform. I would desire to know the false and the true...” (Ibid.:270-271).

However, the most suspicious and, many times hateful, role of European *farang* in the eyes of Siamese is perhaps that of missionaries. The Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French all sent their missionaries to Ayutthaya. When the Portuguese arrived in Ayutthaya in the early 16th century from their port of Malacca, their strong determination was to convert the Siamese to Roman Catholic Christianity. Prince Damrong notes that the Portuguese Government at that period wanted to plant Christianity and Portuguese nationality permanently in all Eastern countries which the Portuguese had conquered or where they had established trading stations. They therefore encouraged the Portuguese to marry the native women and to bring up their descendants as Portuguese and Christians (cited in the Executive Committee of the Eighth Congress 1930:30; see also So. Plainoi 1995:326). The Protestant Dutch and British missionaries followed the Portuguese, but they also failed to plant the seeds of Christianity among Siamese (see Keyes 1993).

French missionaries during the reign of King Narai, through the conversion of Constantine Phaulkon, an appointed Principal Minister of Siam, were “led to believe that they would eventually succeed in converting the King and afterwards the whole Siamese nation” (Damrong cited in the Executive Committee of the Eighth Congress 1930:32). With strong support from King Louis XIV and King Narai’s openness and favor to foreigners, the French missions, engineered by Phaulkon, were allowed to preach Christianity and opened their seminary in the Kingdom. They were subsequently “destined to be destroyed” (Ibid.) in the “anti-foreign, anti-Christian Revolution” (Wyatt 1984:116-117) led by Phra Phetracha in 1688. Wyatt (Ibid.:117) points out that the revolution to unseat Phaulkon and end the French and foreign influences was fueled by what he calls “xenophobic sentiments” among the local populace. Wyatt (1984:116-117) wrote:

Anti-foreign and anti-French sentiment had been growing. As people see it, the king’s most powerful minister was a Greek, who had married a Japanese Christian and lived in European style, surrounded by French priests and English merchants. Phaulkon seemed more solicitous of foreign, Christian interests than those of his king. The arrogant and licentious behavior of the French troops antagonized many. Buddhist monks and laypersons were suspicious of the growing prominence of Christian priests; and many foreign trading communities had been hurt by

Phaulkon's policy, which favored private English traders and, they thought, the companies...

French missionaries and other *farang* communities had been subjected to hardships and difficulties after the 1688 revolution. Once Phra Phetracha had gained full power, wrote an anonymous French priest who experienced the political crisis during that time, he antagonized every Christian foreigner and expelled them from the Kingdom. The Portuguese Christians were forced to reside on an island. The English were among the first *farang* who were stripped of their assets and jailed. The French residents of Ayutthaya and Lopburi had to flee the kingdom. Some other foreigners also had to either leave Ayutthaya or relocate elsewhere (see *Prachum Phongsawadan Phak Thi 81*). Chronicles written by French missionaries (see *Prachum Phongsawadan Phak Thi 21*; see So. Plainoi 1995:322-409) showed that anti-Christianity sentiments among the Thai rulers and elite had continued in the subsequent reigns (e.g., King Sua r. 1703-1709; King Thai Sa r. 1709-1733). King Taksin (r. 1767-1782) was also noted for his anti-Christian and anti-Islamic policy. He issued a proclamation to prevent Siamese and Mon from becoming a Muslim (*puak mahamat*) or a Christian (*puak khao rit*) with a maximum punishment of execution (see So. Plainoi 1995:382-383).

Farang influence subsided after the 1688 revolution until the fall of Ayutthaya at hands of the Burmese in 1767. Despite this brief suspension, *farang* influence never actually entirely disappeared from the Siamese political and cultural worlds. *Farang* legacies in terms of material and technological inventions were still maintained. Siamese rulers and elite in the 18th and early 19th centuries continued to uphold their firm positions on the dubious identities of the *farang*. As they saw it, the *farang*'s true interests were to gain commercial interests and to convert Siamese Buddhists to Christianity.

The Re-Emergence of Ambiguous Westerners: *Farang* in the Early Bangkok Period, 1767-1851

Siamese royal leaders and intellectuals in the years since the Ayutthaya period have maintained their conflicting perceptions of and cautious stances toward *farang* counterparts. On the one hand, for their colonial intents and desires, *farang* were seen as wicked and dangerous as far as Siam's

economic and political interests were concerned. In this respect, *farang* could never be fully trusted. On the other hand, Siam had to look up to *farang* as ‘models of and models for civilization and modernization’ to paraphrase Geertz (1973). *Farang* were sources of greater and advanced civilization for Siam, especially in the eyes of the royal elite and intellectuals. The dawn of Siamese modernization was made possible largely through the selection, importation, adaptation, and consumption of the Euro-American inventions

Suspecting *Farang*. When Chao Phraya Chakri came to power and established a new Siamese capital in Bangkok in 1782, his political and religious efforts were seen as a revival of Ayutthaya as well as a reinvention of new Siam identities (see Wyatt 1976). Wright (2004) interprets King Rama I’s efforts as being “to reconstruct and maintain the Siamese traditional world based on the old Siamese paradigm based on Traibhumi legacies. Siam, therefore, had never had crises of identities despite its capital and its administrative structures were shattered by the Burmese. In the eyes of *King Rama I*, *farang* were “*tamil khao*” (white Tamil) or “*mitcha thithi*” (false minds) (cited in Wright 1998). In other words, in the traditional cosmological order and pre-modern economic and political hierarchies, *farang* who came to Siam were still far from having a modern dominant or superior status. Siamese rulers and elite had ranked them as rather lowly or equal outsiders or others in both spiritual and worldly standings. *Farang* were considered as trade partners, visitors, travelers, priests, or groups of foreign fellows among many communities of foreigners in Siam.

In *Phraratchaphongsawadan Krung Rattanakosin Ratchakan Thi 2* [*Royal Chronicle of the Rama II of the Bangkok Period, 1809-1824*], Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, the father of modern Thai history and archaeology, cautioned that in the 19th century Siam must be extraordinarily careful in dealing with *farang* [traders] in comparison to foreigners of other national origins.

Among foreigners coming to trade with Muang Thai, *farang* have been markedly different from the Chinese and Indians since the Ayutthaya period. In trading with other countries, *farang* usually used forces against their [non-*farang*] trading partners or even against their fellow *farang* to gain advantages or to protect their interests. Sometimes they [*farang* traders] made wars and invited colonial authorities to rule [over their trading partners’ land]. The Chinese and Indian traders, on the contrary,

agreed to cooperate and be subsumed under the administration by the governments of the host countries. (cited in Saichon Sattayanurak 2003:88)²³

Prince Damrong's reminder apparently echoes King Rama III's insightful speech from his deathbed in 1851 to warrant his successors against the Western powers. In his royal visionary statement, he was reported as saying that:

There will be no more wars with Vietnam and Burma. We will have them only with the West. Take care, and do not lose any opportunities to them. Anything that they propose should be held up to close scrutiny before accepting it: Do not blindly trust them. (cited in Wyatt 1984:180)

What Wyatt translates as the West is *farang* or Western colonial powers. The King really means *farang* and their imperialist desires in his original words. (see Thiphakorawong, Chaophraya 1961:366)

Dealing with Imperialist *Farang*. The *farang*'s colonial intent had begun to emerge after a series of trading exchanges between Siam and the West [the Portuguese and the British] and the arrival of missionaries, which resumed in the reign of King Rama II. The *farang* had finally shown their colonial stripes and Siam was aware of their imperialist threats through the fall of neighboring and traditional regional powers, such as Burma, China, and Vietnam in the first half of the 19th century. Prince Damrong (cited in the Executive Committee of the Eight Congress 1930:37) noted that “the most important event that influenced Siamese thought about Western culture was the first Chinese war with England, which occurred in 1842.” While China, the traditional powerhouse in the region, was defeated and international politics had intensified with Western colonialism, leading Siamese elites, such as King Mongkut, King Phra Pinklao, and Chao Phraya Srisuriyawong (Chuang Bunnag), realized that “...the Siamese should begin to try and acquire knowledge about the Western people so as to be prepared for future eventualities” (Ibid.). These persons had formed a core part of young and progressive Siamese intellectuals during the reign of King Rama III, and were “modern men of vision [*cham puak*

²³My own translation.

samai mai] who wished to learn *farang* languages and other knowledge for the benefit of the Kingdom. They did not mind having relations with and studying from *farang* missionaries” (Damrong Rajanuphap 2002:92).²⁴

Until the end of the reign of King Rama III in 1851, Siam was able to keep *farang* political influences at bay. Siamese rulers and elite were able to protect their interests and political will with a conscious realization that dealing with the *farang* was inevitable. When King Rama III was reluctant to negotiate an international contract with the British envoy led by Henry Burney, his ministers and close relatives reminded him that “the British’s [colonial] borderlands were expanding closer [towards Siam’s]. If we were not flexible [to their demands], we would make an unwanted enemy” (*Phrachum Phongsawadan* Vol. 20, 1967:109). The King finally agreed with his subordinates to allow his representatives to discuss Siam’s trade and diplomatic ties with the *farang*, while trying his best to uphold Siamese moral and intellectual strengths. One of his intellectual efforts to counter *farang* imperialist influences was the Wat Phra Chetuphon’s inscriptions, where *farang* were represented as Siam’s morally inferior others among many ethnocultural non-Siamese people (see Davisakd Puaksom 2003a).²⁵

Kan Lok-Kan Satsana Dualism:

Farang under King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, 1851-1910

The image of *farang* during the first three reigns of the Chakkri monarchs were the distant subjects of scrutiny and control. For example, Prince Damrong 1974:69-70) made an observation on Sunthonphu (1786-1855)’s *Phra Aphaimani* that “when Sunthonphu wrote *Phra Aphaimani*,²⁶ we the Thai knew very little about *farang*. There were no more than five people

²⁴With the conclusion of the treaties with British and other Western countries, the Siamese elite were fully aware of the power shifts in international politics and the threatening of *farang* force in the late 19th century. Wyatt (1984:184) notes that “Mongkut and Suriyawong knew better than anyone else the nature of the power that threatened the kingdom and the means by which Siam’s sovereignty might be subverted or suppressed—they read the Singapore and Hong Kong newspapers.”

²⁵Sulak Sivaraksa (1997a:71) strongly urges the community of Thai studies scholars to consider King Rama III as the founding father of their discipline and take his birthday (March 31, 1787) to mark the celebration of Thai studies as an established scholarly discipline. King Rama III’s life and his devotion to promoting Siam’s economic wealth, political power, and genuine Thai cultural roots should suffice to argue on his behalf. To Sulak, the King Rama III’s reign could be seen as the last stronghold for genuine Siamese cultural identities prior to the slaughter by *farang*’s powerful non-Buddhist “methodology and [their wasteful] consumerism” (Ibid.:64).

²⁶According to Sombat Chanthongwong and Chai-anan Smudwanija (1980:276), Sunthonphu composed *Phra Aphaimani* over two periods. The first part was finished when he was employed in the Court of King Rama II from

out of an entire population of Siam capable of speaking *farang* languages [i.e., English, French]. How could we expect him to command some accurate knowledge of *farang* geographies and cultures?”

However, the floodgates were opened wider in the subsequent reigns. It is arguable that King Mongkut was perhaps a genuine cultural and political strategist and negotiator in his “cautious reforms” (Wyatt 1984:182) to save Siam from western colonialism. Sulak Sivaraksa (1997b:9) argues that King Mongkut’s successful strategies in dealing with *farang* were “to flexibly abide the strong imperialist storm from the West” and to pay more serious attention to the West and international politics during the heyday of western colonialism in this part of the world. The King was convinced that China was no longer the powerhouse. The winds of change had begun to turn and Siam needed to be careful in playing its international diplomatic games. In one of his royal proclamations, King Mongkut composed a long message to explain and reassess sending Siamese envoys to China. He came to realize that the Chinese kings, unlike the rulers in the West and other neighboring kingdoms, “looked down upon the Thai and refused to accept their diplomatic ties during the previous reigns from the Ayutthaya to the Bangkok eras. The Thai [Kingdom] was cheated and the Thai monarchs were dishonored. King Mongkut therefore made up his mind [policy], not to send more tribute to Peking.”²⁷ (*Prachum Prakat Ratchakan Thi 4, Phuttha Sakkarat 2405-2411* 1998:346).

King Mongkut had mobilized Siam on both the civilizing and modernizing fronts, aiming to build a modern nation out of an ancient kingdom. While it is well-argued amongst students of modern Thailand that the Bowring treaty with the British and a series of similar treaties with the West in 1850s were some of the defining moments in Siam’s modern political and economic history (see Chatthip Nartsupha and Suthy Prasartset 1981; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker 1996; Somphop Manarungsan 1989), King Mongkut’s reforming projects in the cultural and intellectual realms towards *farang* were intensively self-critical through outward-looking lenses to the West. He was deeply self-conscious and aware of the stereotypicalized and negative rumors relating to Siam and himself, which had been circulated among foreigners and which held that Siam was an extraordinarily rich country under absolute monarchy and ruled by a

1820-1823, when he was at the zenith of his career. The final part was written during turbulent years in the reign of King Rama III (1825-1845).

²⁷ My own translation.

“shallow minded king and admirer of...European usua[ge]s[sic.], customs, sciences, arts, and literature &c., without limit” (Mongkut 1994:157). The King concluded that “foreigners must consider him only as a mad king of a wild land” (Ibid.).

King Mongkut had shown his enthusiasm to learn the *farang*'s knowledge and other cultural practices despite having never set foot on their soil.²⁸ He was an active student in acquiring western languages, scientific and other knowledge from western missionaries since his days as a Buddhist monk. He engaged closely in intellectual debates with his Western counterparts on issues concerning Siam and the West (i.e., Buddhism vs. Christianity). He was also one of great admirers of *farang* inventions and luxurious goods, which he frequently ordered through his agents in Singapore, Hong Kong, New York, and London (see Mongkut 1994).²⁹ Manich Jumsai noted that the King's competency in English and other foreign languages helped to open up and nurture his cosmopolitan views. “He loved writing correspondence in English with westerners very much” (Manich Jumsai 1994:1). It is evident in his letters and royal proclamations that the King was highly conscious of the position of his Kingdom in the eyes of civilized world. In a letter to Sir John Bowring, dated May 14, 1856, the King reminded his British counterpart of his mission “...to govern the people of this half civilized and half barbarious[sic.] nation herein being of various several races, languages, religions...” (Mongkut 1994:37). In addition, soon after his succession to the throne in 1851, King Mongkut prohibited his ministers and officials from being half-naked at his presence, because it was a sign of barbaric practices and revealed disgusting skin fungi. Officials needed to wear shirts like *farang* (cited in Sulak Sivaraksa 1997b:14-15).

Scrutinizing and debating *farang* knowledge and cultures are noticeable intellectual engagements, which King Mongkut and his progressive contemporaries actively pursued. In a widely-cited book, *Nangsue Sadaeng Kitchanukit*, Chao Phraya Thipakorawong (Kham Bunnag) displayed

²⁸See detailed accounts of King Mongkut's biography and key events during his reign in Bowring (1969); Damrong Rajanuphap (2003, especially in the chapter 2); Mongkut (1994); Paramin Kruathong (2003).

²⁹For example, in his letter to W. J. Butterworth, the Governor of Prince of Wales Island, dated 21st April 1851, King Mongkut placed his order through his agent for Western goods suitable for his new royal status. Wrote the King, “whereas I was changed from priesthood to the seat of President of country now, I have neglected all my tools and intensions of my own use or left the sacred place for the use of priests. I ought to obtain many things newly for use in my own family out of those that for the royal palace or regal residence. I have therefore placed 1000 dollars in the hands of my man Mr. Nai Bhoom who I have ordered to purchase for me many articles of various curious weapons or articles of gold and silver clothes & ca. and some wooden tools of best woods, mahogany & ca.” (see Mongkut 1987:93-95).

his intellectual discourses intended to teach the younger generations of Siamese some modern knowledge advancements, aimed at countering the West with a ‘proper’ view of Thai Buddhism in comparison to other religions, such as Christianity and Islam. The book’s subject matter is composed of discussions on general geographies and views on religions, especially Buddhism, written in a question-answer (Q&A) format. He wished to write a book offering proper knowledge and perspective to his young readers to be able to scrutinize true-or-false distinctions between worldly/mundane (*kan lok*) and religious/secular (*kan satsana*) matters (Thiphakorawong 1971:246-247). He believed that his book would encourage some Siamese, who “have ignored the religion [Buddhism] and neglected to acquire [religious and modern] knowledge,” to “open eyes and ears to look around and compare things” (Ibid.:246). Wrote Thiphakorawong, “for those who are skeptical of Buddhism, I would urge you to open your eyes and ears to reflect carefully on religious matters. How do you perceive your own or other people’s religious teachings and faiths? When you have come up with a reliable answer, you can always hold it for the rest of your life. You will never be deceived or too excited by the worldly matters, which happen before us and overwhelm us every year” (Ibid.:246-247).

Throughout the book, Thiphakorawong always keeps *farang* or foreigners in mind. *Farang* are literally absent, but toweringly present from the beginning to the end. He aggressively questions American missionaries and counters their Christian teachings and principles with detailed explanations of Siamese Buddhism. By consciously illustrating his critical dialogues with/against *farang* as a leading example, his genuine intention is to encourage his Siamese readers to stand up and self-assess their own knowledge and religious faiths, so that *chao sayam* (the Siamese) would not be ashamed (*otsu*) before the eyes of foreigners. “The foreigners [*farang*] teach [proper religious and worldly knowledge] to one another, while the Siamese are too lazy to do so. It is considered a shame before the eyes of the foreigners. I wish to teach those people who are ignorant of religious knowledge [the Siamese], so that they would not be embarrassed before those who know [*farang*]” (Ibid.:246).³⁰

One of famous debates on *farang* ideas, which involved King Mongkut himself, is the case of Anna Leonowens’ complaint to save two Siamese “slave girls.” Leonowens, the governess hired

³⁰See Davisakd Puaksom (1998:253-313) for further discussion on the Siamese intellectuals’ responses to the discourses of religious otherness set by the Western missionaries in early 19th century.

by King Mongkut to teach English to his children and young concubines, wrote a letter to the King and commented on the subject of slavery in Siam that "...slavery shall be a great blot on the Siamese nation... [N]o nation which holds or permits selling human beings in the market for money can ever be great" (cited in *Silapawathanatham*. January 2004:82). The King responded in his letter dated on May 12, 1864 with a long explanation in "very private postscript." He states that "...to grant the said girls freedom from obligation to serve their lawful mistress, will be greatest violation of Siamese law and custom" (Mongkut 2004[1864]:82). He explains to Mrs Leonowens that slavery in Siam "is not of such the bad nature" and it has existed in "many highly civilized countries in Europe" (Ibid.:83). Educating Mrs Leonowens with information concerning categories of slavery as practiced in Siam, the King encouraged the English governess to look around and re-examine her own Christianity-based morality. Argued the King, "...Christianity...did not help toward the abolishment of slavery. All of Christian nations has [sic.] made rich profiting by commerce, England even not excepted in holding slaves as well as in trading slave-ships, etc. etc. almost even up to present date as for example the war in the United States of America..." (Ibid.:84-85).

For the King, the practice of slavery was a culturally and historically relative matter. Its abolition in the name of civilization and religious morality was not always universally acceptable, since it had been a common practice during that time (see also Thanet Apornsuwan 2004a:89-91). The key point, however, is that His Majesty's royally authoritative, and masculine answer to a complaint filed by a female *farang* governess could be taken as an Oriental reminder, similar to that of Thiphakorawong's, urging *farang* to "look all around and not be induced to hurried and rash steps by strong advice of philanthropic individuals however well dispositioned" (Ibid.:85). In other words, the King issues a 'mind-your-own-business' notice to the governess as well as other *farang* critics, of course, in a private manner this time. The King expressed his ideas through the use of English with some notable grammatical errors and shortcomings in this letter and in other communications with his international correspondents (see Mongkut 1987, 1994). His written utterances could resemble what Bhabha (1992) calls the "out of sentence." This 'out-of-sentence' voice like this one shows that the Orient was not always docilely Orientalized. At least it helped the Orient to talk straight back to the *farang* or their Occidental counterparts.

**Civilizing Agents:
Farang and the Rise of Elite Nationalism, 1910-1932**

Civilizing Agents. A number of studies (e.g., Atthachak Sattayanurak 1995; Batson 1984; Keyes 1989; Peleggi 2002; Thongchai Winichakul 1994, 2000a, 2000b; and Wyatt 1984, 1994) have demonstrated that the reigns of three Chakkri absolute monarchs at the turn of the 20th century (from approximately 1868 to 1932) were critical times for nation-building and modernizing. King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) reformed almost all aspects of Siam and led the Kingdom from its traditional heritages to modern foundations in order to ‘align’ with western colonialism. King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) was recognized for his role in establishing European-model nationalism. King Pajadhipok (r. 1925-1935) was remembered as the last absolute monarch, an institution which was altered, if not ended, by the 1932 revolution to introduce Western-style democracy to the Kingdom. Out of these oversimplified descriptions of this critical period, I would like to briefly examine how the *farang* had been constructed and interpreted as models of civilization and modernization in Siam, while the royal elite had occupied the privileged position of agents of *farang* models.

In the eyes of these three monarchs, the *farang* were sources of and methods for achieving the “*siwilai*” status among the ‘civilized’ countries. They exemplified what Peleggi (2002:93), in his account of Wat Benchama Bophit’s annual fund-raising fair launched by King Chulalongkorn in early 1900s, calls “a transient site for the localization of global markers of *siwilai*”. Beginning in the reign of King Mongkut, these three monarchs continued the apparent trends to break away from Siamese tradition to pursue *farang*-modeled civilization and modernization.

Dubbed by Emile Jottrand (cited in Peleggi 2002:90), a Belgian who spent years in Bangkok at the turn-of-the-century, as an “enlightened and Europeanized” monarch, King Chulalongkorn had initiated and achieved much more than his father in what might be viewed as the “*farangization*” of Siam. While King Mongkut relied partly on his agents overseas to empower his own agency in his “small steps” (Wyatt 1984:189) to civilize Siam, King Chulalongkorn had launched himself, his children, and other royal elite as Siamese representatives to gain direct experiences of the civilized worlds. He sent his sons to be educated in Europe, and all of the

succeeding Chakkri kings (King Rama VI, VII, VIII and IX) were directly and indirectly products of his original initiatives. He made several overseas trips to European colonies (e.g. Singapore, Batavia, Colombo, India) in Asia and twice to Europe throughout his 42-year reign. As Peleggi (2002:164) points out, King Chulalongkorn, his sons, and other royal elite enjoyed “Western material cultures” and employed them as markers of civilization in their ritualized empowerment process to refashion their royal images and identities. However, the royally-initiated *farangization* projects in Siam in the first half of the 20th century had not taken on all aspects of *farangness*. *Farang* things and people were not, in all cases, imported and directly supplanted in Siam’s cultural soil.

The *farang* had remained suspicious outsiders despite being models of civilization for the Siam rulers. Fresh from the 1893 confrontation with the French and the colonial threats in the late 19th century, King Chulalongkorn (1997:49) claimed that most *farang* could not be entirely trusted. In his letter to Phraya Wisuthasuriyasak (Pia Malakul), then the ambassador to London, dated January 21, 1894, the King urged the ambassador to return to Siam to take up a post in the Ministry of Education because the Kingdom lacked well-trained, capable manpower to run the newly-created centralized state machinery. Most *farang* consuls and officials hired in Siamese government offices were incapable. The King wrote:

“...it not easy to hire *farang* and encourage them to work. It is obvious that they are different from us in their national origins and languages. Their trustworthiness and loyalty are always questionable. Their aim is only to make money and go home. Having said so is unfair, because there are some knowledgeable and reliable [*farang*], who have built up their reputation and decent career. They are very helpful. Nonetheless, almost all *farang* must be counted as “fake, not true friends” (*phuen kin mai chai phuen tai*)” (Chulalongkorn 1997:49).³¹

The King’s view on categorizing *farang* based on their class and socioeconomic backgrounds was quite consistent. On his trip to Europe in 1897, he wrote to his wife, noting the class differentiation between the European royalty and those *farang* sent to stations in Siam and the Far East. He noted that the “*farang* in Europe and *farang* in Muang Thai are very different from

³¹My own translation.

each other. But we cannot look down upon them [rank and file *farang* in Siam], because they are representatives of their lords... I don't think I am in Heaven as I arrive Europe [and witness their civilization], then view *farang* in Muang Thai like Hell animals... I just wish to beg you to tell this truth to Prince Dewawong, Prince Damrong, and Chao Phraya Aphairacha, so that we can treat them properly” (King Chulalongkorn 1992[1897]:183-184).

King Chulalongkorn's views on *farang* were conditioned by the fact that Siam had experienced difficulties created by the extra-territoriality of and political threats by the colonial powers, while the establishment of schools to train civil servants was only in its embryonic stage. Siam's administration was severely undermanned, but had to be extraordinarily careful in dealing with *farang*, given the lesson learned from the 1893 incidents. In 1898, Chao Phraya Phra Sadet Surenthrathipbodi (Pia Malakul) (1997:57), the Minister of Education, described the French colonial threat as “an external royal enemy” (*ratcha sattru phainok*), who “intrudes into Siam's soil and threatens us with their armed power. The Siamese have been badly hurt...”

The *farang*'s influences were even more apparent during the reign of King Vajiravudh, but the rulers' paradoxical views on *farang* continued. The King himself was the first Thai king ever to be educated in the West. He was a key member of the first batch of King Chulalongkorn's sons attending schools in Europe. He spent ten years in England as a student at Sandhurst and Oxford. After completing his studies and serving a brief term of duty with the Royal Durham Light Infantry, he returned home via the United States and Japan in 1902. The King had then geared Siam toward the European civilizing pattern and England was his natural model, especially for his nationalist project (see Greene 1970:251-259). Despite the fact that the King had subscribed himself to *farang* civilization,³² his nationalist vision had led him to be cautious of Western and other foreign influences. Being dependent on assistance from the West or other foreign countries, especially China, would lead Siam into difficult time. According to Greene (Ibid.:255-256), the King warned against imitating the West. He pointed out that getting drunk, telling lies and then excusing oneself by saying that one was following accepted Western manners are unacceptable. He laid the blame for the increased frequency of this type of behavior on Westerners residing in Bangkok. Argues the King, “without doubt, contacts with low-class Europeans have had

³² Wyatt (1984:224, 232) observes that King Vajiravudh “had fifteen years to prepare for his royal duties, a luxury few other Siamese kings have had. Vella terms him a Victorian gentleman, but he may be more properly be termed Edwardian...” for “his extravagant expenditure, and his apparently frivolous preoccupation with games and plays”

unfortunate results on the morality of our youth.” In other words, the King warns that there are many versions of *farang*. They were not as socio-culturally homogenous as Siamese during that time tended to perceive them, as they had come to Siam from different classes and other socioeconomic backgrounds. The King had shown a strong preference for dealing with educated, middle-class, or elite Europeans, not just any *farang*.

The *Farang* had served as an index to civilization in King Vajiravudh’s thoughts. Like his grandfather and father, the King considered that Siam was ranked lowly in the international ladder of civilization. He felt that through his nationalist program and Buddhist morality, Siam must be uplifted in order to attain these privileges and, thus, become on par with the Europeans and Americans. The King maintained that “...Thais should not hate foreigners, but should just not trust them completely” (cited in Greene 1970:256). This statement seems to underscore the long history of Siamese rulers and elite views of the *farang*, which has had its roots in the premodern kingdom of Ayutthaya.³³ It is also applicable to what continued to occur in the subsequent reigns.

Farang on the Ground: 1932-the Present

Siamese rulers and elite have played prominent roles in localizing and redefining the *farang* to suit Siam’s preexisting cultural worlds and its modernization project. However, it would be an incomplete story without taking a look at how *farang* have been perceived in contemporary popular culture and how the constructed discourses of the *farang* have shaped their cultural identities, especially in the second half of 20th-century Siam.

Distant and Suspicious Others. *Farang* influences on popular culture did not become evident in a wider scale until the end of the reign of King Rama III. According to Wright (2004:114-115),

³³Sombat Chanthongwong and Chai-anan Samudvanija (1980:352) assert that the relationships between Siam and the West in the reigns of King Narai and King Mongkut are primarily different for two reasons. First, the western countries which came into contact with Ayutthaya were not technologically or scientifically advanced as they became later. The industrial revolution had not yet begun. And second, the West and Ayutthaya were under absolute monarchy, while in the 19th century, the Western countries had become democratic and Siam still remained a monarchy.

farang had been viewed as lowly fortune-seeking travelers, traders, and missionaries who were markedly different from Siamese. They had not produced much intellectual or technological influence on Siam at least during the first three reigns of Bangkok era. Until their imperial intents and victories over some regional powers like Burma, China, Japan, and Vietnam came to materialize in the early and mid-19th century, *farang* cultural and political influences had hardly produced significant effects in the cultural landscape of Siam. Siam had continued to subscribe to its traditional Traibhumi Buddhist worldviews. In their view, the most important foreign cultural and political forces in the world were not *farang*, but China and other immediate neighbors. *Farang* were just one of several foreigners from far away lands who came to settle in Siam. They had yet contributed substantially to the formation of the Siamese proletariat economy and culture in the early Bangkok period, as Nidhi Aeusriwongse (1995; 2002:4-75; 2004:36-39) has convincingly argued in his study of literary works of the period.

Images of *farang* began to appear in some major literary works during the early Bangkok period. In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (1970:1076), an Ayutthayan folk tale which was recomposed and recorded in early Bangkok, *farang* are mentioned briefly in a gathering of multiple-ethnocultural crowd witnessing the fight between Plai Chumphon and a magician disguised as a crocodile. In the crowd, there are Khmer, Mon, Burmese, Vietnamese, Karen, Chinese or Chek, Thai, Laos, Khaek and *Farang*. As compared to other neighboring peoples, *farang* were the least-mentioned in the story, indicating their cultural distance from and unfamiliarity to ordinary Siamese in those days. In *Phra Aphaimani* (1974), Sunthonphu's master poetic story written in the early 19th century, *farang* as characters, places, and things are mentioned extensively throughout the story. However, they are mostly imagined and fictitious *farang* rather than historical or genuine ones. The most frequently presented representation of *farang* in Sunthonphu's story are *Farang-Langka* (the Westerner from Ceylon), *Farang-Angkrit* (English), and Sangkharat-Bat Luang (Catholic priest). Prince Damrong (1963:60) reminds us that Sunthonphu might have acquired knowledge and perception pertinent to 'real *farang*' during his lifetime. In 1815, Ceylon or Muang Langka was occupied by the British. He might have drawn from foreign news and included this in his literary work as *farang* places and characters. In addition, the Catholic priests, naval ships, weapons, and other *farang* inventions which he described intensively in the story, might already have been known among the Siamese public in early 19th century. However,

Damrong cautions that there exists a distance between reality and imagination in terms of “geographical knowledge and customs concerning *farang*” (Ibid.: 62) in Sunthonphu’s work.³⁴

In these literary representations, *farang* are depicted as somewhat distant, strange, and suspicious. This view partly resembles that of their royal elite counterparts discussed earlier. Davisakd Puaksom (2002) argues that throughout the whole story of *Phra Aphaimani*, Sunthonphu views “other people” such as, Khaek, Java, Malayu, Farang, Angkrit, Wilanda (Dutch), Singhon (Singhalese), Makkasun (Makassarese), or Tamil with very suspicious eyes. Their given otherness qualities include barbaric race (*chat Tamil*), unreliable Lankan tongue (*lin Langka*), non-Buddhist beliefs (*nok phra satsana*), having a different language, religion, and blood-ties, and being Makassarese devils (*yaksa Makkasun*). *Farang* was also certainly an index of otherness and difference in the popular perception. The Siamese representations of *farang* and other people are even more evident in *Klong Tang Phasa [A Poem on People of Different Races]*, which is part of the inscriptions at Wat Phra Chetuphon. At least three *farang* races (Wilanda/Dutch, Italian, and Farangset/French) are carefully crafted and poetically displayed, with an emphasis of their stereotypically fixed images in the eyes of Siamese elite, intended for their fellow Siamese audiences from all walks of life. The Dutch are mentioned as seafaring specialists, who strongly believe in Christ as the Creator and dress like the English. The Italian also dress like the English and reside in the south of the Western seaside. The French are inscribed as dressing in luxurious clothes wearing watches and other ornaments. France is located near England, and the country is enormous and populous. They have command over a Sepoy-style military unit (see Davisakd Puaksom 2003a: 122). These elite-generated representations of *farang* in *Klong Tang Phasa* were further popularized and registered in the minds of ordinary Siamese in the subsequent reigns through folk performances like *likae*. (see Suraphon Wirunrak 1995)

The *Farang* have also been incorporated into Siamese popular culture through intercultural communication and other forms of day-to-day cultural contacts. In *Ratchakitchanubeksa, Ratchakan Thi 4* (2540:180-190), King Mongkut, on the occasion of receiving a Portuguese

³⁴Nidhi Aeusriwongse (2002:31) points out that Sunthonphu uses the whole Asian continent as a literary space in *Phra Aphaimani*. These are rather real and reachable geographical spaces, which fit neatly to the emerging Siamese proletariat’s immediate experience and imagination. Davisakd Puaksom (2002) reads *Phra Aphaimani*’s geographical spaces as maritime states in Asia, where people’s lives are centered on maritime activities. For more detailed discussion of this issue, see Khun Wichitmattra (?).

envoy, provided a brief history of the Catholic Portuguese who had settled in a community and married with local women in Siam since the Ayutthaya period. They were culturally localized and harmoniously co-resided along with the Siamese. Their racially-mixed children were called “*farang kudi chin*,” which means *farang* who were born from the mixed marriage with Chinese and living along the Kudichine canal in the Thonburi area. They had been actively involved in trade and other economic and cultural activities throughout the first three reigns of the Bangkok dynasty. These Portuguese served as soldiers, translators, sailors, and even doctors in Siam. They were perhaps signifiers of early *farang*-Siamese hybrid influences, which were to characterize Siamese/Thai popular cultures in twentieth century.

Muang Nok [Foreign Countries], Khong Nok [Foreign Goods], Nakrien Nok [Graduates from Foreign Countries] and Hua Nok [Foreign/Western-Oriented Person]

During this period, following the example of the royal elite, the ordinary Thai also rapidly began to highly value *farang* material culture and commodities. Kanchanakhaphan (Khun Wichitmatra) (1997:66-73) describes how people in Bangkok during the reign of King Chulalongkorn desired and consumed *farang* goods and how imported *farang* and other foreign goods had become part of everyday life by the turn of century. Based on his childhood memoirs from during the latter part of the reign, he believed that the reign of this great king was “the period when *Muang Thai* had begun to have many new modern, *farang* things available to ordinary people” (Ibid.:66).³⁵ Among the modern things that excited Siamese people in those days were imported goods sold in several Indian and *farang* department stores (*hang khaek/hang farang*), the telegraph, trams, steam-engine boats, *farang*-style uniformed police, and movie theaters. Imported, luxurious goods available in expensive *farang* stores were immensely welcomed by the elite and well-to-do people. Consuming *farang* goods ignited a sense of cosmopolitan pleasure, which marked their new cultural identities and confirmed their social status in those days. Chai Ruangsinn (1974 cited in Somrak Chaisingkananon 2001:99-100) provides a picture of how the Bangkok elite were excited with and enthusiastically responded to imported *farang* goods.

When the carriers from foreign countries arrived in Bangkok, the royal elite and nobles were the first group rushing to buy luxurious goods before anyone else. The best-sold and popular items include fashionable clothes, hats, suits, white shirts, gold

³⁵ My own translation.

buttons, neck-ties, watch straps, pants, socks, shoes, and *farang*-style kitchenware like spoons, forks, plates, bowls, towels, napkins, and table-cloths. Young royal elite with a good command of the English language from almost all palaces usually placed their orders for English books, news magazines, and other journals. The king and most nobles preferred to build *farang*-style palaces, so they needed imported photographs or paintings to decorate the wall. They adopted western table-manners using spoons, forks, knives, and napkins during meals. This consuming-*farang*-thing pattern has become fashionable. Whoever wishes to pursue a status of ‘modern person’ (*khon samai mai*) has to follow the trend.³⁶

This vivid account provides an insight into how *farang* things had been highly valued among the royal elite class in Bangkok. This fashionable trend also spread to ordinary people, especially the emerging of wealthy Chinese merchants and educated Siamese who were products of modern education, which began to grow and expand during the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

Consuming or adopting *farang* goods/culture by the royal elite and the ‘modern person’ could be understood through this set of Thai terms: *muang nok* (foreign/western countries), *khong nok* (foreign goods), and *hua nok* (foreign-oriented mind). *Muang nok* refers to European countries and some of their colonies in Asia. It indicates the place of the origin of civilization, where *khong nok* (highly valued foreign goods) are produced. *Hua nok* or modern-minded people are Siamese who keep up with the trends through the intensive consumption of foreign goods and the adoption of *farang*’s ways of life. *Hua nok* persons originally referred to exclusive and privileged groups of people who studied abroad, mainly the royal children and siblings from well-to-do families. These terms indicate that *farang* culture had firmly established itself through and as objects of desire and fashionable identities. It should be noted here that the Siamese primarily preferred to consume, imitate, or possess *farang* things and culture in their own ways. They had yet to fantasize or romanticize about *farang* as real people. Racially-mixed marriage and children were still unacceptable in those days. It was very controversial when Prince Chakrabongse married a Russian lady and King Chulalongkorn was reportedly upset with his son’s interracial wedding (see Chula Chakrabongse 2540). In his second trip to Java in 1901, the

³⁶My own translation. For a first-hand account of luxurious life in a Siamese noble palace, see Chula Chakrabongse (1997).

King himself calls the children born to the marriage between *farang* and indigenous people whom he observed in Bandung as “*farang kreung chat*” (half-blooded *farang*) (Chulalongkorn n.d.:74).

An additional way to observe the overall *farang* influences among Siamese elite, middle class and urban commoners in the early and mid-20th century is through novels. In her studies of social thoughts as it is represented in the novels published in the reign of King Rama VII (1925-1935), Em-om Hiranrat (1996:89-90) shows how *farang* influences in the forms of *maung nok*, *khong nok*, and *hua nok* are repeatedly displayed. Novelists like Dokmaisot, Yos Chatcharasathien, and Momchao Akartdamkeung Rabibhadana reflected on how Siamese society placed high social values on *muang nok*, *khong nok*, and *narien nok*. Western European countries like Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States were seen as the place where one can go and acquire *farang*-like civilized manners. Proclaims the protagonist in *The Circus of Life* written by Akartdamkeung Rabhibadana (1995:61), “Foreign [Western European] countries are Paradise, Your Lordship. Compared to them, our country is like Hell.” Young men and graduates from these countries are highly desirable and eligible in the local marriage market, while they are guaranteed a short-cut passage to success, especially in their government service career. In addition, the Western social manners and ways of life are regarded as part of Siam’s high culture. Modern, educated persons had to acquire *farang* manners as a social license to enter Bangkok’s high society, even if they did not go to school abroad.

Key western ways of life popular among elite and middle class people in Bangkok included European-style dress, mixing some English jargon in social conversation, dancing and partying with foreigners, having English-style tea parties, going to movies at night or enjoying horse-races over the weekend with foreigners (Ibid.:111-112). Wisoot, a character in *The Circus of Life*, makes this following strong vow to himself to go abroad and study in England, “even if I had to die over it”.

I was too determined to go abroad to worry about the final consequences. I wanted to learn the secret of other countries’ advanced development. I wanted to learn why those who returned from abroad looked so prosperous, clever and smart, and gained high salaries and prestige quicker than anyone else. I wanted to discover the celestial

pool of gold in which Thai students abroad took a dip before returning home gilded from head to toe. Since I did not have enough money to take a full dip, I only asked to be able to see that gold font —seeing it would be enough. Even if I had to die over it, it would have been worth living for such a death. (Akartdamkeung Rabibhadana 1995:68-69)

However, the Siamese craze for *farang* culture has not been a one-sided story. From time to time, negative views and concerns over being too submissive to western ways of life have been expressed as a parallel or reality-check to the fashionable trend. In the reign of King Rama V, Thienwan (1842-1915) was among the few Siamese intellectuals/commoners, who openly worried about the foreigners' domination and control over Siam's economy. Since Siamese, from the royal elite down to the commoners, had a strong desire to work in the civil service, the Kingdom's economy would be in the hands of foreigners, especially *farang* and Chinese. He expressed his views clearly in his periodicals, *Tulawiphak Photchanakit* and, later, *Siri Photchanaphak*, where he presented a series of provocative social thoughts and critiques to the public. He even set himself up as an example to encourage the Siamese to get involved in trade and running other business. (Sombat Chanthonwong and Chai-anan Samudavanija 1980:323-324)

Encountering *farang* culture could be a moment of self-doubt and reassessment of Siamese cultural roots. This is a consciousness which gives birth to conservative and nationalist reactions to *farang*-ness. In the novel, *Khvam Phit Krung Raek [A First-Time Mistake]* (Dokmaisot cited in Em-on Hiranrat 1996:27-28), a character comments on *farang*-like behavior among young people in early 20th- century Siam that "...we cannot blame *farang* all the time. There are some good things in *farang* culture. Why don't we adopt them? It's not right for young men who came back from *Muang Farang* to refuse to perform proper greeting (*wai*), sitting, and other traditional manners, while young ladies know only how to make up their face." The reflexive question here is whether it is true that *farang* are superior to Us-Siamese/Thai. Or is this due to our own willingness to favor them. This line of thought is part of critical minds as shown in *Phiew Laung, Phiew Khao [Yellow Skin, White Skin]* (Akartdamkeung 1975).

Luk Kreung and Mia Farang [Racially-Mixed Children and the Farang's Wife]. *Luk Kreung* and *Mia Farang* are post-Vietnam War products of Thai-Farang intimacy, which reflect a high

degree of intensive physical and cultural manifestations superseding prior generations. A number of recent studies have explored the complex discourse of *farang* on contemporary Thailand's national, gender, and sexual identities (Jackson and Cook 1999; Mills 1999; Reynolds 1999; Van Esterik 2000; Weisman 2000). These studies seem to agree on a thesis that, in the second half of twentieth century and the first decade of this millennium, *farang* influence in making and reshaping Thai national and cultural identities have not only extended to a greater degree of globalized intensification, but have also involved an intimate level of hybridization in both cultural and physical manifestations. Through a close study of the historical development of the racially-mixed children phenomena, Weisman (2000:336) argues that "the current *luk kreung* boom is the latest example of the traditional Thai tolerance of diversity... [It also] reveals that the Thai fascination with, and exaltation of, *luk kreung* and *luk kreung*-ness is intricately tied to issues of modernity, sexuality, and race." In other word, the Thai's craze for *farang* things has been deeply articulated in material, mental, and physical terms. This should be seen as the latest steps of *farangization* of Thai-self at both individual and national levels.

Although the interracial marriages between *farang* and Thai and the *luk kreung* had been common in Siam since the Ayutthaya period, this did not become a widespread sociocultural phenomenon. Such marriages were limited to small groups of people involved in the cultural contact zones such as, the Christians, the Chinese, and those working closely with *farang*. In some rare cases, *farang*-Thai unions happened among elite or high-ranking couples (see Weisman 2000: Chapters 4, 5, and 6). However, interracial contacts became wide-scale social practice in the post-WWII decades when American GIs were stationed in the US military bases in upcountry Thailand. The relationships between GI servicemen and poor Thai women from the countryside brought about turbulent cultural changes in the Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s. They were the watershed of the controversial "*luk kreung*" problem in Thailand, which can be seen in a number of novels, TV series, and movies, such as, *Khao Nok Na [Rice Outside the Paddy Field]* (Sifa 1976) and *Phuying Khon Nan Chue Bunrod [Woman's Name Is Boonrawd]* (Botan 1996). These racially-mixed relationships added at least two new dimensions to the ongoing discourses of *farang* in Thailand. First, it was the *first* time in Thailand's modern history that the *farang* and their physical manifestations expanded beyond urban centers and mixed more significantly with Thai women, who usually came from poor families and rural backgrounds. Second, the allure of *farang*-ness began to gain a new momentum through the negotiation of the

meanings and values of *luk kreung*'s hybridities. The *luk kreung* from the Vietnam War-era may not be seen as desirable, especially those of African-American descent, and have to endure hardship and discrimination, but they paved the way for the 'Caucasian/White Amerasian/Eurasian *luk kreung* boom' in Thailand's entertainment industry in the subsequent decades.

From the 1980s up to the present, Thailand has discovered *luk kreung*, either born to a Caucasian father or mother, as representatives of a modern form of Thainess. Argued Weisman (2000:336), "Modern Thainess, presented in the form of *luk kreung*, is constructed as being cosmopolitan and self-confident, successful and beautiful, prepared to take its place alongside other 'modernities' on the global stage." This new form of marketable Thainess is made possible through the beauty pageants, show business, advertisement and entertainment industries (see Van Esterik 2000). With the power of mass media-saturated consumerism, a large number of Eurasian and Amerasian *luk kreung* have become successful actors and actresses, supermodels, pop singers, and famous social personalities in Thailand. They in turn have continued the allure of *farang* in the making of Thailand's popular culture, which started with the Siamese's craze for *farang* things and social manners indicating a civilized status more than a century ago (see Pattana Kitiarsa 2003).

The allure of Thai-*Farang Luk Kreung*-ness has continued to dominate Thai popular media and become a common part of everyday life scenes. Take the 2003-2004 TV series and novel, *Molam Summer [The Summer-Time Northeast Thai Folk Singer]* (Arita 2002) as an example. Deauden, a teenage daughter of a Thai nurse from Ubon Ratchathani and an American engineer growing up and living in New York, takes a trip to visit her grandmother in Ubon for a summer. She has by chance becomes a leading *molam* singer for a troupe run and operated by her maternal relatives. With her cosmopolitan looks and self-confidence plus a much-crazed Thai-white American appearance, she gained a *lukthung-molam*³⁷ superstardom during the short period she spent in Isan. Local and national audiences immediately fall in love with her performance and

³⁷*Lukthung/molam* refers to one of popular musical genre in contemporary Thailand. It includes a wide-range of songs and musical performances from the countryside of all regions and thus reflects folk life and musical-cultural voices from rural agricultural villages and small towns. Isan or the Northeast region has been widely known for its musical wealth and dynamic contribution to the *lukthung/molam* musical industry.

suddenly *lukthung-molam*, especially *molam sing*³⁸ has become a pop musical genre nationwide. Despite its comedic tones, *Molam Summer* offers a contemporary Thai fascination and fantasy of cultural intimacy between two cultural extremes in their cultural landscapes, namely, *Farang* and *Isan*. The former represents the most cosmopolitan, modernized, and globalized portion of Thainess, while the latter has long been considered a cultural backwater or otherness in the eyes of the elite and urban middle class. A Thai/Isan-American *luk kreung* performing a trademark of Thai Isan or Thai-Lao cultural identities under the pleased gazes of national prime-time TV audiences signifies at least how the Thai popular media could lead their national audience to consciously imagine and juxtapose their cultural self on the world stage. As Deaunden happily ends her summer-time love story with a young Sino-Thai owner and operator of an entertainment record business from Bangkok, it points to the fact that Thailand's middle class has increasingly asserted themselves as contenders and conquerors of the cultural landscapes of Thainess. The most influential and loudest voices directing the appropriation of national and cultural identities in recent decades have come from the middle class through the mass media machinery. Their voices are even more forceful than those belonging to the Thai state agencies.

The latest wave of Thai-*Farang* union, which has been notably invisible in Thailand countryside in the past few decades, is the interracial marriage between women from rural villagers and mostly white *farang* men from Europe and the US (Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya 2005). This notable practice has become a social phenomenon particularly in the rural villages in Isan or the Northeastern region, where the high degree of seasonal ex-migration for off-farm jobs in the cities and overseas has continued for decades. Of course, most *farang* men and Isan women met and developed their relationships in the cities, tourist attraction sites and elsewhere. In many cases, they were introduced via networks of friends and relatives. Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya (2005:3) suggests that Isan women who have married Western men and migrated to live abroad with their *farang* husbands have maintained "...a strong sense of belonging and connection to their home villages... [and] created a social space where traditions, norms and practices of gender roles and relations, marriage and sexuality have been exposed to inquiry and negotiations." In other words, these women have found themselves being caught in the midst of the latest hybridized allure between the rural Thai-Isan and Western traditions.

³⁸*Molam sing*, literally Isan *racing molam/folk singer*, refers primarily to a modernized *molam* genre involving fast-beat rock-style music, electric instruments, and eclectic performance involving young audiences like the modern rock concert. It is quite recent, and can be traced back only to the mid-1980s (see Suriya Smutkupt et al 2001).

The cultural signification behind this interracial marriage of *farang* men and Isan women is not the financial reasons as reported in the press and as suggested by local government agencies and the press (see “*Ruang Mia Farang...*” 2004:102). This type of interracial marriage helps redefine the Thai cultural and national identities in the way that is suitable for the borderless and globalized age. It shows that cultural and national identities can be sited beyond the borders and controls of a nation-state. It has established a form of hybridized culture and border-crossing identities, where the distinction between Thai-ness and *Farang*-ness or the Orient and the Occident, has increasingly overlapped and become blurred. It has also increasingly engendered Thailand as a passive and docile feminine entity. More importantly, coupling with the ongoing *luk kreung* boom in the advertisement and entertainment industry, it shows how deeply and profoundly the discourse of *farang* have been penetrating into the heart and soul of Thainess against the country’s historical backdrop. Our definitions of Thainess from now onwards must be awkwardly incomplete without taking *farang* into account, given the fact that *farang* have been transformed and transported from being superior but distant and suspicious others to intimated modernized/globalized segments of Thai-self.

“Farang” in Current Thai Academic Discourses

The *farang* have maintained their special place in Thailand’s intellectual and popular history. Like Prince Damrong, Thienwan, and their predecessors in early twentieth century, a number of modern Siamese intellectuals, e.g., Luang Wichit, Pridi Phanomyong, Kukrit Pramoj, and Sulak Sivaraksa³⁹ had been in one way or another critical of *farang* influences on the making of Thai identities. Sulak Sivaraksa (1980:197), for example, has asserted for decades that:

³⁹It is ironic to note that all these public intellectuals were educated in Europe or had intensive contacts with *farang* through work and travels (Thienwan—see Sombat Chanthornwong and Chai-anan Samudavanija 1980:316-373). In many cases, the Thai critiques on *farang* influences are made possible through their *farang*-trained or self-acquired Western knowledge and methodology. Sulak Sivaraksa (1995:52) reminded his readers that we (the Thai) have been brained-washed to perceive that “*farang* is a good thing (*farang pen khong dii*).” The Thai fail miserably to capture the foundation of *farang*-ness. Insists Sulak, “to understand *farang*, it is fundamental to capture the roots of their Greco-Judaic civilization, which only very few Western-trained Thai have come to realize” (Ibid.). Separately, he observes that “indeed, the studies of Muang Thai with *farang* methodologies began after the Second World War or during the time I studied in England. For I was different from my fellow Thai students (*narien nok*), I would not allow *farang* [professors] to teach me about Thai studies stuff. This is perhaps due to my arrogance and ego-centricism...” (Sulak Sivaraksa 1997b:2).

For Thai to accept Occidental ways uncritically may be disastrous. But this is what is happening. We Thais are copying from America and Europe without foreseeing the possible results.

What Sulak describes as “Occidental ways” has been entering the life and consciousness of the Siamese since their early encounters with the Westerners in the Ayutthaya period (see So Plainoi 1995; Wyatt 1984:88). In one of his recent works, Sulak asserts that Siam since the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) has been losing its faith in Buddhism and other traditional ethical and moral strengths. Concludes Sulak, “the more has Siam followed *farang* ways, the less has it been able to retain Buddha’s Dhammic principles” (Sulak Sivaraksa 1997a:24).⁴⁰ Occidental or *farang* ways are apparently perceived as overwhelmingly mundane, and thus, morally flawed. The notable dichotomy lying behind Sulak’s reasoning is the Buddhist-based distinction between the ‘secular’ (*lokiya*; Pali *laukika*) and ‘spiritual/religious’ (*lokuttara*; Pali *lokottara*) matters. Siamese rulers and intellectuals have for centuries maintained that while *farang* are more superior in mundane/secular matters (*thang lok*), Siam is far stronger in the spiritual or moral (*thang tham*) realm (see Davisakd Puaksom 1997, 2003a).⁴¹

One of the latest intellectual projects by a Thai scholar to reassess the allure of *farang* in the making of Thai national and cultural identities is a series of widely criticized works on postwesternism and critiques of Western thought by Theerayuth Boonmi (2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2003c).⁴² Basically, Theerayuth Boonmi (2003a:5) argues that the West has overwhelmingly dominated the Rest including Thailand in all aspects of human knowledge and social life. “Westernism” or the Western-centric knowledge and methodologies have brought the West into the economic, political and cultural supremacies over the Rest in the past few centuries. To overcome this “deep colonialist” paradigm, he proposes that Thailand and the Rest need to go

⁴⁰My own translation.

⁴¹ For further discussion on the contests for interpretation of Thainess and *farang* influence on the decline of Thai civilization in the names of modernity, capitalism, and consumerism, see Thongchai Winichakul (1994:9-12).

⁴² Among many critics of Theerayuth Boonmi’s works, Wright (2004:24-25) points out that Theerayuth’s deconstruction of the West is “an old whisky in a new bottle.” There is nothing new in criticizing the West and reconsidering Thailand’s alternative paths. To him, Thailand has become ‘the slave of the West’ not because the Thais have embraced too much Western knowledge and culture, but because they have learned too little [or too superficially] about the West. The Thais mostly gained false knowledge and images of *farang* through Hollywood and Disneyland. “Nowadays the Thais look at *farang* with confused and frustrated eyes. On the one hand, *farang* are seen as respectable, enviable, and good examples, and on the other hand, they are wicked, barbaric, frightened, and disgusting.” (Ibid.:24). See further critiques on Theerayuth’s works in Thongchai Winichakul (2003).

beyond Western domination. Thailand has to develop its own development vision and alternative path to the future in the name of postwesternism.

The West has created modernism and postmodernism. The former colonized countries have enjoyed their own postcolonialism. [Therefore], Thailand must produce postwesternism. (Ibid.:28)⁴³

The postwestern-oriented Thai society, insists Theerayuth, should be able to optimize its own choices of Thainess based on cosmopolitan knowledge, values, and identities produced by the culturally diverse groups of Thai people as well-informed civic members of the world community.

Theerayuth Boonmi's disjointed and oversimplified works represent an updated version of Thai reflections on the *farang* supremacy and domination over aspects of contemporary social life. While they appear to outline a systematic criticism and intellectual engagement with trends of Western thoughts, their major thesis fit well with the country's widely-accepted conservative and nationalist discourses on the Thainess (see Reynolds 1993; Thongchai Winichakul 1994). They may not offer brand-new or provocative thoughts to excite the Thai public or academic community, but they certainly help redefine and renew the dynamic positions of *farang* as superior but suspected Other in the Thai construction of knowledge and values (see Manas Chitakasem and Turton 1991). *Farang* influences indeed have produced far-reaching impacts on both the material and consciousness levels of Thai society. The 'Thai-selves' at both individual and national layers have been defined and redefined, shaped and reshaped, through the productive, 'love-hate' dialogues with *farang*, more profoundly than any other foreigners.

In responding to Prawet Wasi, Sulak Sivaraksa, Theerayuth Boonmi, and other contemporary Thai intellectuals, Wright (2004a, 2004b) harshly reminds them that it is unfair and illogical to make *farang* and other foreign nationalities scapegoats for Thailand's problems. He does not agree with the proposition that Thailand has been dominated by *farang* influences. It is wrong to conclude that the Thai have 'accepted' *farang* knowledge and culture either too far or too much. It is not true that Thailand is too dependent on the West. Instead, Thailand, as he believes, has

⁴³My own translation.

learned too little and too superficially about the West or the *Farang*. Like the message from Manee and other key Siamese characters in *Thawiphop*, Thai intellectuals, officials, media, and the public seem to be too quick to blame other people and refuse to critically soul-search for their own genuine solutions to existing problems for a better future.

Contemplating this aforementioned public debate, I argue that examining issues involving *farang* and their genealogical connotations in the shaping and reshaping of Thai national and popular identities should enrich our understanding of the ongoing politics of identities in contemporary Thailand. Reversing the Saidian Orientalist thesis and revising some recent findings by the Thai Orientalizing project (Davisakd Puaksom 2003a; Thanet Aphornsuvan 2004a, 2004b; Thongchai Winichakul 2000a, 2000b), I argue that *farang* should be understood as an elite-led as well as media-saturated popular Occidentalizing projects resulting from historically-rooted and culturally-situated experiences of contacts between Siam/Thailand and the West. After all, Thongchai Winichakul (1995:35-36) reminds us to ask ourselves what it matters if we (the Thai) have become increasingly *farang*-like. It is the elite and educated, middle class people who raise the issues of being Thai and complain about the vanishing of Thainess, while the rest of the populace rarely do so, because they still live close to their 'Thai-Thai' life. Thainess is well kept in their everyday lives. They hardly see *farang* as a threat or an enemy to the foundation of Thai identities, at least not as strongly as what the conservative or radical Thai middle class or elite have suggested in the past few decades.

Conclusion

Farang influences on Siamese national and cultural identities are intellectual and ethnocultural projects which counter Said's Orientalism. The influential Orientalist logic has been turned inside-out by Siamese rulers, elites, intellectuals, as well as the populace. The logical principles of Siamese Occidentalism may be similar to those of the West in their Orientalist project, but their intentions, limitations, and implications are not always the same. Siamese elites and leaders have never projected *farang* as objects of colonial conquest. The familiar theme for them was to imagine *farang* as suspiciously mixed objects of worldly desire, who are morally and spiritually

condemned. Siam has been aware that *farang* are immensely more superior and powerful, and that Siam needs a way to contend with them.

Throughout this ‘tentative’ historical exploration, my first thesis on *farang* as a Siamese Occidentalism is that, *farang* and *farang*-ization are a historically-rooted and culturally-grounded system of knowledge and power production, which has been defined and redefined itself over the course of the Siamese modernization process. The *farang* is a product of modernity, which has been hybridized and thus postmodernized in its recent development context. In this respect, I concur with Canclini (1995:2) who argues that “the uncertainty about the meaning and value of modernity derives not only from what separates nations, ethnic groups, and classes, but also from the sociocultural hybrids in which the traditional and the modern are mixed.” *Farang*-ization has exposed the uncertainty and anxiety among the Thai over their own modernizing/postmodernizing project. I believe that this is the real significance of the discourse of *farang* in the Occidentalizing project originally initiated by Siamese royal elites, officials and later middle-class consumers driven by the mass media. The *farang*’s most important contribution to the making of Thai-self has been their role in the production of hybridized knowledge and power, thereby giving rise to continued dialogues concerning the Kingdom’s path to modernity. National and cultural identities are part of the modernity project and the discourse of *farang* has illustrated that this project has been hybridized in most aspects. In short, *farang* and *farang*-ness could be both an entrance of as well as exit for the Thai/Siamese in their Occidentalizing efforts. They serve as a reminder that the politics of Thai identities are terribly one-sided and incomplete without a careful consideration of *farang* and other forms of non-Thai otherness. They also tell us that Siam or Thailand is very capable of producing its own version of the Occidentalizing project and that the Occidentalized self has not come from a far-away land of the West. It has been nurtured and grown healthily here and there in the borderlands or in the ‘contact zones.’⁴⁴ (Saldivar 1997:13-14)

My second thesis is derived from my attempt to portray *farang* as a Siamese tactical method in their negotiations to locate their cultural and national selves along with/against the Western-initiated projects in the names of colonization, modernization, and globalization. In his argument

⁴⁴For Pratt (1992:6), ‘contact zone’ is the space for colonial encounters. It is “...the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

for “Asia as method” based on Taiwanese and Northeast Asian experiences, Chen (2003:880) suggests that “Asia and the Third World could become a method for us to begin to shift our sites of identification and multiply frames of references.” By appropriating Chen’s suggestion, I consider *farang* as a method to rethink and reframe the references of Thai-self. *Farang* has been employed as a tactic or method employed by Siamese or Thai agents to deal with superior, but suspicious Others like the West. I argue that this is a culturally-defined means as well as a political tactic consciously and intentionally employed to place meanings and values of *farang* Otherness in the changing landscape of Siamese worlds. In short, *farang* as a form and strategy of elitist Occidentalism constitutes cultural practice in the service of the project of power.

My understanding of *farang* as method is far different from anti-*farang*/anti-West sentiments, which have been proposed by a number of Thai intellectuals and activists in the post-1997 economic crisis period for two reasons.⁴⁵ First, after centuries of contacts with *farang*, “the West has been inside our subjectivity, by having been our common reference point, and therefore there is nothing for or against” (Chen 2003:881). From however Thainess is defined, *farang* influences are simply inevitable. Thainess is incomplete without the allure of *farang*-ness. One can never deny this reality. Second, Siamese/Thai by and large have positioned *farang* in dubious or ambiguous ways, not oppositional or binary as generally understood by a number of Thai scholars. Since the West has been considered as more powerful and aggressive, especially since the 19th century, *farang* have always been assigned with dubious meanings: they are dangerous but very useful, admirable but wicked, etc. They cannot be fixedly located either as an enemy or a friend in the politics of Thai identities over periods of time. *Farang* is therefore best to be kept as an elusive method bounded and situated in specific historical and cultural moments. Siam or Thailand has demonstrated that, together with its representation as a production system of knowledge and power, *farang* actually offer methods, which Siamese or Thai have employed to write about, debate against, consume or disregard, and remember or forget their powerful Western partners time and again, regardless of how much or how sufficient Siam or Thailand has learned and known about the West. No matter what, Siam like everyone else in the world, always has its own sets of knowledge and methods at hand and ready to work.

⁴⁵ See, for example, articles published in a series under the *Withi That* project like *Phalang Thai Lae Setthakit Mai [Thai Forces and New Economy]* (2001)

My final thesis is that the allure of *farang* in shaping and reshaping Thai cultural identities is by far more dynamic than what intellectuals and scholars imagine. I see the '*farang* on the ground' as a very productive and compelling site to produce meanings and values of what it tactically means to be Thai. It is true that *farang* have had deep influence in the defining of Thai selves, but what we should pay more attention to is the borderland junctions and their crossing-border activities between Thai and *Farang*, and Thai and other non-Thai otherness. *Farang* have traveled from far-away lands and from being dubious Others, and moved closer and closer to the heart of cultural and physical bodies of the Thai. Therefore, it is important that we know *farang* as our subject of knowledge and methodology. It is even more crucial that we know how to position ourselves in our narratives to localize *farang* and other forms of Otherness which have surrounded and overwhelmed us.

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