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ELUSIVE TRUTHS: BRITISH MEDIA AND THE THAI MONARCHY

ROGER KERSHAW

Roger Kershaw, now semi-retired, was Lecturer in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Kent, 1970–83, and spent a sabbatical year in Bangkok. The subject of Thai monarchy features extensively in his recent book: *Monarchy in Southeast Asia, The Faces of Tradition in Transition*, Routledge, 2001.

The Royal Court of Thailand: I. The Long Goodbye. II. The King and the Critic. TV documentary by Oxford Television Company. Written and produced by Will Aslett. Screened on BBC-2, 24/25 August 1998.

The Revolutionary King. The True-Life Sequel to *The King and I*. By William Stevenson. Constable, 1999. Pp. xii, 280. £9.99. Pb. ISBN 18411 94514

The Chakri monarchy of Thailand has sacrificed little of its mystique to modernity, indeed during the now 55 years of a reign not untouched by tragedy but always strategically oriented towards democracy against militarism, the monarchy's magnetism has grown stronger and now radiates beyond Thailand's borders. The interest of the Western media reflects this—yet without necessarily tempering fascination with sober and well-informed analysis.

Part I of the two-part TV documentary relates the life of the late Princess Mother (d. 1995), through a series of often moving flashbacks (for instance, her work among the poppy-growing hill-tribes) integrated with the preparations for her funeral—both dimensions enhanced by interviews with her personable private secretary. We learn how the abdication of King Prajadhipok, not long after the military had overthrown absolute monarchy, led to the daughter of a Chinese goldsmith becoming the mother of two kings. The first of these, King Ananda, “died in a mysterious shooting accident at the royal palace” in 1946, hence the succession of the younger brother, Bhumibol. A celebrated “social critic”, Sulak Sivaraksa, is mobilised as principal authority on the mind of the King.

Sulak suggests that the King's only friend was his mother, and that he will be lonely if not adrift without her. But it appears that even in her lifetime she failed to protect, or divert, him from the thrall of ceremony. Symptomatically, the King is shown giving her a sumptuous state funeral which she would have abhorred, and which reputedly acts as a block to the people's participation. There is even an element of deception involved, for her body lay in state for nearly a year in a hidden coffin, not in the

visible golden urn, she being a commoner. The programme presenter builds Sulak's theme into his own commentary and selection of footage, by mocking not just the King's (alleged) addiction to ceremony, but also its (manifest and admitted) grip on many Thais, especially insofar as it serves to uphold social hierarchy. Yet it seems ironical that the presenter himself takes over the Thai popular belief that the Princess Mother's death was a portent of impending economic chaos for Thailand—an event “from which neither she nor the King could save it”, and which would destroy the monarchy itself if the wasteful ritual of “the golden years” were not cut back. The best element of Part I, for this reviewer's taste, is the inclusion of a reading from the Princess Mother's account of her childhood, and interviews with the coffin-maker and the abbot in charge of obsequies—all in Thai with excellent sub-titles.¹

Part II reverts to the theme of an economy “spinning out of control” behind a glittering façade, which is treated as an allegory for the King's pathetic imprisonment in ceremony. Much more than in Part I, Sulak—the critic named in the sub-title for this Part—is now given a platform for his criticism of the King as pawn of the military as well as creature of ceremony. Sulak explains that he is in favour of the Thai monarchy as a stabilizing element, and is even optimistic about the institution under a less dedicated future incumbent. But it is vital that the monarchy should be prepared to adapt to modern times, and this entails willingness to allow criticism of its conduct. The coup-addicted army, which promotes the mystique of monarchy for its own ends, must also change, he urges. The BBC commentary hammers the theme of the pernicious *lèse majesté* law much more than Sulak himself does, and there is no reference to Sulak's historic acquittal on such charges in 1995.²

Then Sulak talks about the previous King's death, and pays honour to Pridi Banomyong (Premier in 1946), for covering up the suicide which the two Kings' mother seemed to believe was the case, by announcing an “accident”. However, Sulak (as seen and heard) does not go on to mention that this generous act backfired, as the military clique was able, firstly, to remove Pridi himself from political leadership by insinuating a murder plot on the left; and secondly, to try to blackmail the royal family by spreading a rumour implicating the new King. It is left to the BBC commentary to evoke this issue, yet in a somewhat evasive way by indicating that Lord Mountbatten, “the Queen's representative” [*sic*], at first suspected the new King but later accepted Thai assurances that this was not so, against a visual background of a Mountbatten letter from the archives which moves up the screen with its lines truncated. (By dint of studious reconstruction with the Rewind button we catch a glimpse of a Viceroy who may have concluded that if the late King was the victim of an accident—yet an accident of the most tragic kind conceivable—the matter should be laid to rest for the sake of the very survival of the monarchy as such.) Next comes a clip on the subject from the present King's interview with the BBC in 1978, in which he seems painfully uncomfortable and evasive.

Now technocrat Anand Panyarachun appears (the King's appointee as Premier in 1992, in between the last military regime and the next democratic phase), and offers more generous advocacy of the King than Sulak tends to do. Anand praises the self-discipline involved in making the transition from Western culture and education to the restrictions of kingly office, with all its weight of transcendental meaning in Thai society. But Sulak is again given the platform, for a critical word about the taboo on touching the royal person, apparently still very much in force today (at any rate, he uses the present tense). The theme of the King's alleged fixation on ceremony surfaces again, and is reiterated by the BBC commentary with no reference, at this point, to the royal rural development projects. We are introduced to the King's intervention in the street fighting of October 1973 (the student revolt that brought down the military dictatorship of the day) and his initiation of a new process of democracy, but this was "a rare foray into politics". The historical progression becomes generally obscure here, for the newsreel footage used to illustrate the October 1973 incident looks suspiciously like October 1976 (when the post-1973 democratic interlude came to an end amidst a massacre of students). As for this incident, the commentary flies in the face of history by lurching into a totally sycophantic mode, saying that once again the King intervened on the side of the students! As if to reinforce this analysis, an army spokesman is seen explaining (to the interviewer) that the coup was the work of "young army officers", against whom the King took a stand. But the informed observer suspects that Major General Ratanavich is actually talking about the attempted 1981 coup against General Prem (unelected Premier, but "the King's Man", in the transitional democracy inaugurated not long after 1976). The documentary only returns to empirical earth with its handling of the 1992 crisis (where the King intervened to calm the street confrontation between the forces of the latest junta leader, General Suchinda, and the pro-democracy, retired General Chamlong, before appointing Anand as "caretaker").

Sulak and his anti-military, only conditionally pro-monarchy, perspectives dominate the rest of the story. The army, we learn, lacking a role in national defence, are only good at "killing their own people", destroying the environment in the name of "development", and playing golf. It is in order to justify the huge military budget in face of non-existent external threats that the army claim to be "protecting the King", and invest not a little of their budget in ceremony—recently and most notably the King's Golden Jubilee celebrations (1996). These photogenic events are awarded ample footage—with sardonic commentary on the Prussian-style uniforms of the fainting soldiers on parade. The Royal Barge ceremony, in which the vessel nearly came to grief in a strong current and had to be set back on course by a police launch, is said to show "the clash of tradition and modernity". Although the King had warned the Thais against rampant materialism, he appears to have been too much a prisoner of ceremony and ally of the army to be able to solve the great economic crash of 1998. (The inference of such quasi-magical potential, if only it were

unbound, seems to come from the presenter, not Sulak.) But despite doubts about the calibre of the heir to the throne, Sulak concludes, the monarchy could have a future if the Thais use the institution with skill and responsibility. From his earlier remarks, this must include a willingness to accept criticism.

Of course it is not easy to describe or analyse how the Thai King has conceived and practised his role in relation to the development of Thai democracy. Everything he does is veiled in an aura of mystery, even his “non-traditional” acts. But perhaps the most serious error of the documentary is to start out from the assumption that there could be an easy answer. Given a more modest mind-set, the presenter would not have been constrained to fulfil viewers’ expectations, thus aroused, with a jumble of facile or exotic clichés. Several of these are actually contradicted by evidence emerging in the programme itself. Several merely reflect a Westerner’s incomprehension of Thai beliefs, or antipathy towards them. The heavy dependence on Sulak Sivaraksa lends a certain coherence and seeming authenticity to the analysis, yet opens the programme to the charge of imbalance. This is not in the best tradition of the BBC. The most disturbing omission, in an analysis which concludes with the financial crisis of 1997, is the complete lack of any reference to the making of the new democratic Constitution during that year, and the King’s supportive role in the process.

Whereas the TV documentary discussed above is “popular” in idiom but does not popularise the King of Thailand in the sense of praising him, the recent book by a British author treats him as a hero of our times but uses a type of presentation which will leave most readers mystified. Just conceivably, the more infuriating features of William Stevenson’s style are essential to his major purpose, which seems to be to implant, by dint of constant repetition, a general impression that King Ananda was the victim of a murder plot by Japanese Intelligence, whereas a careful dissection of the evidence might lead one to an alternative view. Thus at each recurring point where the guilt of the Japanese evil genius Tsuji, or conversely the innocence of Bhumibol, are about to be demonstrated, the writer will switch to some entertaining but totally irrelevant, different topic in the life and times of the royal family, or the culture of Thailand.

It does rather seem as if certain quarters hoped that such a book could lay to rest the “canard” of the King’s involvement once and for all. But in view of the manifest convictions of Lord Mountbatten and King George VI in the matter in 1946, and the clear fact that the elder brother did not die at his own hand with a bullet from his own Colt .45, one may conclude, with utmost sadness, that the royal family would have been better served by a straight-forward “PR job” in the manner of Lord Chalfont,³ or simply by silence. (It is certainly counterproductive to dismiss Mountbatten as an “imperial bully” and King George VI as innately prejudiced and suggestible to any myth or lie.) Even sadder is the disingenuous attempt to exonerate the King for not intervening to save the scapegoats, who were finally executed by Police-General Phao in 1955. If by any chance royal

real-politik was in play, in face of a military clique that had decided to drop blackmail and work to restore the prestige of the monarchy after all (thus needing the executions in order to “bury the rumours which were discrediting the King”), then one can almost imagine that the loyal courtiers who went to their deaths, silent and loyal to the death, would have assented. But Stevenson simply quotes Malcolm MacDonald on their amazing fortitude and loyalty under years of torture. The idea of royal complicity is hardly evoked, even in order to disprove it. One can understand why, but the question does not go away by remaining basically unasked. Something could have been said, also, about Pridi’s loyalty in announcing “an accident”, no doubt in line with the Princess Mother’s briefing, whatever he may have believed privately.

On the other hand, Stevenson’s privileged position as an informal mouthpiece of the King has guaranteed, for us, the privilege of access to the royal family’s construction of its own past and present role. This includes not only the Princess Mother’s sense of a mission to turn back the tide of post-1932 military dominance in favour of a new “Chakri Restoration”, and her Buddhist activism; but also the King’s own sense that he “became his brother” at the latter’s death and had to take up the mantle of his mission to work for a “self-reliant republic”; and the poignant dilemma of Bhumibol as he came to comprehend that his most potent political asset was precisely the traditional charisma which should have no place in a modern social order. Not less significant is the way Bhumibol sees himself as custodian of the ideals of his father too (the princely Dr Mahidol) and as an adapter of the strategic arts of his great grandfather (Rama IV, dubbed “Mongkut” in the West).⁴

On the very negative side, however, we meet a would-be agenda personal to the writer himself, comprising attempts to enshrine a good name for British Second World War Intelligence in general and for Sir William Stephenson in particular. Stephenson had been the junior Stevenson’s boss in clandestine operations in Thailand at the end of the war. It was Stephenson who had been convinced that Tsuji was behind the regicide, and was sure he would have proved it but for American obstruction of investigations in Japan. It was Stevenson who, many years later, wrote the book *A Man Called Intrepid*,⁵ a panacea for Stephenson and his philosophy of the unknown patriot who, acting totally alone and justified by his superior understanding of international realities, saves his country by flouting formal law and conventional norms. It was King Bhumibol who then translated this book into Thai, not only moved by gratitude for the man who had tried to clear his own name in the 1940s, but genuinely inspired by a philosophy that seemed to fit the moral requirements of a patriot king voyaging in uncharted and treacherous political waters. And it was again King Bhumibol who put out feelers to Stevenson to come to Thailand and, without quite being commissioned, compose a panacea for himself.

Not the least of the writer’s qualifications, as it turned out, was his burning Anglo-centric contempt for American policy towards Thailand

at every period, including the US-supported ascendancy of Phibul and the years of the Thai Communist insurgency: Stevenson's views coincided with the King's faith in political rather than military solutions to dissidence. In this context, Stevenson goes to the length of identifying the King as a "friend of the students" who fled Bangkok after October 1976, totally suppressing the King's involvement in the rehabilitation of Field Marshal Thanom which led up to that coup. (This distorted perspective—consistent, interestingly, with Will Aslett's documentary—is in sad contrast to the detailed and moving account of the King's solicitude for the demonstrating students in October 1973.) Stevenson also reveals considerable contempt for the military men whose wartime background was in the Japanese-sponsored (and Tsuji-linked) Northern Command. This must be generally in tune with the feelings of the royal family, but the King's behaviour in 1976, however explicable in the circumstances of the time, would have seemed too contradictory to be rationalised. Or was omission committed here simply because the royal family supplied partial information? Again and again, one is struck by Stevenson's ignorance of political history.⁶

Academic students of Thailand may also feel uncomfortable about Stevenson's tendency to mock at Thai myth and traditional beliefs. We, by contrast, tend to cultivate a detachment which is in fact deeply sympathetic to the subject; we may even feel nostalgic or protective towards cultural forms which are disappearing. But this might not be an option for a King who sees how much tradition is manipulated by elites who are themselves a typical phenomenon of modernization. Again, the most appropriate response to the book may be one of gratitude for its probably accurate understandings of the King's thinking and personality. Stevenson's credibility gains from passing hints that he met a touch of "innocence" in the King, a certain kind of "naivety"; and from the extraordinary passages in which he suggests the King's alienation from the Queen, and insinuates the same in regard to his son-and-heir.⁷

Of course this could be based on court gossip, but Stevenson did obviously become a confidant of several individuals at a very high level. His presumption—in Thai terms—in using the family nicknames "Nan" and "Lek" for King Ananda and King Bhumibol may be one factor behind the tacit "ban" on the book in Thailand.⁸ An even more likely reason is that he has dwelt too much on the old allegations against the present King, precisely in the process of trying to "set the record straight". Thus, he proves to be quite insensitive in some ways, but if he had been more sensitive he could scarcely have committed so many tantalising insights to paper. In short, this book is a mine of potential historical leads, which scholars, sooner or later, will want to follow up.

Scholars should, however, give low priority to some apparent myth-making on Stevenson's own part, such as the claim that the King delayed his mother's funeral until the financial crisis broke, so that he could use the ceremony as a platform to demonstrate that his mother's and his own warnings had been correct.⁹ This mixing of objective observation with

orientalist fantasy—in much the same idiom as the TV documentary reviewed above—may serve to suggest that there are still gaps to be filled in our knowledge and interpretation of Thailand, and that strict academic research indeed has a part to play in this.

There is little comfort in the fact that key clichés of the two productions reviewed contradict each other. It is in the nature of cliché not to stimulate the critical faculty but to deaden it. Cumulative confusion can only reinforce this tendency. The media may set a standard of credibility which discredits our own thoughtful investigation and interpretation as unnecessarily dull, pathetically pedantic, and possibly downright wrong. This seems a matter for special regret if the consumers of these packages on exotic countries include not only or mainly the general public but numbers of opinion-formers, not to say the decision-makers of international commerce and foreign relations.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Less edifying is the persistent mockery of Thai custom in the script, as well as the presenter's persistent references to the King's "assession" [*sic*—as heard].

2. Sulak, a cultural icon for many Western Thailand-specialists, worked in London on the BBC World Service during the 1960s. He has often depended on the sponsorship of Western academe (for international publicity, university attachments abroad) at times of prosecution for his courageous criticisms of the monarchical institution in Thailand. See further on Sulak and *lèse-majesté* in Roger Kershaw, *Monarchy in Southeast Asia. The faces of tradition in transition* (London, Routledge, 2001), pp 146–149.

3. Alun Chalfont *By God's Will. A Portrait of the Sultan of Brunei* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989).

4. Of more subtle interest is Bhumibol's admiration for traditional Chinese statecraft and international strategy. One wonders how much this may be "in the blood" of the Chakris, so to speak, in view of their ancestry, not to speak of Bhumibol's own maternal grandfather. But the kind of nuance that Stevenson likes to evoke is the fact that the name of a fruit "sounded to the untutored ear like *mongkut*" (p. 126). Presumably this refers to *mangkhut*, the mangosteen, but "Mongkut" was not the King's Thai name anyway.

5. William Stevenson, *A Man called Intrepid: the Secret War* (London, Macmillan, 1976).

6. For instance, at one point he confuses P.M. Anand with Thailand's "first democratic Premier" (p. 6) and later describes his appointment in 1992 as the first (p. 226—in fact the first happened in 1991, under General Suchinda). General Suchinda is vividly described in the act of "seizing power" in 1992 (pp. 221–223—yet, already in power, he was only girding himself at this point to deal with the pro-democracy demonstrations). An important facilitating, if not initiating, role in the rise of Field Marshal Sarit in 1957 is attributed to the King (p. 142—this is immensely interesting, being previously unpublicised, but were the existing dictators really "surrounded in their homes" by the tanks, or in Government House?). P. M. Kukrit of 1975–76 was "dismissed by the army" (p. 189 this is very controversial). The 1997 Constitution was drafted in a way that "unties the King's tongue" (p. 251—this aspect has escaped other observers).

7. See p. 245 on the Queen; pp. 197, 235 on the Crown Prince and possibilities of a female succession. Unfortunately, the writer does not clarify the nature of the King's prerogative to change the succession—which would have to be effected, if at all, through the Palace Law.

8. See Dalya Alberge, "Thai king's tale unable to be told in Bangkok", *The Times*, 15 October 1999.

9. See Chapter 30, esp. p. 247.

10. The writer received generous support for graduate studies from the British Government between 1965–68, under the Area Studies expansion promoted by the "Hayter Report". See University Grants Committee, *Report of the Sub-Committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* (London, HMSO, 1961). Ironically, further quite generous

funding was put up by a later administration in 1983 to encourage university staff in poorly subscribed subjects to trade in their tenure and leave. There is room for a study of the misplaced optimism of Sir William Hayter's Committee that the new academic specialists would be able, in a "competitive" arena, to influence government, business and public on Third World matters, and would see long-term student demand for their programmes.

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