

Exploring King Vajiravudh's Official Nationalism through Art Discourse

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Abstract

Art, in all creative forms and productions, has played a leading role in shaping and constructing political ideologies, values and actions. Being influenced by its spatial-temporal dimensions, art often reflects social and political conditions by taking account of intentions, motivations, and reasons for human action. The ruling bodies and state leaders often arouse nationalistic emotions in their subjects and instill the populace's sentiment to maintain their status and position in society. This article explores the relationship between art and politics by addressing a distinctive form of official nationalism under King Vajiravudh, who sought to retain his political sovereignty by imposing political ideology on all his subjects through art discourse. The development of nationalism in the Thai context is relatively unique in many ways that further raised questions – What is the main concept of official nationalism under King Vajiravudh? In what way did he use art to promote nationalistic sentiments? This study aims to provide a textual and historical analysis of art as a political discourse of nationalism under King Vajiravudh. The main concept of his political ideology is to instill a new degree of commitment, loyalty and sacrifice to the nationalistic trinity of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy'. The king valued the concept of civilised pedigree and used heritage to stimulate nationalistic sentiments through the revival of traditional art and architecture as a part of heritage conservation. The main theme for his performing art was to strengthen and glorify the institution of absolute monarchy and to propagate the concept of national unity and patriotism with great pride in Siamese cultural heritage.

Keywords: King Vajiravudh; nationalism; political ideology; art discourse; heritage

Introduction

Nationalism in the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, in the Southeast Asian context, is often seen as an anti-colonialist development, where indigenous subjects in the occupied territories formulated their nationalist sentiment for the sake of securing independence from foreign rule along with the establishment of their own states (Smith, 1971). The foremost heroes in this region were normally native leader who was influenced by the ideology of nationalism through their modern knowledge from the West, which usually mobilized public support to resistance, hostile to colonialism and often to indigenous elite and determined to destroy it (Kasetsiri, 2018).

However, a new type of political development called “official nationalism” emerged as an anticipatory strategy adopted by the royal elite, notably czars and kings, who sought to strengthen their state by imposing their ideology for nationalism on all their subjects through *religion, language or culture* (Seton-Watson, 1977). In this sense, the relationship between art and politics has been receiving attention in academic research because art discourse potentially reflects and supports the political views of state leaders (King & Amnuay-ngernta, 2017). As art is a mediating form of political power, state leaders often arouse nationalistic emotions of their subjects and manoeuvre the populace’s sentiment to maintain their status and position in society (Coaldrake, 2002). Kratoska & Batson (1999) asserted that official nationalism was relatively unique in many ways that further raised questions about definitions, instructive comparisons, and models of nationalism.

Therefore, this article explores the relationship between art and politics by addressing the political ideology of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925). The main purpose of this study is to provide a textual and historical analysis of art as a political discourse of nationalism under King Vajiravudh.

Art is often seen as the reflection of social and political conditions, as it informs politics by shaping and constructing political ideologies, values and actions (Negash, 2004). Architecture and the built environment also serve as a visual metaphor for political ideologies running the institution it represents (Ismail & Zhaharin, 2017). We can read the political and social history of a city and the relationship between authority and people by observing an architectural style, scale, form, plan syntax, architectural details, ornaments, site, position, and its surroundings (El-Torky, 2018). The ruling bodies and state leaders symbolically make use of art and architecture to maintain their status and position in society by imposing their nationalistic ideology on all their subjects (Coaldrake, 1996). While we cannot make simple causal relations, we can still explore the complex connections between art and politics (Edelman, 1995). There are several reasons why art provides a site from where we can observe and experience aspects of political values (Negash, 2004).

1. Art takes account of the intentions, motivations, and reasons for human action. If politics is the realm of human affairs in which people take action rhetorically, then understanding their intentions, motivations, or reactions is by definition crucial.
2. Art is a privileged medium in the sense that it communicates knowledge about life at both the abstract level and at a deeper cultural level of meaning.
3. Literary and other texts are influenced by their spatial-temporal dimensions. This leads us to the reason for seeking the perspectives of art in informing politics. We cannot begin to talk about the concept of official nationalism during the reign of King Vajiravudh without considering the impact of colonialism and its aftermath, especially during the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

The research paper is structured into four parts. The emergence of official nationalism in Siam was investigated, followed by the main political concept of King Vajiravudh - the

nationalistic trinity of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy'. Then, the meaning of King Vajiravudh's ideology was interpreted through art and cultural discourse, and finally, how the king use performing arts and architecture as a tool to promote nationalistic sentiments.

The emergence of official nationalism

Benedict Anderson (1991) has suggested that Thailand, as the only Southeast Asian country to maintain independence from direct colonial rule, invented a distinctive form of *official nationalism*, as a device where by the Siamese elite sought to retain their political sovereignty by integrating the people in the name of the nation under their leadership. The Siamese elite imposed a standardised, homogeneous, centrally sustained high culture on their subjects in order to create a modern nation (Barme, 1993). Such official nationalism was variously referred to as *elite nationalism* or *sakdina nationalism* (Kratoska & Batson, 1999, p. 289), as initiated from the top down, from the monarchy to the mass of people.

The official nationalism in Siam was initiated by King Chulalongkorn during the 1880s and 1890s through a series of his modernisation policies developed along Western lines (Murashima, 1988). Reforming the political systems were made through the establishment of functional bureaucracy, which reduced the power of city lords, an introduction of military conscription, and the abolition of slavery (Wyatt, 1994). The king also sought to improve the tax collection system, whereby both the freed slaves and the general peasantry were required to pay a monetary head tax to the state. Due to these reforms, local loyalties and relationships were undermined and transferred towards the absolute monarchy, which sought to create a new, wider affiliation for its subjects by promoting the idea of the nation. In fact, it is a kind of process to become greatly intensified, formalised, and institutionalised by his successor, King Vajiravudh, who started moving all the policy levers of official nationalism: compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organised propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism....and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation (Anderson, 1991).

The absolute monarchy in Siam became shaky at the beginning of the twentieth century because of the structural problem within the absolutist system that failed to satisfy a young group of western-educated officials who called for political participation (Mead, 2004). It was impossible for the king to avoid criticism from the public, especially if he was not accepted and lacked *barami* (charisma) in political legitimacy. This may be true with King Vajiravudh who encountered difficulties in running his state affairs and later aggressively promoted nationalistic policies designed to instill in his subjects a new degree of commitment to three fundamental institutions: Chat (nation), Religion, and Monarchy.

A Key concept of King Vajiravudh's political ideology

Benedict Anderson (1991) stated that official nationalism was an attractive model for the traditional royal rulers who turned into modern ones. The state leaders ruled over their dynastic realms, inhabited by heterogeneous and largely illiterate populations. It was a self-protective policy, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial or dynastic interests by bringing their subjects to serve the interests of the state first.

The ideology of 'official nationalism' in Siam was fully developed by King Vajiravudh who was threatened by the modern bureaucrats (Mead, 2004). Despite his long-term education in Britain, King Vajiravudh was not convinced by European liberal democracy and parliament. Under the pseudonym of *Noila*, Prince Vajiravudh replied to newspaper critics who were asking to have a parliament like other civilised countries. To Prince Vajiravudh, the parliament was perceived as an utterly useless body of absurdity and confusion because the members spent

long hours in tedious debate and meaningless speech-making. He claimed that most Siamese was uneducated and lacked a profound knowledge of democracy; thus, it would be a high risk to have a single political group exercise power in the nation. He believed that there were no ethical politicians to work for the sake of public interests. Changing a political leader every term would also damage the country. Socialism was not suitable for Siam as there was no equality on earth. Rather, he addressed the roles of absolute monarchy based on the ancient Buddhist theory of kingship whereby social harmony could only be attained when the social members chose the most intelligent and capable among themselves as the leader or king to act on their behalf (Sattayanulak, 2019).

Giving a royal speech to his Wild Tiger Corps in 1911, King Vajiravudh sought to instill a new degree of commitment, loyalty, and sacrifice for the three fundamental institutions: Nation, Religion, and Monarchy. Green (1999) stated that the king was influenced by the British nationalistic trinity of 'God, King, and Country'. This slogan became the ideological foundation of the Thai government for many years to come (Sattayanulak, 2002).

One of the prominent features of his political ideology was the symbolic relationship of kingship and his sovereignty. According to King Vajiravudh (cited in Murashima, 1988), all people should be regarded as relatives and the monarch is a dignified member. The king is entrusted by the people with the sovereign power of the national community. Therefore, his kingship status is regarded as ultimately dependent on the will of the people, but once the people have entrusted the community role to him, they must then follow him absolutely. Regarding the relationship between the nation and the monarchy, he urged the Siamese people to be loyal to the king and protect the nation and the religion (Barme, 1993).

In King Vajiravudh's view, those who lack such loyalty should be considered as a person without a country (Vajiravudh, 1955, p. 88). Incidentally, those who harm the king must be regarded as those who harm the nation, destroy the dignity of the country, and break the peace and happiness of the community. He offered the following example:

"We are all in one boat. ...If we don't paddle and only sit back all the time, the dead weight in the boat will slow us down. Each person must decide whether to paddle and not argue with the helmsman or jump out of the boat and swim. If ballast for the boat is needed a chunk of stone is better than such a man because it won't argue with the helmsman" (Vajiravudh, 1955, p. 97 – 99).

In this sense, the helmsman was certainly the king, himself. He believed that the monarch was the primary strength of the nation because he not only steered the ship of state through troubled waters but also drew up the charts showing where the dangerous waters were.

On the relationship between nation and religion, King Vajiravudh asserted that Theravada Buddhism, the country's primary religion, was superior to those practiced elsewhere. In his view, adherence to Buddhist morality was the way to build a strong and prosperous nation. On the contrary, the lack of morality would erode a nation until it was finally destroyed (cited in Murashima, 1988, p. 93):

"...a nation insufficient in morality will become badly disordered and divided...When each member has no morality and does not care for justice...there must be conflicts and there can be no happiness among them. ...it becomes impossible to live together as a community which can only lead to the destruction of the national community".

In his view, those members of Thai society who abandoned the Buddhist faith were not really Thai (Barme, 1993). He further argued that individuals who rejected Buddhism or did not give the doctrine unqualified support were selfish and thought only of themselves. As a

result, they brought about disunity which would inevitably undermine the nation's independence.

However, Ishii (1986) argued that there is no evidence that the king was a particularly zealous student of Buddhist doctrine. His writings on Buddhism contained popular expositions of fundamentals rather than detailed studies of finer points of doctrine. Meanwhile, his lectures to the Wild Tiger Corps were an apologia for the 'Englishman' within and a self-presentation of Thai identity. Certainly, the king was an ardent defender of Buddhism; but there is ground for doubt whether he was truly able to internalise Buddhist values. Given the contradictions inherent in the king's positions, Ishii (1986, p. 163) concluded that "it might even be said that the higher he raised the voice of Buddhist propaganda, the clearer the image emerged of an 'Englishman' who could not fully become a Buddhist".

It was certain that the relationship between nation and religion was born of the struggle between his European influences and the traditional Siamese values by which he was destined to become king. The highly contrasting characteristics of his official nationalism were also manifested through his associated culture and art, especially architecture, to be discussed in the next section.

Official nationalism through art and culture discourse

The state of Siamese art and traditions was in decline at their lowest ebb in the late 19th century as the Siamese elite were most influenced by European exposure and anxious to make a good impression on Westerners (Vella, 1978). Social idealism in the royal court at that time was based on civilised Westernisation which greatly influenced traditional art and architecture. The Siamese elite was likely to reject the symbolism of the traditional cosmology embedded in traditional architecture. Similarly, traditional mural paintings on the three worlds of *Triphum* cosmology including detailed mystical animals were less seen in art and architecture.

King Vajiravudh criticised the blind importation of European political ideas as a cult of imitation summarised in the following (cited in Murashima, 1988, p. 95):

"Imitating Europeans blindly means becoming slaves to them...Imitating Europeans to be civilized is wrong because civilisation means having one's own creativity and independence of culture. We should imitate our glorious ancestors who were able to integrate and preserve our nation."

King Vajiravudh pointed out under the pseudonym 'Asvabahu', in his most penetrating article *Siamese Art* (1914), that the art of the country was like 'a poor invalid' because of a cult of Western imitation. The king asserted that "all sorts of vandalism have been committed against art, literature and morality in the name of civilisation". 'Asvabahu' definitely discouraged Siamese people from imitating the art of other nations because their definition of beauty might not be suitable for the Siamese. He also believed that traditional art could not flourish through the efforts of a few genuine art lovers only. Instead, it was the duty of all Siamese people to keep alive the national treasures, especially decorative painting, sculpture, metalwork, lacquerware, architecture, and art.

Feeling that Siam was threatened to lose a traditional pedigree, King Vajiravudh attempted to instill pride in traditional art associated with nationalism and conservation (Poshyananda, 1992). In order to impose the revival of traditional artistic endeavours, the king took on the role of a strong defender and patron of Siamese art for both aesthetic and nationalistic reasons (Wongsurawat, 2021). As a result, the Department of Fine Arts and the Arts and Crafts School was established in 1912 and 1923 respectively under the immediate supervision of the king, who attempted to develop national art and craftsmanship under one control. The king also encouraged studies in archaeology, literature, drama, and performing

arts. Furthermore, he sponsored a number of art fairs and supported international exhibitions of Siamese art and crafts, notably in Turin in 1911, in Berlin and Dresden in 1912, in Leipzig in 1914, and in San Francisco in 1915 (Poshyananda, 1992).

King Vajiravudh used Siamese history as a means of stimulating nationalism including addressing the need to preserve heritage sites, encouraging the production of historical artefacts, promoting the stories of the glorious past, and applying particular episodes or aspects of the past for his present purposes – strengthening his official nationalism (Vella, 1978). The king believed that there was a need for general appreciation and public support in order to ensure the survival of Siamese arts and crafts. This was not only for the sake of the real merits of the art itself but also for the sake of the nation - art was considered part and parcel of national life. He fully applied his nationalistic ideology in his own writings on history sprinkled with historical references and justifications. Such writings were freely applied to old institutions that he wished to preserve, especially for the monarchy, the nation, and the Wild Tiger Corps.

Revival of performing arts

One of King Vajiravudh's artistic forms that received great attention was traditional performing arts, as seen from his creative output of approximately 180 plays (143 in Thai and 37 in English). There is no doubt that the golden era of traditional and modern performing arts was during his reign; the king also saw the revival of Siamese drama, dance, and music as a part of the essence of preserving Siamese national culture (Rutnin, 1996).

The king himself performed two musical plays - *Phra Ruang* and *Wiwah Phra Samut* - at the seaside palace in Phetchaburi, and it is interesting to examine what the message the plays themselves reveal. He purposely centralised all royal entertainment and dramatic activities so as to use them, not only for his own pleasure and entertainment but also for his political ideology on official nationalism.

The main theme of his performing arts was to strengthen and glorify the institution of absolute monarchy and to propagate the concept of national unity and patriotism with great pride in Siamese cultural heritage (Rutnin, 1982). He attempted to instruct and enlighten Siamese people on the need to stir up duty, responsibility, and loyalty to the nation and to the king (Mina, 2015; Rutnin, 1996; Umavijani, 1981; Vella, 1974). Each play ends with a moral lesson or a speech by a main character highlighting moral virtues, national obligations, and sacrifice for the country and the monarchy.

King Vajiravudh utilised Siamese history to demonstrate the theme of national identity. He addressed the supremacy of the monarchy's status and roles by referring to only three successful predecessors: *Phra Ruang*, King Naraesuan, and King Taksin. In King Vajiravudh's eyes, these three monarchs were courageous, intelligent and, above all, natural leaders capable of inspiring confidence, commanding respect, and uniting the country. It seems that he aspired to exemplify the domination of unity and loyalty to the monarchy and to enhance the king's vital role in national security and independence.

Phra Ruang represented an attempt to create a national myth from the legendary figure of *Phra Ruang* who fought against the Khmer rulers and finally became king of Sukhothai during the 13th century. *Phra Ruang* called upon the Thai people (Phraratchaniphon Phra Ruang cited in Vella, 1974)

I ask only that we Thai not destroy our nation.
Let us unite our state, unite our hearts, into a great whole.
Thai - do not do harm or destroy Thai,
But combine your spirit and your strength to preserve the state
So that all foreign people
Will give us increasing respect

King Vajiravudh wrote three different versions of a play about this monarch as well as an account of his field trip to the remains of the ancient kingdom. These three versions are a traditional dance drama written in 1912, entitled *Khom Dum Din* (The Underground Khmer); the second version, a modern drama *Phra Ruang*, the best known and frequently performed, written in 1917; and the third version, a musical *Phra Ruang*, first presented in 1924 (Umavijani, 1981; Vella, 1978). All versions were performed on stage for larger audiences. The king himself played the role of Nai Man. All three versions have been published and performed many times.

The main themes of the play *Phra Ruang* included patriotism, unity, political power and the struggle to be free from foreign subjugation. King Vajiravudh purposely brought a legendary figure out of the shadows and gave him historical life as a glorious exemplar of Siamese virtues. The king learned how to combine goodwill with invention, and mercy with persuasion. Apparently, he had *Phra Ruang* as his imagined mentor in political ideas and administration, especially unity and solidarity among the Siamese people.

M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (1985) stated that King Vajiravudh, a bicultural monarch, encountered difficulties in creating a nationalistic sentiment and in the revival of traditional art. Because of his long-term education in Britain, the king had an inclination of confusing traditional and Western lifestyles, which was seen from what he was wearing while having meals. His passion for military grandeur in the English manner, including personal daily activities, clearly contrasted with his revival of Siamese royal traditions and ceremonies.

He insisted on wearing *pha nung* (wrapped-around pantaloons) for Thai luncheons in the traditional style (Rutnin, 1996). At night, he preferred a luxurious full-course dinner prepared by a Paris-imported chef. When the king dined with his courtiers, he had his new plays read aloud by royal pages at the royal dinner table. After dinner, there would be impromptu plays, games, rehearsals, play reading, music and other entertainment to keep the court alive until the early hours of the next morning.

It was this contradiction in his character and behaviour, being on the one hand traditionally Thai, and on the other hand forwardly Western, which often confused his associates. This also caused them to doubt his sincerity. However, King Vajiravudh should be given a great deal of credit for having initiated the performing arts. During his reign, the performing arts were no longer a ritual or merely an entertainment as in their traditional role. Rather, they became an artistic instrument to manifest his socio-political ideas for nationalistic ideology.

Revival of traditional architecture

In architecture, King Vajiravudh believed that there was a need to revise traditional styles after the excessive adoption of Western motifs. However, a question has arisen as to what extent his socio-political vision was associated with his practices in the revival of traditional architecture. It was certain that he hardly believed in the traditional cosmology of *Traiphum*. Instead, he valued the concept of civilised pedigree and used history to stimulate nationalistic notions (Khrouthongkhieo, 2020).

This practice was consistent with the social norm of that time, which was based on ideas of civilisation led by Westerners (Noobanjong, 2003). Chatri Prakitnonthakarn (2003) stated that King Vajiravudh's enthusiasm for the revival of cultural heritage created new aesthetic values focusing on traditional architecture, which signified a civilised history and national identity of Siam when compared to other civilized nations (Figure 1). Such traditional

architecture, which mainly possessed intricate and splendid craftsmanship, also represented Siamese identity (Prakitnonthakarn, 2003).



Figure 1. The traditional architectural style of Tap Khawn Mansion, at Sanam Chandra Palace, Nakhon Pathom, was erected in response to King Vajiravudh's revival of national identity. (Photography: Sompong Amnuay-ngerntra).

The revival of traditional art and architecture resulted from the Siamese elite who were unable to clearly identify their own genealogy and exposure to the outside world. The more they strived for ideas of modernity in order to make an impression on Westerners, the further they realised that they were losing their traditional identity (Prakitnonthakarn, 2003).

King Vajiravudh's contradictory ideas of modernity (Westernisation) and tradition on



Figure 2. (Left) The Western architectural style of Charli Mongkhon-at residence, Sanam Chandra Palace, Nakhon Pathom, featuring King Vajiravudh's beloved dog monument, Ya-Leh, in front of the round towers in German Gothic style and the unusual Siamese-style pediment above the window. Figure 3. (Right). The traditional Siamese style Watchari Romya Hall incorporated with the three-headed elephant Erawan carrying a bolt of lightning, at pediment of the building. (Photograph: Sompong Amnuay-ngerntra).

were also expressed in architecture as evidenced by the fact that the king disfavoured the heavy intrusion of Western styles, especially the Italian marble Ananta Samakom Throne Hall and the German-designed palace of Phra Ram Ratchanivej, whose construction began in the previous reign, but which he felt obliged to complete (Green, 1999; Poshyananda, 1992; Praktinonthakarn, 2003) Although the hall was grand, elegant, and unique in Siam, King

Vajiravudh commented that it did not express any indigenous character. However, constructions of European design continued to be built during his reign, some undoubtedly with his approval. Notable among such architectural works were the Thai Khu Fah Building (Norasingh Mansion which is currently the Government House) and Banthomsin Building (Phitsanulok Mansion) in a Venetian Gothic style erected by the king for his favorite courtiers. In addition, several buildings within Sanam Chandra Palace in Nakhon Pathom clearly reflected the contradiction in his artistic preferences for both Western and traditional styles, especially Charli Mongkhon-at (see Figure 2) and Mari Ratratabanlang buildings, which were erected in pure Western styles; whereas Watchari Romya (shown in Figure 3) and Samakki Mukhamat Halls were built in the traditional style.

Despite King Vajiravudh's enthusiasm for the revival of traditional styles, it is interesting to note that he did not completely reject Western architecture. Several buildings erected during his reign looked traditional in their physical appearance, but they were built with modern materials and relied heavily on Western engineering and technology in their construction (Suksri & Freeman, 1996). However, his attempts at the revival of traditional architecture were mostly not successful. Ornamental materials were continually ordered from Western countries to decorate the grand residences of which construction began in the previous reign and was subsequently completed during his reign. Construction techniques and materials, in the meanwhile, had developed further. Steel permitted greater interior spans and glass admitted more lights. The use of the vault considerably changed the architecture of buildings.



Figure 4. (Left). Vajiravudh College, Bangkok (Photograph courtesy of Vajiravudh College)

Figure 5. (Right). Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Arts, a modified Khmer-Thai style building, Bangkok. (Photograph: Sompong Amnuay-ngerntra).

Poshyananda (1992) stated that the king preferred traditional designs by Luang Wisan Silpakam, who applied Western knowledge and modern construction techniques to continue the progress of modernisation seen today in the main building at Vajiravudh College (shown in Figure 4), and at the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University (Figure 5). These buildings adopted a modified Khmer-Thai style that had started to emerge at the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign.



Figure 6. One of the royal courtiers' places within the complex of Sanam Chandra Palace, Nakhon Pathom, featuring King Vajiravudh's influence on the English Arts and Crafts movement. (Photography: Sompong Amnuay-ngentra).

King Vajiravudh's contradicting inclinations between Westernisation and tradition created a new context in traditional art in response to the social norm of civilisation, in which classical Siamese art expresses cultural glory and national identity. However, it is interesting to investigate how traditional art is used to signify the Siamese glory to stand alongside that of other civilised countries.

It is certain that King Vajiravudh's enthusiasm for the return of traditional crafts was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement led by the old aristocracies in Great Britain, the Western country he knew best through his educational exposure. Significantly, the Industrial Revolution had begun in Britain in the 1750s and spread during the 19th century to Europe and America. Industrial development contributed to the mass production of new materials and new ways of making things. It demanded new types of buildings for transport and industry and created the techniques that made these possible. Therefore, the most progressive buildings of the time were the work of engineers rather than architects, using iron, the principal new material, boldly and adventurously (Norwich, 2000). In art, industrialism depreciated aesthetic values in the eyes of the old aristocracies, who valued superb hand-crafted details. Fearing that industrial development would cause craftsmanship to become extinct, the aristocracies revised classical traditional art in response to industrialism and its ways.

The English Art and Crafts movement was led by William Morris (1834 – 1896), who was born into a wealthy family in London and championed the cause of the craftsman and encouraged a return to the skills of weaving, hand-printing, and fresco painting. Also, he took part in a great popular demonstration demanding social and political reform and finally became a Marxist. The legacy of Morris had a great impact on the thinking and works of Arts and Crafts architects, designers, and craft workers across Europe in the 20th century (Glancey, 2003).

King Vajiravudh was substantially influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement and applied this nostalgia for traditional values to his artistic pursuit (as shown in Figure 6). Although Siam was not opposed to industrialism, the king asserted that Siam still needed to

strive for traditional art and crafts, which was the national identity expressing a civilised tradition. He realised that the superb handicraft details expressed the civilisation of Siam, like other European countries. Also, the revival of intricate craftsmanship was consistent with his official nationalism, which dominated the role of monarchy and royalty in taking a strong position of defence and patronage of Siamese cultural heritage. Only the royal elite was able to possess high-value classical Siamese art. Notably, the vernacular art of indigenous peasants was not taken into consideration, due to the hierarchy of Siamese society in that era.

Throughout his reign, it was apparent that King Vajiravudh purposely selected only a partially traditional approach to art and architecture. He paid less attention to the religious symbolism of the *Traiphum* cosmology embodied in architecture. However, this did not mean that King Vajiravudh lacked an understanding of the symbolic significance. Instead, he selected the traditional value in an international context only. The king enhanced the traditional values and created a new role in civilised history to suit his socio-political interests in relation to the quest for 'Siamese modernity' (Prakitnonthakarn, 2003). The conceptual synthesis of Siamese and Western cultural experience, which retains the spirit of Siamese national and cultural identity coupled with Western knowledge and modern technology, can be manifested at Mrigadayavan, the seaside palace in Phetchaburi province.

Table 1. The relationship between King Vajiravudh's political ideology and art discourse

Political Ideology	Art and Culture Discourse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official nationalism • Instilling a new degree of commitment, loyalty and sacrifice to the nationalistic trinity of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy' • The glory of absolute monarchy and propaganda for national unity and patriotism • Adherence to Buddhist morality to build a prosperous nation • Opposing a cult of Western imitation • Anti-Chinese propaganda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revival of traditional art and architecture • Colonial opposition • Great pride in traditional art and culture associated with nationalism and conservation • Stimulating nationalistic sentiments through the production, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage • Revival of performing arts as a part of Siamese heritage conservation • Arts and Crafts Movement (English influences) • Conceptual synthesis of Siamese architecture with Western amenities and modern technology

Source: Elaborated by the author

Table 1. displays a complex connection between art and politics during the reign of King Vajiravudh. The king instilled a new degree of commitment, loyalty and sacrifice to the nationalistic trinity of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy' through the production, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage as seen in literacy, performing arts and architecture.

Conclusion

During the fifteen years of his reign, it is known that King Vajiravudh, a man of culture and art, purposefully used his literature, drama, and architecture as a device in promoting the political concept of official nationalism with great pride in traditional art and culture. The king encountered political challenges from a new middle class as a result of the political revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. These young intellectuals called for a participatory form of

politics - a parliament and constitution. However, King Vajiravudh was able to successfully retain royal absolutism during his reign and made his nationalistic trinity of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy' popular to the present day.

Feeling that Siam was threatened to lose a traditional pedigree, King Vajiravudh attempted to revise traditional art and culture associated with his official nationalism and conservation (Poshyananda, 1992). He valued the concept of civilised pedigree and used history to stimulate nationalistic sentiments. This practice was consistent with the social norm of that time, which was based on civilisation led by Westerners. To the king, traditional art and culture signified a civilised pedigree and national identity of Siam compared to other civilised nations (Prakitnonthakarn, 2003).

King Vajiravudh's political ideology was clearly demonstrated through his performing arts. The king centralised all royal entertainment and dramatic activities for his own pleasure and political discourse. Without a doubt, the main theme of his drama performances was to propagate the concept of national unity and patriotism with great pride in Siamese cultural heritage (Rutnin, 1996). The king attempted to instruct and enlighten Siamese people on the necessity for stirring up duty, responsibility, and loyalty to the nation and to the monarchy.

Through his formative education in Britain, King Vajiravudh was substantially influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement led by the old aristocrats. The king valued the superb hand-crafts details manifesting Siam's civilisation, like those of other European countries. Also, the revival of intricate craftsmanship was consistent with his official nationalism, which dominated the role of the monarchy in taking a strong defence and patron of Siamese cultural heritage. However, on his personal level, King Vajiravudh had a high inclination to a contradiction between traditional and Western lifestyles, which subsequently created a new context for the conceptual synthesis of Siamese and Western cultural experience. For the sake of retaining the spirit of Siamese national identity coupled with Western modern technology, this new context has been discoursed through architecture and the built environment during his reign.

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