The Gift

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The Gift: Collecting Entanglements & Embodied Histories.

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At the entrance of The Arts House, previously known as the Court House and later as the Parliament House, stands a bronze elephant, placed on a high quadrangular pedestal with an inscription in four languages—Thai, Malay, Chinese and English. “His Majesty, Somdech Paramindr Maha Chulalongkorn, the Supreme King of Siam, landed at Singapore, the first foreign land visited by a Siamese Monarch, on the 16th March 1871,” informs the English text to passers-by; the texts in the other three languages tell the same story, from a different perspective: Singapore was the first foreign land ever visited by the Siamese monarch His Majesty Chulalongkorn. Every word tells a story and when they are brought together, words open up to an infinite number of stories.

King Chulalongkorn’s visits to foreign lands could be explained as demonstrations of his attempts at modernising Siam. In particular, the visits to Europe in 1897 and 1907 are often described in terms of the climax of His Majesty’s endeavours to introduce ‘civilisation’ to the Kingdom of Siam, and naturally these visits had a beginning, a first: the visit to Singapore. Notions of ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernisation’ had begun to circulate during the reign of King Mongkut (King Rama IV), the revered father of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V). King Mongkut’s intensive dealings with Europeans took place in the palace and within the Kingdom of Siam’s realm. Three years after he ascended the throne in 1868, King Chulalongkorn began to make visits abroad. His first journey out of Siam was a visit to Singapore and Java, foreign lands that were controlled by the European powers of Great Britain and the Netherlands, respectively. It was the first time a Siamese monarch went out of his realm not to wage war, not to make a pilgrimage, not to acquire sacred objects or animals in an attempt as royalty to prove that he was at the zenith of his power, the Cakkavatti Raja, King of the Universe. In fact, King Chulalongkorn’s visit to the South was the beginning of an essential and vital mission not only to become familiar with possibilities of introducing modernisation to his realm; he also wanted to show himself to the powerful Europeans as an equally powerful ruler, remind them of the existence of the Kingdom of Siam, affirm Siam’s sovereignty over the northern part of the Malay Peninsula, and explore the expansion of trading contacts. On March 13, 1871, he arrived at the Johnston Pier, Singapore.
His Majesty’s first visit was not as smooth as silk to begin with. These were hectic times in Singapore as Sir Harry St. George Ord, the first Colonial Governor of the Straits Settlements, was leaving for England and Sir Edward Archibald Anson was appointed Acting Governor.¹ The correspondence between Caophraya Phraklang, Minister of the Treasury and Minister of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, and Phraya Atsadongkhot-thitsaraksra (Tan Kim Ching), the Kingdom of Siam’s consul in Singapore, had been an uneasy one, troubled by concerns of how His Majesty the King of Siam should be received and in particular where he should take up royal residence during his stay in the city.² The problems were solved by the merchant community of Singapore which was eager to contribute 10,000 dollars to His Majesty’s reception.³ Arrangements for the official reception were obviously beyond Siam’s control, but in order to ensure that the presence of His Majesty would be grand and impressive, Caophraya Phraklang asked the consul to prepare an appropriate locality for His Majesty’s stay, and two officials were sent ahead to make sure that preparations were made in accordance with His Majesty’s status and dignity.

The visit was a success: His Majesty was very satisfied with the reception that the Singapore government had arranged for him. While still in the city, he sent a royal telegram to Queen Victoria to thankfully inform Her Majesty in London of the wonderful reception which the Singapore government had organised for him, in wordings that contain not even the slightest suggestion that Siam’s authority was inferior to that of Great Britain. Eight days were spent in Singapore before the king sailed for Batavia and, on his way back from Java, he was to pay a short private visit to Singapore before returning to Bangkok.

After His Majesty the King of Siam’s visit, discussions between the royal guest and the dignitaries around him and the Singapore government, represented by John Frederick Adolphus McNair, Colonial Engineer of the Straits Settlements, Surveyor General, Member of the Legislative Council, circled around the question of how the Siamese monarch could show his royal appreciation and gratitude. Caophraya Phraklang and McNair, who had apparently come to respect each other in personal meetings and correspondence, shared the necessary communications on the matter;⁴ in October 1871, Caophraya Phraklang wrote:

At the time the Supreme King of Siam paid a visit to Singapore, Your Excellency informed His Majesty that Your Excellency is willing to establish a monument that will be an important sign that His Majesty the King of Siam made a journey to Singapore, Colony of the British. And it was also the first time that the King of Siam made a visit to see a colony of the British. At this moment (Bangkok authorities) have sent a brass elephant with Phraya Samutburarak (and) Luang Sorayut to Your Excellency so that you erect this monument...⁵
The bronze elephant, sent by His Majesty the King of Siam to commemorate his visit to these shores, stands now erected in all its glory before the Townhall, and, we regret to say, does not look by any means imposing. The square pedestal of brick and stucco on which it has been elevated is substantial enough, but that is all that can be said in its favour, and it is anything but creditable to the taste of its designer. There is a graveyard-monument look about it, which is increased by the inscriptions on the four sides, which seem at a distance to give the name, age, and enumerate the many virtues, of some illustrious deceased, and the little elephant itself—entirely in consequence of its surroundings—looks for all the world like a comfortable little porker, “in uffish thought” contemplating a raid against the “jabberwock” or into some forbidden ground. We would not be understood as intending to throw any ridicule on the King of Siam’s present, or wishing to slight the friendly spirit which animated His Majesty in sending it, but surely there is artistic talent enough amongst our officials to have devised a pedestal more fitting,—more in character, alike with the Royal donor, the present itself, and this Eastern land.
Moreover, Caophraya Phraklang made it clear that the Kingdom of Siam would cover all costs and expenses, leaving the design of the pedestal on which the bronze elephant would be placed as well its location to the authorities in Singapore to decide, but proposing Johnston Pier as the appropriate location for the monument, the place where His Majesty the King of Siam had come ashore. In the same correspondence, Caophraya Phraklang told McNair that the King was seriously concerned that people would distrust the idea of a gift and would perhaps spread rumours that His Majesty by presenting Singapore with this bronze elephant primarily meant to glorify himself rather than show his deep gratitude for a very pleasant and dignified reception. McNair made the decision that the bronze memorial of the Siamese king’s visit should be placed in front of the Town Hall. And on 29 June 1872, The Straits Times newspaper announced that the bronze elephant had found its place in Singapore.

In the early 1870s, Singapore’s newspapers termed the elephant “a present” from the King of Siam rather than “a gift.” Ever cautiously examining the intentions and activities of the government, the local press and its public were curious to see if this bronze elephant might be the beginning of an infinite system of gift exchanges. Or was it perhaps meant to be a “tribute,” and did the King ask for protection? Either possibility would not be quite inconceivable: successive rulers of kingdoms in the North had developed a tradition of paying tribute to the emperor of China in exchange of protection from aggression, and rulers in Ayutthaya and later Bangkok had acted as suzerains over states around them, demanding tributes in various forms, with varying degrees of success. In the 1850s and 1860s, King Mongkut had expanded royal contacts with empires even farther away than China: envoys had been sent to Queen Victoria of England and to Napoleon III of France with a wide variety of precious gifts in hesitant attempts at presenting his Royalty as being equal to British and French Royalties. King Mongkut’s diplomatic policy of making contact with the outside world by way of envoys and missions served as the very model that his son, King Chulalongkorn, was to follow in person: he would visit a number of polities outside his realm during his long reign.

Since time immemorial, elephants had been traded to India, China and Japan from Siam, and smaller states had sent elephants as tributes to the court of Ayutthaya and, later, Bangkok. One of the kings of Ayutthaya and, later, King Mongkut had sent elephants to the Kingdom of France as gifts of friendship, but both consignments had ended in failure: Ayutthaya’s elephants had drowned on the way to Europe, King Mongkut’s elephants were eaten by the hungry people of Paris. In consultation with his courtiers, King Chulalongkorn decided to send a bronze elephant to Singapore: a material and solid sign of gratitude and appreciation would be a practical and lasting alternative to a living elephant—and certainly a more effective gift than a white elephant, the symbol of the Kingdom of Siam, gesturing to the virtue and majesty of the Royal House.
According to Siamese tradition, white elephants should be presented to the court in Bangkok whenever they were found or caught; in circles of British travellers, diplomats and literati quite a different story had taken root, inspired by reports about Southeast Asia: ownership of white elephants only caused trouble as those who were given a white elephant by the King of Siam were bound to besmirch their own authority and power if they were unable to take care of the animal in the appropriate manner. The Cakkavati Raja, proud owner of white elephants since time immemorial, decided in 1843 to have a white elephant in the national flag that was to accompany King Chulalongkorn on his first visit to Singapore. A living elephant—white, pink, or grey—would certainly do no good to British-Siamese relations and it made perfect sense to King Chulalongkorn to send Singapore a solid bronze elephant instead. Meant to be “a monument” (the term used by the court in Bangkok), it was made by the royal Division of Traditional Thai Crafts to showcase the expertise of Thai craftsmen and establish its status as an ever-lasting memorial (but then, it is worth mentioning that the four metal plates with inscription attached to the quadrangular pedestal were engraved in Calcutta for 1,200 dollars).

Thus, in front of the Town Hall, the elephant was to stand on its pedestal for some fifty years, and while Singapore was fast expanding and the Town Hall was progressively transformed into Victoria Memorial Hall and, later, Victoria Theater and Concert Hall, the sculpture remained a stable and solid point in front of the building that repeatedly saw its function changing. “A present” of the King of Siam, the Singapore press termed the shiny sculpture initially, and also as “a monument” in memory of the “first visit of a Siamese Monarch to a foreign land.” But regardless how solid and respectable its location, the elephant was to experience contempt, disregard and indifference from generations of Singaporeans, who gradually substituted the more meaningful word “gift” for “present,” as though they were not too impressed by the monument’s beauty and elegance. “A little porker,” “a long nosed pig in copper,” “a relic of one or another visit,” and “a graveyard monument” are some of the qualifications that were reported in The Straits Times around the turn of the century. Moreover, an ever decreasing number of Singaporeans were aware of its existence: “Nine people out of ten who use the Court House have no idea at all what it means,” remarked The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser in 1933. All too often people did not even notice the elephant’s presence, even as the building it was meant to guard changed more than once in function in the fast-expanding city. Largely unnoticed and unseen throughout the years, the bronze was on occasion painted pink and green in celebration of a victory by members of a local European cricket team who apparently wanted to bring the elephant to life.

No wonder that the aristocrat, royal representative of peninsular elephants, was described as “weather beaten” and “lonely” in the press. No wonder that the Department of Public Works had to take occasional action to preserve the elephant’s well-being.
Unfortunately, it is not known what King Chulalongkorn and his son King Vajravudh were thinking of the rather sad state of the Siamese memorial gift on their official visits to the city. Perhaps they were simply happy to know that the royal gift was surviving the relative indifference of the local population. The bronze symbol of Siamese royalty remained silently protecting the Kingdom of Siam from potential invasion and aggression, an emblem of kinship and friendship among the polities of Southeast Asia and beyond.

When in 1919 Singapore celebrated its hundredth anniversary, the bronze elephant—still standing as monumental gift and largely disregarded—had to make place for a statue of Raffles, the founding father of the city. It was moved to the front of the, then, Supreme Court, now The Arts House, a building which it has continued to guard until the present day.

After 1961, authorities of the newly proclaimed Republic of Singapore were made aware of the importance of creating a tradition for the new nation-state; history should be treasured, identity should be taught to the local population, and concerted efforts were made at shaping a narrative about the city’s evolution from a small fishermen’s village to the glorious metropolis of today: memorable buildings erected and remodelled since the city’s foundation should be restored, preserved, and perhaps remodelled again. Moreover, the creation of a strong identity was important in order to be able to play a prominent role in the global economy and in international politics, in particular in the framework of ASEAN.

In developing relevant policies, the authorities must have been reminded of the fact that the King of Siam had been the first who initiated diplomatic and economic connections of friendship and equality between two polities in Southeast Asia a long time ago, symbolised by the bronze elephant placed in front of the Court House, standing on silent and solid guard while the building it was meant to protect changed shape and expanded in the spirit of Singapore’s dynamic development, progressively functioning as Parliament House, Supreme Court, store house, Department of Social Welfare, Legislative Assembly, and Arts House. Lonely, ignored and neglected, once meant to be the symbol of everlasting and grateful friendship, the bronze elephant is still standing on its pedestal, in glory and commemoration of the good relationship between Singapore and Thailand, in the spirit of the wishes of His Majesty Chulalongkorn, King of Siam.

The bronze elephant: a present, a gift, a monument.
Above

Opposite
Siamese Elephant, Kings plain.
Siamesischer Elefant, (König-Platz)
Notes


2 Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 1 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 129, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 8 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 136, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 16 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 138, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 17 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 141, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 22 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 142, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 25 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 147, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand.


4 Caophraya Phrakhlang & McNair come to respect each other in personal meetings and correspondences. Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 22 February 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 145, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 1 March 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 149, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 10 June 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 180, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 10 June 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 181, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 14 July 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 213, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 24 July 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 216, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 18 October 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 250, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
   Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 19 November 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 265, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand;
Correspondence from Siamese Consul at Singapore to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 26 September 1873, MR.5 RL-KT/17, 136, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1872-1877, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand; Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 17 October 1873, MR.5 RL-KT/17, 140, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1872-1877, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand; Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 19 March 1873, MR.5 RL-KT/17, 257, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1872-1877, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand; Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 6 February 1878, MR.5 RL-KT/40, 61, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1877-1879, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand; Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 16 March 1878, MR.5 RL-KT/40, 63, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1877-1879, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand; Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 27 March 1878, Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 27 March 1878, MR.5 RL-KT/40, 66, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1877-1879, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand.

5 Correspondence from Caophraya Phrakhlang to Major McNair, 10 October 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 250, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand.


7 Correspondence from Major McNair to Caophraya Phrakhlang, 19 November 1871, MR.5 RL-KT/3, 265, Correspondence between Caophraya Phrakhlang and Siamese Consul at Singapore about government affairs during 1869-1871, Codex, Royal Secretariat of King Rama V, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand.


10 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
Acrylic on canvas, plexiglass, lightbulb, wood and hunt paper, dimensions variable.
Collection of Singapore Art Museum.