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A Dark Spot on a Royal Space:

The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History¹

THANAVI CHOTPRADIT

In the seminar “Art since 1932” at Thammasat University in 1983,² Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj, the conservative royalist intellectual and politician, denounced the People's Party's art (Sinlapa Khana Ratsadon)³ as alien to the basis of Thai society and even tasteless:

Thai art after 1932, frankly and patriotically speaking, is the most declining age of art, that is, there is no Thai art at all' because 'they [the People's Party leading members] came back from France and their taste of art is just from cafés along the streets of Paris', hence, 'the images they see as beautiful are pornography [*phap po*]'.⁴

As a “True Blue”,⁵ Pramoj actively attacked the People's Party (Khana Ratsadon, 1932–47) and promoted royalism in both the political and cultural spheres. In 1989, he supported and legitimised the government's plan to tear down the People's Party's Sala Chaloeamthai, the National Theatre and cinema on Ratchadamnoen Avenue (Figure 1) in order to open up the view from the avenue towards Ratchanatda Temple and the Loha Prasada (Metal Castle)

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FIGURE 1: Sala Chaloemthai, Bangkok. Source: Chatri Prakitnonthakan, *Khana ratsadon chalong ratthathammanun: Prawatsat kan mueang lung 2475 phan sathapattayakam amnat* [Khana Ratsadon Celebrating the Constitution: History and Power of Thai Politics after 1932 in Architecture] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005), p. 96

(Figure 2), both built by King Nangklao (King Rama III, r. 1787–1851). His article in *Siamrath*, a daily newspaper, published on 17 August 1989, stated that the revolutionaries had “bad taste” and no “love for Thai arts and culture”, and therefore tried to copy the layout of Paris’ Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Bangkok. He further encouraged the government to purge the entire environment in Rattanakosin of all buildings that were deemed to be “not beautiful” and “unfitting”.⁶

Pramoj’s criticism is part of a long-term strategy of defaming the People’s Party and its cultural legacy instigated with the fall of the revolutionary regime in 1947. His approach has been fundamental to the popular understanding and attitude towards the People’s Party.⁷ Whereas the People’s Party’s Revolution of 1932 has been recast as “early ripe, early rotten” (*ching suk kon ham*), the hasty change for which the nation had not been ready,⁸ the revolutionary visual culture was perceived as “foreign” and “tasteless”. Following the demolition of Sala Chaloemthai, some commercial buildings on Ratchadamnoen Avenue were converted to the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, the museum of the history of the Rattanakosin era under the House of Chakri. The Supreme Court building in the Ministry of Justice complex was, however, demolished as part of the Celebration of the Auspicious Occasion of the King’s Eightieth Birthday Anniversary on 5 December 2007.⁹ The demolition and conversion of the People’s Party’s architecture indicates how the ideology of the city changed according to shifts in power as it shows the return of the royalist order to Bangkok’s landscape.



FIGURE 2: Ratchanatda Temple and the Loha Prasada (Metal Castle), Bangkok. Source: Author

Further to the state's attempt to establish new memory and political ideology through iconoclasm, the cultural legacy of the revolution was buried in the grave of historical oblivion as it has been ignored by Thai art historians. This article examines the status of the art of the People's Party in relation to Thai art history and Thai society. It argues that the royalist accusations highlight the profound significance of the revolutionary art and architecture. The People's Party's art is deeply embedded within a struggle for political legitimisation. It is not solely imitation of "foreign" art—an alien of Thai society—but indeed artistic syncretisation that has been intrinsic to the contestation between the revolution and counter-revolution from 1932–2010. The following section discusses how the Thai art historiographical practice excludes and includes the revolutionary art in narratives of art history. The absence and re-presence of the art of the People's Party in art history demonstrates that the politics of aesthetics and academic practice are closely tied with the changing political circumstances.

Absence/Re-Presence: The Art of the People's Party in Thai Art History

The absence of any study of revolutionary art is a result of insufficient

theoretical and contextual grounding in the practice of art history in Thailand. Most Thai art historians have paid very little attention to modern and contemporary art. As Maurizio Peleggi has recently elaborated, Thai art history, since its beginning in the early 20th century, has deeply engaged with antiquarianism and museological classification in order to construct a narrative of “national art(s)” that links to the political history of the nation”.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, which is the only art history institution in the country, focuses on working in the field of premodern art. The book titled *Prawat naeo khwamkhit lae witthikhon khwa wicha prawatsat sinlapa thai* [Historical Perspectives and Methodological Approaches Concerning the Discipline of Thai Art History] by Rungroj Thamrungraeng, Thai art historian and lecturer at the Department of Art History, proves Peleggi’s point. The author provides an overview of Thai art historical practice and emphasises stylistic classification and periodisation of premodern art as central concerns of art history. The book implies that artefacts are testimonies of the nation’s history that connect past civilisations/kingdoms to modern Thailand. With a focus on ancient art and antiquity, Thai art history is fundamentally nationalistic, but what kind of nationalism have the Thai art historians embraced?

According to Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, royalist nationalism is a hegemonic discourse that has dominated the entire production of knowledge in Thai history.¹¹ It absorbs all stories and events into a master narrative plot that centres on the monarchy. Hence any facts that are incoherent to the master narrative of Thai history are unorthodox memories and therefore unwanted pasts. The art of the People’s Party, being both modern and anti-royalist in essence, is perceived by most Thai scholars as “un-Thai” and therefore does not fit Thai society. The case of the People’s Party’s art as the mottled art movement, forced to be negative and rejected, suggests the repression of certain historical events because they are heterogeneous to the main hegemonic narrative.

Being a dark spot in Thai art history, the work of the People’s Party became what Jacques Rancière termed the “wrong”.¹² The “wrong” is the uncounted in a space where it is countable as uncounted within the Thai royalist art historical narrative. Rancière’s concept of a “wrong” as a miscount, or *les sans-part*, describes a position within a political structure; there is a fundamental wrong within the social hierarchy of political order that refuses to recognise the existence of some groups. The ignoring of the art of the People’s Party by Thai art historians demonstrates the politics of academic othering and relegation. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, the dynamic of the intellectual field is a competition between the power in publishing and the power in refusing

publication.¹³ The practice of Thai historiography of art history appears to be a site of struggle where power is embedded in the constitution of a rightful publication. As such, being the “absence” or “void” in the narrative of art history suggests that it is paradoxically a “part” of Thai art history: it is a mottled aspect that is forced into exile by the combined act of concealing, distorting and erasing. The royalist nationalism is the basis of both Thai aesthetics and writing on art history. Thus the absence of revolutionary art or its subordinated status is precisely a part of the whole discourse of royalist art history because such history will definitely not allow its opponent version of history to exist. As Craig Reynolds remarks, it is impossible to write history without facing up to the politics that lie behind that history.¹⁴

It should also be noted that, to fill the gap left by art historians, artists sometimes play the role of art critics by writing on modern and contemporary art history and art criticism. However, these writings are schematic or written from the perspective of art appreciation. In addition to art criticism, biographies of Silpa Bhirasri (formerly Corrado Feroci)—another form of writing that has been excessively produced and has served as a source of information about Thai modern artistic practice and art education—have significantly omitted a propaganda aspect in the works he had produced during the revolutionary regime.¹⁵ Bhirasri, an Italian sculptor hired by King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, r. 1910–25) to serve the royal court in 1923, worked in Thailand from the time of absolutism to the revolutionary regime and the post-revolutionary regime. He was, in fact, an important art consultant to the People’s Party government; his students became state artists—civil servants (*kha rachakan*) working under the Fine Arts Department—and produced artwork for the new political authority. Honoured by the post-1947 state as the “Father of Thai Modern Art” and founder of the art education system, in biographies written about him, the exclusion of Bhirasri’s role in relation to the People’s Party’s propaganda implies that it may result in a contamination of his idealistic image and interrupt the smooth, sequential flow of past events in the royal-national art history.¹⁶

After decades of devaluation, a revision of the importance of the art of the People’s Party emerged in 2005. The architectural historian Chatri Prakitnonthakan was the first to counter Pramoj’s criticism of revolutionary art as a mere Western imitation and returned it to academic debates.¹⁷ He also coined the term “*Sinlapa Khana Ratsadon*” (the art of the People’s Party) for the art and architecture of this period. By grounding his research in social analysis, Prakitnonthakan offers a different perspective towards the People’s Party’s cultural legacy as a product of internal politics and considers it as an embodiment of the new ideology of constitutionalism.

In addition, Prakitnonthakan's explanation of revolutionary art is essential to the revivification of the memory of the revolution through the use of its legacies by the Red Shirt movement in 2009–10. However, the Red Shirts' appropriation of the People's Party's cultural heritage in relation to the subsuming of the revolutionary memory to the movement's struggle has yet to be fully discussed. As a consequence of the 2006 royal-supported military coup that toppled the elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the debate over the origin of democracy and the possession of sovereign power has resurfaced as a war between royalist and electoral democracies.¹⁸ The People's Party or the monarchy: which one is the true begetter of Thai democracy? The people or the King: who possesses sovereign power in Thailand? The rivalry between these two ideologies has initiated the re-interpretation of the past as a process that associates it with the present with the Red Shirts' use of the revolutionary cultural inheritance: the People's Party's Plaque (Mut Khana Ratsadon), the Safeguarding the Constitution Monument (Anusaowari Phithak Ratthathammanun) and the Democracy Monument (Anusaowari Prachathippatai) specifies the place of the past in contemporary Thai society.

The disavowal and re-evaluation of People's Party's art are grounded in its essence as being a constitutionalist/anti-royalist symbol. The next section focuses on the performative power of the People's Party's Plaque in both the revolutionary regime and the post-2006 politics. It aims to demonstrate how the plaque, as a visual marker of the 1932 revolution, functions as a site of ideological interpellation and contestation where the debate on the origins of Thai democracy and possession of sovereign power has yet to be settled. Through a discussion of the visual representation and performative acts, the People's Party's Plaque will be located within the battlefield of political rivalry where different ideologies fight against each other in an effort to establish themselves in the public consciousness.

The People's Party's Plaque: A Thorn in the Royalist Flesh

In the early morning of 24 June 1932, Phraya Phahon Phonphayuhasena (Phot Phahonyothin, hereafter Phahon), the head of the military faction and leader of the People's Party, stood on the Royal Plaza, an open space at the end of Ratchadamnoen Avenue,¹⁹ and part of the royal residential complex, the Dusit Palace, and read the Announcement of the People's Party No. 1.²⁰ The colonel declared that, "The time has ended when those of royal blood farm on the backs of the people. Things which everyone desires, the greatest happiness and progress which can be called *si ariya*, will arise for everyone."²¹ This message indicated that the 1932 Revolution signalled the end of the



FIGURE 3: The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, Bangkok. Source: Author

government under King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII, r. 1925–35) and brought about a better life, a “*si ariya*” or “golden age” civilisation, according to Buddhist belief, for the Thai people.

The constitutionalist Siam did not solely come into existence by means of language. The hailing and enactment of this new state also involved a performance in space. The declaration of the new regime on the Royal Plaza indicates the importance of the Dusit Palace, which included the Royal Plaza, the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn and the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall as a landscape of sovereignty and therefore a platform for political events. The People’s Party revolution on 24 June 1932 destroyed the hierarchical class system in favour of greater equality and even managed to transform the sacred into the secular; the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall (Figure 3), which had formerly functioned as a reception hall and meeting place of the Prajadhipok’s Royal Council, was turned into a temporary prison for some council members.²²

The senior members of the administration, including the regent Prince Paribatra Sukhumbhand, Prince of Nakhon Sawan, Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, were both an object of contestation and the first group of the royal family to witness the formation of a new political order that would drastically lower both their power and

status. Being imprisoned in their own palace/office, the royals were horrified by the content of the speech given in the announcement, particularly when it was declared that: “There is no country in the world that gives its royalty so much money as this, except the Tsar and the German Kaiser, whose nations have already overthrown their thrones.”²³ A message was sent to Prajadhipok inviting him to return to the capital to rule as a constitutional king and accommodate the new regime but should he refuse, the revolutionaries would declare a republic. The revolution thus reversed both the status of the palace and royalty from superior to inferior; their social status would be allowed to recover although it would always remain lower than their previous status, and only if the King accepted the People’s Party’s conditional offer. Prajadhipok, who was on holiday at Klai Kangwon Palace (Far from Worries Palace) in the southern seaside town of Hua Hin, accepted the condition. Later, the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall became the National Assembly of the People’s Party government.

The People’s Party’s act of defiance, levelled at the absolutist system, was also manifested in the creation of the People’s Party’s Plaque (Mut Khana Ratsadon) or Democracy Plaque (Mut Prachathippatai) (Figure 4). On 10 December 1936, one year after Prajadhipok had abdicated and the throne fell to the nine-year-old King Ananda Mahidol (King Rama VIII, r. 1935–46), the People’s Party’s government, at its zenith, attached the People’s Party Plaque near the King Chulalongkorn statue on the ground of the Royal Plaza. It is located exactly at the spot where Phahon had announced the transformation of Siamese political system.



FIGURE 4: The People’s Party Plaque, Bangkok. Source: Author

Although small and difficult to notice, the People's Party's Plaque created a physical and symbolic mottle—a dark spot on the royal space. It staked out the Royal Plaza as a commemorative landscape of the revolution. However, despite its importance in memorialising the revolutionary moment, there are insufficient historical records concerning the actual plaque. The name of the designer is unidentified and the motivation for selecting a *prajamyam* motif, which is one of the basic motifs of traditional Thai ornaments (*lai thai*) as a central element is unexplained. A *prajamyam* is a square floral motif with four triangular petals; its function is decorative. The details of the petals may vary as there are several types of *prajamyam*, but all of them are restricted within a square frame and each petal is always intact. The *prajamyam* in the People's Party's plaque was cut in half to present the following commemorative sentence: "Here, in the dawn of 24 June 1932, Khana Ratsadon [The People's Party] has brought forth a constitution for the glory of the nation."

While the form of this commemorative plaque was based on a traditional motif, it does not suggest continuity with the past but rather a disruption or fundamental change. As Thai traditional arts deeply resonate with religiosity and hierarchy, the division of a *prajamyam* motif into two parts symbolises a radical break and transgression of the hierarchical order by the newcomers. The split *prajamyam* echoes the act of announcing the revolution at the Royal Plaza in 1932, and emphasises that the People's Party's innovation emerged on the ground of destruction and transformation of the traditional or royal-related signs: an aesthetic terrain. The enlightening aspect of 24 June 1932 was also highlighted in the phrase "in the dawn", which implied an escape from the darkness of the old regime and the inauguration of a whole new *si ariya* society.²⁴

The attachment of the People's Party Plaque created a new political geography of the Royal Plaza. It exhibited the beginning of constitutionalism in the public space. In this circumstance, landscape was a mode of political discourse. The revolution of 24 June marked a marriage between politics and geography, and indicated the intervention and the defiance of the revolutionaries towards the royalists. And, in turn, it revealed how the power of landscape lay in its ability to reify and reaffirm political vision.

However, the fall of the People's Party in 1947, the return of the monarchy as well as the emergence of neo-royalism resulted in a subsequent viewing of the People's Party's Plaque as a symbol of an unpleasant past. As Benedict Anderson remarks, "all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesia",²⁵ the royalist-nationalism of the post-1947 era suppressed the People's Party and the 1932 Revolution in order to reconstruct the monarchy as the progenitor of democracy. Prajadhipok



FIGURE 5: The Royal Statue of King Prajadhipok at the National Assembly, Bangkok. Source: Author

was reincarnated as the “Father of Thai Democracy”; the Royal Statue of King Prajadhipok at the new National Assembly serves as the materialisation of this discourse (Figure 5). Although most Thais have not recognised the existence of the plaque, since it is just a small plaque on the street where cars run pass by, Craig J. Reynolds mentions the rumour, which he was unable to confirm, that it had been removed and returned during the Sarit’s regime (1958–63).²⁶ The mere rumour of this incident—whether it really happened or not—suggests an iconoclastic attempt towards the revolutionary memory.

Just like the 1932 Revolution, the People's Party's Plaque has no place in the royalist state since it signifies interruption in the chronological flow of Thai royalist history.

It was not until 2007 that the People's Party and its cultural legacy were brought back into public debate.²⁷ The 1932 Revolution re-emerged as the birth of Thai democracy in the aftermath of the 19 September 2006 coup d'état. The 2006 coup created an anti-establishment movement and anti-monarchy sentiments among many Thais.²⁸ The coup and abrogation of Shinawatra's faction, in many ways, unmasked the elites' disapproval of popular sovereignty and majority rule. These operations stirred up a widespread awakening of political consciousness among Thai people, especially the rural poor who had long been neglected and kept silent in the national political field. They were the main supporters of Shinawatra's parties and were later members of the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD),²⁹ also known as the Red Shirt movement. In this circumstance, the historical legacy of the People's Party re-emerged in the 21st century as the true begetter of the Thai Democracy.

The post-2006 political conflict brought about a new interpretation of the history of democracy in Thailand. It also marked a renewed engagement with the People's Party's cultural heritage in a contemporary political movement. The notions of heritage and nostalgia provide interpretative frameworks for understanding the Red Shirts' historical consciousness and the movement's appropriation of the People's Party's cultural heritage, particularly the People's Party's Plaque. The issue of heritage in this article does not deal with preservation or conservation but appropriation of the past in a specific political circumstance. Raphael Samuel, a British Marxist historian and pioneer of "history from below", proposed that heritage is as much about the ordinary as about the elite.³⁰ Samuel redirected the debates on heritage by arguing that people's fascination with the past has opened up spaces for "public history". Heritage, as the terrain for unofficial history and memory, may open a new way to construct a "history from below", local knowledge and identity of the minority. As such, heritage is a cultural asset that can be used progressively, challenging the official history of the nation, status quo and existing class distinctions. Heritage, as a source and marker of identity,³¹ helps construct collective identity and accelerates collective acts of remembrance.

Nostalgia, a longing for place and a yearning for a different time, is not always antithetical to progress. It is not only retrospective but also prospective, since fantasies of the past may have a direct impact on dreams for the future. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is paradoxical because it appears as a defensive mechanism to seek a solution to current problems.

Boym distinguished two types of nostalgia: “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia”. Restorative nostalgia highlights *nostos*, a return home but reflective nostalgia concerns *algia*, the longing itself or melancholy, yet these distinctions are not always distinguishable. Restorative nostalgia is central to national and religious revivals. It aims at constructing a trans-historical lost home because it does not consider itself as nostalgia but as truth or tradition.³² In the case of the Red Shirts, the resurrection of the erased memory of the People’s Party and the emotional bonding as ascendant-descendant indicates a longing for the revolutionary past and a desire to rebuild it for a better future. The Red Shirts’ yearning for the 1932 Revolution indicated utopian dimensions of nostalgia: a politically leftist “restorative nostalgia” that offered a retrospective vision of the preferred present and future.

Since the official Thai history under royalist rule had suppressed the memory of the 1932 Revolution, the People’s Party’s Plaque functioned as the mode of unofficial knowledge. It served as visual evidence of the revolutionary victory in 1932. The existence of the plaque insisted that the People’s Party was the birth-giver of the people’s sovereignty, countering the royalist discourse that cast Prajadhipok as the father of Thai democracy. The cultural, historical and political specificities are core to the application of memory in a specific circumstance. Since 2007, the People’s Party’s Plaque has become more than just a public gathering point, but serves also as an operational site for political activities. As an intermediary agent between the past and the present, the Plaque provides both symbolic and literal reference to the 1932 Revolution.

The first commemoration at the People’s Party’s Plaque by the anti-coup movement took place on the morning of 24 June 2007 (Figure 6). A group of NGOs—the NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (NGO-COD), Thai Labour Solidarity Committee, Four Regions Slum Network, Thai Volunteer Service Foundation and State-Enterprises Workers’ Relation Confederation (SERC), Student Federation of Thailand (SFT) and the 19th September Network against Coup d’État—celebrated the 75th anniversary of the 1932 Revolution at the plaque. The People’s Party’s Plaque, a symbol of the victory of the commoner in the political transformation, became a landmark for the protest against the coup.

The commemoration began with the lighting of six candles, referring to the People’s Party’s six principles: independence, security, economy, equality, liberty and education, around the plaque, followed by a reading of the Announcement of the People’s Party’s No. 1. The reading of the People’s Party’s announcement in 2007 re-addressed and re-engaged the importance of ordinary people, the citizens of the state, to the Thai nation. Furthermore, it created ancestral bonds between the People’s Party and the anti-coup



FIGURE 6: The commemoration of the 1932 revolution at the People's Plaque, 24 June 2007.
Source: www.prachatai.com [accessed 11 May 2015]

protestors. It constructed a connective narrative as it conceptualised the 1932 revolutionaries as the forebears of the 2007 protestors: their ideological ancestors and role models. The 2007 commemorative act at the People's Party's Plaque reaffirmed continuity with the revolutionary past as a source or origin of political legitimacy.

Among other activities and speeches, the 19th September Network against Coup d'État read the announcement of 24 June 2007, declaring that the 1932 Revolution had yet to finish and that it needed to be carried on until sovereign power truly belonged to the people.³³ The commemoration on 24 June 2007 reflected what Fredric Jameson calls "nostalgia for the present", a paradoxical desire to recall the past within processes of progress.³⁴ This restorative nostalgia fantasises the role in the present of a particular, determinate past as an origin to return to and a departure from which to go on: the 1932 Revolution as the "beginning" of an unfinished project. In this context, the People's Party's Plaque has transmuted from a marker of past revolutionary victory to a platform of present and continuing ideological protest.

Memory implies a self or subject who perceives a memory or does the remembering; the commemoration of the People's Party's revolution in 2007 revived the revolution as a source of inspiration and as a spiritual ancestor—

a progenitor and guardian of democracy. The commemoration established a living connection with these revolutionary ancestors, casting the latter-day protestors as descendants of and heirs to the defunct tradition. By claiming historical roots, the anti-coup protestors pictured the 1932 Revolution as an unfinished project for them to accomplish. Here, the revolutionary past appeared as the opposite image to the present. That image is an archetype: an ideal image, a fantasy of a lost world that reflects present desires.

The anti-coup protestors created an interrelationship between the memory of the People's Party and the story of the movement. As the current political movement engaged with representations of the past, they relocated the memory of the People's Party into the present-day Thai political landscape. By connecting the current political situation with the revolutionary days, the protestors further inserted its struggle into the fabric of the memory of the People's Party. The past-present alignment between the People's Party and the anti-coup protestors, many of whom later became the Red Shirts, suggests a historicisation of the latter since it reflects the movement's attempts to enter into historical record. Thus, this revivification project added layers of meaning and a political dimension from the present into the revolutionary memory. The protestors' self-historicisation as heirs of the revolutionary movement and warriors of democracy subsumes the memory of the movement into the stream of Thai political history.

From 2007 to the time of writing, the People's Party's Plaque has been conceived as an embodiment and tangible signifier of the revolutionary's ideology that the Red Shirts engage in their struggles against the military coup and royalist democracy. The Red Shirts' commemoration and activities at the People's Party's Plaque could be considered as physical forms of historiography as they served as performative agents in challenging royalist democracy—a counter-memory to the narrative of the true begetter of Thai democracy. Yet the plaque served not only as a medium in the ideological and memorial restoration project, but also functioned as a concentration point in the Red Shirts' attempt to affirm their actions, to constitute their memory in the public consciousness. By implicating the current political situation in the commemoration at the People's Party's Plaque, the memory of the People's Party was no longer an unfolding memory from the past but a memory that was shaded by the perspective and circumstances of the present. The memory of the People's Party was then altered and adapted to suit the present cause of the Red Shirts, with the aim of employing it as a weapon against the royalist movement.

As the People's Party's Plaque provided a point of reference, proof of the commoner's victory, this smallest revolutionary memorial became the most

powerful of all anti-royalist symbols. In return, the power of the People's Party's Plaque in challenging royalism and royalist democracy made it become a thorn in the royalist flesh. Like the whole cultural legacy of the People's Party, the plaque was a mottled spot, an irremovable stain on the royal space of the Royal Plaza and the "wrong" in the royalist art history. At the commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the 1932 Revolution in 2012, the state placed the immediate area around the commemorative plaque under surveillance. About 30 police officers from Dusit Police Station watched over the event, justifying their presence as being for security reasons and to prevent the commemoration from the "third party".³⁵ However, the police did not clearly state that who would the "third party" would be and what would they possibly do during the commemoration.

The highlight of the 2012 commemoration was the performance by "the People's Party the Second" (Khana Ratsadon thi Song), a group consisting of students from both Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University. Dressing up as the People's Party key members, the People's Party the Second staged a commemorative play about the revolution (Figure 7). They read the



FIGURE 7: The People's Party the Second at the commemoration of the 1932 Revolution on 24 June 2012. Source: www.matichon.co.th [accessed 11 May 2015]

People's Party's six principles and proposed six new principles corresponding with the current situation. The six new principles called on the military to halt all political intervention; find those responsible for the alleged murder of Red Shirt demonstrators and supporters and other innocent people in the April-May clashes with the military in 2010; improve the lives of labourers and the lower classes throughout the country; stop the use of *lèse majesté* (Article 112);³⁶ release all political prisoners; and provide academic freedom and education to all Thai citizens.³⁷

The commemorative space around the People's Party's Plaque provided an arena in which the People's Party the Second established a firm historical background with the revolutionaries and the 1932 Revolution. Calling themselves "the People's Party the Second" and announcing the six new principles at the People's Party's Plaque indicated a relationship between the resurrection of past events and the historicisation of themselves as the second generation of revolutionaries. However, the performance did not only commemorate the People's Party's revolution but also integrated current needs. As the performance revitalised the success of the 1932 Revolution that changed the Thai political system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, this commemorative performance brought back undesirable memories for royalists. Furthermore, a call for the abolition of *lèse majesté* and the release of all political prisoners advanced liberty, one of the People's Party's six principles, and explicitly placed the monarchy in the opposite corner. This new aspect of liberty combined with the anti-royalist implications of this revolutionary icon demonstrated a challenge towards royalism. More obvious than ever before, the People's Party the Second's performance accused the monarchy of being a hindrance to the development of democracy.

Since division between the pro-democracy movement and the royalists has deepened every year and various massacres of the Red Shirts have, at the time of writing, yet to be clarified, the commemoration of the People's Party's past merges with the current demand for justice and state surveillance of the commemoration of the 1932 Revolution becomes more intense. Disguising the overt surveillance is no longer necessary. Two years later, at the commemoration events of 24 June 2014 and one month after the latest military coup,³⁸ state officials surrounded the People's Party's Plaque with black/yellow warning tape and barricades (Figure 8) and required participants to register before entering the protected site.³⁹ Clearly, such protection was neither for the security of the revolutionary heritage nor for the participants. Rather, it was an expression of power by the military state on this commemorative landscape. The registration system implied a more rigid control and surveillance.



FIGURE 8: The Protected Royal Plaza and the People's Party's Plaque on the Commemoration of the 1932 Revolution on 24 June 2014. Source: www.prachatai.com [accessed 11 May 2015]

On 23 June, Pol. Gen. Somyot Poompanmuang, Commissioner General of the Royal Thai Police, warned that any sign of protest against the coup was illegal.⁴⁰ The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the junta ruling the country following the coup, announced martial law to prosecute opponents, ban political activities and censor all media. As such, martial law separated the pro-democracy movement from the People's Party, cutting the ancestral bonds between them. The commemoration of 24 June 2014 was conducted under the theme of "Dream Afloat: Sending Wishes to the People's Party". It consisted of the cleaning of the People's Party's Plaque, the laying of flowers, poetry readings, writing messages to the People's Party on small pieces of paper and the releasing of balloons. The total absence of anti-coup protests in the commemoration of the 1932 Revolution signified a total collapse of Thai democracy.

Since the country has been under the latest military junta, nostalgia has reappeared as a sign of hope for the future. As the longing for the People's Party was the only expression permitted by the junta, it was used as a signifier of a dream for democracy. As indicated above, the participants wrote their messages to the People's Party on pieces of paper that were placed inside balloons, but Amnuay Nimano, Deputy Commander of the Metropolitan Police, did not allow them to release these balloons at the People's Party's Plaque, stating that the balloons might float over the royal grounds of the nearby Dusit Palace. The participants thus moved to the Democracy Monument. This prohibition demonstrates how the institutions of power exercised

power to zone and regulate the use of space. The landscape of the Royal Plaza became a site of contestation or an arena of conflict. As a result, the participants released their wishes into the sky at the Democracy Monument on the other side of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, faraway from the royal residential area.

The Wrong and the Right

Whereas the anti-royalist stance expressed in revolutionary art, architecture and memorials contributed to the eventual suppression of the People's Party's visual culture in Thai art history and in the public sphere, it is precisely this status of "wrong" for the royalists that enabled it to be "right" for the pro-democracy movement. Thongchai Winichakul once remarked, "Memory is not to tell the truth but who you are."⁴¹ Memory is fluid by nature and opens itself to continuous interpretation, reformation and legitimisation. For the pro-democracy movement, the People's Party were the "forerunners", not a cohort of "early ripe, early rotten" as in the royalist accusations. This attempt to reconstitute a collective memory points out that nostalgia happened in times of historical upheaval.⁴² No longer an alien of Thai society, as Kukrit Pramoj had condemned it to be, the People's Party's visual culture has been revived and has interwoven itself into the fabric of Thai political (art) history and contemporary Thai politics.

The People's Party's art functions as both the target as well as the performative agent in the revolution and counter-revolution efforts; this article has argued that the dynamism of the People's Party's art is deeply embedded within the debates around who is the true begetter of Thai democracy and the possessor of sovereign power. It has always been the locus of a political rivalry between royalism and constitutionalism/democracy. As such, the absence and re-presence of the People's Party's cultural legacy is intrinsic to the ongoing war to define, justify and possess the desired political ideology among the conflicting groups in Thailand.

At the time of writing, the pro-democracy movement continues to appropriate the People's Party's cultural heritage as the disputes over sovereignty of the Thai nation-state have intensified due to the rapid decline of the monarchy and the rise of the lower classes. The clouded future of the monarchy lies behind the current political crisis since King Bhumibol's poor health (age 88) suggests that the end of his reign is near, and his son and heir, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, is not as popular as his father.⁴³ The term "royalist democracy" may be an oxymoron but it seems to be the only way to secure royal legitimacy. In this circumstance, the rivalry between royalism and constitutionalism/democracy as the origin of Thai democracy is crucial and

state surveillance of the commemoration of the People's Party has become more intense. As a result, the appropriation of the revolutionary cultural heritage has moved further away from engaging with post-2006 politics and towards the crisis enveloping the monarchy towards the end of the King's reign.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- ¹ This article adheres to the phonetic transcription for most Thai words, but without tonal marks. I follow the “General System of Phonetic Transcription of Thai Characters into Roman” devised by the Royal Institute, Bangkok in 1999. I differ slightly from the Royal Institute system in using “j” for the Thai “*ja*”, not “ch”, except in accepted spellings of royal titles, royal names and those names which have been transcribed by other systems. In the case of a name which is widely known or which can be checked, I adhere to the owner’s transcription. Otherwise the spelling follows the system of Romanisation above. I refer to Thai people by their surnames as in Western convention.
- ² The seminar “Thai Art after 1932” was part of a monthly seminar series organised by the Thai Khadi Research Institute of Thammasat University to commemorate the bicentenary anniversary of Bangkok as the capital city of Thailand. The Rattanakosin Bicentenary in 1982 was organised under the chair of the prime minister General Prem Tinsulanond (now the President of the King’s Privy Council) to underline the position of the Chakri Monarch at the core of national unity.
- ³ The People’s Party was a group led by European-trained military officers and civilians who changed the political system of Thailand (formerly known as Siam) from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1932. The regime was eventually toppled by the coup d’état of 1947.
- ⁴ Kukrit Pramoj, “Pathakatha nam sinlapakam samai mai” [Speech on Modern Art], in *Banthuek kan sammama sinlapakam lung Pho. So. 2475* [Records of the Seminar on Art since 1932], ed. Thai Khadi Research Institute (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1985), pp. 2, 13–4.
- ⁵ *True Blue* was an underground weekly newspaper of the political prisoners from various royalist coup attempts in Bangkok Central Prison during the revolutionary regime. It became a term used to refer to royalist intellectuals and politicians who aimed at rehabilitating the monarchy’s status and devaluating the People’s Party post-1947. For an elaborate discussion of *True Blue*, see Nattapoll Chaiching, *Kho fanfai nai fan an luea chuea: khwam khluean wai khong khabuankan patipak patiwat siam por por 2475–2500* [To Dream the Impossible Dream: The Counter-Revolution Movement in Siam 1932–1947] (Bangkok: Fa Diew Kan, 2013), pp. 135–96.
- ⁶ Kukrit Pramoj, “Soi Suan Phlu Column”, *Siamrath*, 17 Aug. 1989, n.p.
- ⁷ Chatri Prakitnonthakan, *Khana ratsadon chalong ratthathammanun: Prawatsat kan mueang lung 2475 phan sathapattayakam amnat* [Khana Ratsadon Celebrating the Constitution: History and Power of Thai Politics after 1932 in Architecture] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005), pp. 24–5.
- ⁸ The discourse termed “early ripped, early rotten” that conceptualised the 1932 Revolution was conceived by the royalist intellectual Chai-Anan Samudavanija

in 1973. See Chai-Anan Samudavanija et al., *Sat kan mueang* [Political Animal] (Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich, 1973).

- ⁹ The Supreme Court building in the Ministry of Justice complex had been threatened with demolition for several years but was finally demolished in 2013.
- ¹⁰ Maurizio Peleggi, “The Plot of Thai Art History: Buddhist Sculpture and the Myth of National Origins”, in *A Sarong for Clio: Essays on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Thailand—Inspired by Craig J. Reynolds*, ed. Maurizio Peleggi (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publication, Cornell University, 2015), pp. 79–93.
- ¹¹ For the full elaboration on the relationship between royal nationalism and the craft of Thai historiography, see Thongchai Winichakul, “Prawatsat thai baep racha chat niyom jak yuk ana nikhom am phrang su racha chat niyom mai rue latthi sadet pho khong kradumphai thai nai patjuban” [Royal-nationalist History: From the Era of Crypto-colonialism to Neo-royalist Nationalism, or the Contemporary Cult of Fathers of the Thai Bourgeois], *Silapawattanatum* 23, 1 (Nov. 2001): 56–65.
- ¹² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 38–9.
- ¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Intellectual Field. A World Apart”, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 11–8.
- ¹⁴ Craig J. Reynolds, *Icon of Identity as Site of Protest: Burma and Thailand Compared* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Program of Southeast Asian Area Studies, 2000).
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Viroon Tangchareon, *Sinlapathat: Ruam bot wijan lae thatsana tang sinlapa* [Perspective on Art: A Collection of Art Critics and Other Writing] (Bangkok: Ton O, 1989); N. Na Paknam (pseudonym) “Thi ma khong kan kamnoet maha witthayalai silpakorn” [The Birth of Silpakorn University], *Muang Boran* 18, 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1992): 88–97; and Silpakorn University, “*Rakngao*” *mahawitthayalai sinlapakon. Nithatsakan phon ngan khong “sit” rongrian pranit sinlapakam-rongrian silpakorn phanaek chang* [“Roots” of Silpakorn University. Exhibition of “Students” from Silpakorn Art Academy], cat. (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 1993).
- ¹⁶ Thanavi Chotpradit, “Mong pai thang nai ko hen tae thewada” [Deity is Everywhere], *Aan Journal* 4, 2 (July–Dec. 2012): 32–48.
- ¹⁷ Prakritnonthakan, *Khana ratsadon chalong ratthathammanun*, pp. 19–46. Prior to Prakritnonthakan, there have been historians who have analysed the monuments erected during the revolutionary regime. These studies contribute largely to the study of the revolutionary monuments by offering a deep analysis of the relationship between art, politics and society. See Nidhi Eosiwong, “Songkhram anusaowari kap rat thai” [Wars on Monuments and the Thai State],

Silpawattanatum 11, 3 (Jan. 1990): 266–84; Saiphin Kaeongamprasoet, *Kan mueang nai anusaowari thao suranari* [The Politics in the Thao Suranari Monument] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995); and Malini Khumsupha, *Anusaowari prachathippatai kap khwam mai thi mong mai hen* [The Democracy Monument and its Invisible Meanings] (Bangkok: Vibhasa, 2005).

- ¹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, “The Last Gasp of Royalist Democracy”, Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology website, 23 Sept. 2014, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/570-the-last-gasp-of-royalist-democracy> [accessed 15 Dec. 2015].
- ¹⁹ The word *racha* in Ratchadamnoen Avenue or the “Royal promenade” derives from *raj*, meaning royal.
- ²⁰ Nai Honhuai (Sinlapachai Chanchaloem), the royalist documentary writer who wrote intensively about Thai history and politics, claimed that the Announcement of the People’s Party No. 1, which was distributed to the public after the revolution, was not the document that Phahon had read in the morning. The writer, whose source was the navy faction of the People’s Party, claimed that Phahon declared the revolution from a document written in German which was much shorter than the Announcement of the People’s Party No. 1. See Nai Honhuai (pseudonym), *Thahan ruea patiwat* [The Navy Revolution], 2nd ed. (Bangkok: Nai Honhuai, 1978), p. 99. Nevertheless, the content of the two announcements is almost the same. This article does not further engage with the debate about the first announcement and will consider the Announcement of the People’s Party as the first one in official discourse.
- ²¹ Pridi Banomyong, head of the civilian faction of the People’s Party, composed the Announcement of the People’s Party’s No. 1. See the People’s Party, “The Announcement of the People’s Party No. 1”, Pridi-Phoonsuk, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, [http://www.openbase.in.th/files/pridibook049 part2_1.pdf](http://www.openbase.in.th/files/pridibook049%20part2_1.pdf) [accessed 7 Sept. 2011].
- ²² The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall was to become even more threatening for Prajadhipok and Queen Rambai Barni; as the Queen recalled, during their return to the capital on 26 June, there were guns pointing towards their vehicle from the throne hall. Thamsook Numnonda, *Lakhon kan mueang: 24 mithunayon 2475* [The Theatre of Politics: 24 June 1932] (Bangkok: Samakhom Prawatsat, 1992), p. 17.
- ²³ The People’s Party, “The Announcement of the People’s Party No. 1”.
- ²⁴ The People’s Party’s association with the sun is also shown through the image of Aruna *devaputra*, a charioteer of Phra Athit (sun god) in Hinduism. Chatrī Prakritnonthakan remarks that the image of Aruna *devaputra*, signifying sunlight at dawn, is seen for the first time in Thai architecture in the revolutionary period. It appears on the pediment of the chapel of the Democracy Temple (Wat Prachathippatai) or Phra Si Mahathat Temple and the pediment of the entrance to

the Democracy Monument (Anusaowari Prachathippatai); both are designed by the architect of the government Phra Prompichit (Au Laphanon). Prakitnonthakan suggests that the use of the Aruna *devaputra* implies the beginning of democracy in Thailand, as if the sun has risen after the darkness of absolutism. See Prakitnonthakan *Khana ratsadon chalong ratthathammanun*, p. 114.

- ²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 204.
- ²⁶ Craig J. Reynolds, "The Plot of Thai History: Theory and Practice", in *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for the Richard Davis Fund and the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1992), p. 319.
- ²⁷ It should be noted that the first event at the People's Party's Plaque was held in 2001 as part of a campaign against plans to move Thammasat University from its original location at Tha Prachan to the suburb of Rangsit. The People's Party founded Thammasat University in 1934 to be an educational institution in Moral and Political Science with Pridi Banomyong as its first rector. To claim a relationship with the People's Party, one of the activities was a tour to the People's Party's Plaque.
- ²⁸ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Development Since Thaksin's Downfall* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2014), p. 4.
- ²⁹ The name later changed to the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (NUDD) in Aug. 2007 but the international press still referred to it as "UDD". There is another name, "Democratic Alliance against Dictatorship" (DADD) too. See "The Story of UDD-NUDD", Siam Freedom Fight, <http://siamfreedomfight.blogspot.com/2010/01/story-of-udd-nudd.html> [accessed 7 Sept. 2011].
- ³⁰ Raphael Samuel proposed historians to see heritage as an educational resource for public history. See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, 1st rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 274–8.
- ³¹ Maurizio Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002), p. 3.
- ³² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 41.
- ³³ See the full report of the event in *Prachatai* website. "Banyakatan ngan ramluek wan chat 24 Mithunayon lan pakmut prachathippatai ngao" [Lonely Atmosphere at the Commemoration of June 24 at the People's Party's Plaque], *Prachatai*, <http://prachatai.com/journal/2007/06/13222> [accessed 21 Nov. 2011]. However, most NGO participants had called for the King's intervention in politics prior to the coup. Somsak Kosaisuk, Secretariat of the Four Regions Slum Network and Rosana Tositrakul, President of the Traditional Medicine for Self-curing Foundation later

supported the royalist movement, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or the Yellow Shirt movement.

- ³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 279–96.
- ³⁵ “Klum Khana Ratsadon thi Song jat kitcha kam tham khwam saat Mut Khana Ratsadon ramluek 80 pi plian plaeng kan pokkhong (chom phapchut)” [The People's Party the Second Organized Cleaning Activity at the People's Party's Plaque to Commemorate the 80th Anniversary of the Change of Political System (see photographs)], *Matichon Online*, http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1340508047 [accessed 18 May 2015].
- ³⁶ *Lèse-majesté*, or Article 112 in the Thai Criminal Code, was created in 1908 and remains unchanged. It states: “Whoever defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years.” The untouchable status of the Thai king is also secured by all versions of the Thai Constitution since 1932, which states: “The king shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the king to any sort of accusation or action.”
- ³⁷ “Prakat lakh hok prakan khong Khana Ratsadon thi Song” [The Announcement of the People's Party the Second], *Prachatai*, <http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2012/06/41243> [accessed 11 May 2015].
- ³⁸ On 22 May 2014, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, Commander of the Royal Thai Army, staged a coup against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra, younger sister of Thaksin (5 Aug. 2011–22 May 2014).
- ³⁹ “Wang dokmai ramluek 24 Mithunayon pi thi 82 – jao na thi lom rua Mut Khana Ratsadon” [Wreath-laying Ceremony to Commemorate the 82th Anniversary of June 24, 1932 – the Police Officers Surrounded the People's Party's Plaque with Barricades], *Prachatai*, <http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2014/06/54203> [accessed 18 May 2015].
- ⁴⁰ “Tamruat tang rangwan nam jab 500 Baht/phap Facebook tan kho so cho chi jat ramluek 24 Mithunayon dai ham naiya kan mueang” [Police Announced 500 Baht Reward Per One Anti-NCPO Picture for Information Leading to the Capture of those Who May Post them on Facebook], *Prachatai*, <http://prachatai.org/journal/2014/06/54182> [accessed 11 May 2015].
- ⁴¹ Thongchai Winichakul, “Silence of the Wolf: The Perpetrators of the 1976 Massacre in Bangkok, 30 Years Afterwards”, public lecture, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 3 Nov. 2011.
- ⁴² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiv.
- ⁴³ King Bhumibol passed away at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok on 13 Oct. 2016, ending his seven decades on the throne. King Vajiralongkorn (King Rama X) accepted the throne on 1 Dec. 2016.

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