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Racing and the construction of Thai nationalism

Prince Chula Chakrabongse and Prince Birabongse Bhanudej were sent to England to study at Harrow and Eton in the 1920s. They lived as Thai princes among the English upper class and indulged in the pastimes of that class, such as athletics, flying and motor car racing. Bira became a successful race car driver on the White Mouse Racing Team, managed by Chula. He even won the Gold Star, awarded to the best 'British' race car driver, in three consecutive years: 1936, 1937 and 1938. His achievements were celebrated in Thailand as a sign of national greatness and of Thailand's parity with the West. Racing was, and still is, closely associated with the nation. Bira and Chula's story contributes to the study of the top-down construction of Thai nationalism. Thai nationalism is not about an armed struggle against colonial oppressors. It is about mastering Western civilisation in attempts to appear equal. It is a nationalism closely associated with the monarchy, members of the royal family, aristocrats and bureaucratic servants of the Crown.

On 9 January 1988, a very strange event took place in the heart of old Bangkok. Fourteen vintage race cars were transported from secure military compounds to the Royal Equestrian Plaza for display and later to race up and down the Ratchadamnoen—the Royal Boulevard. There was much excitement and mayhem, as security was quite lax and no one really knew what to make of the sight of such old cars. The drivers and mechanics were all Caucasians, and the lone female driver, who looked European, spoke perfect Thai. Stern-looking military policemen provided what security there was, along with transportation. Thai spectators lined the two sides

of the boulevard; many also walked freely among the staging race cars. A week later, the cars would also race at the Pattaya International Race Circuit near the famous beach resort town of Pattaya. For the occasion, the race circuit was renamed the ‘Bira International Race Circuit’ to honour Thailand’s only successful international race car driver.¹

This 1988 event on Ratchadamnoen was a ‘re-enactment’ of the Bangkok Grand Prix International Motor Race that was supposed to take place on 10 December 1939. Race car teams and drivers from Europe committed to participate in that race in Bangkok. Posters designed by Prince Birabongse Bhanudej (Phiraphongphanudet, 1914–85) were printed, and an elaborate Thai silver cup was made especially for the grand occasion. The Bangkok Grand Prix was the brainchild of Prince Chula Chakrabongse (Chulachakraphong, 1908–63) and Prince Birabongse.² The two Thai princes had been sent to England to study and to learn the ways of the West. They became bicultural and bilingual Thais, and were two of the original Westernised Oriental Gentlemen, or WOGs.³ Unfortunately, the Bangkok Grand Prix never took place because the outbreak of the Second World War interrupted it.⁴

One of the activities in which the two princes indulged while in the United Kingdom was automotive racing. They fielded a Thai racing team—the White Mouse Racing Team—beginning in 1935. This team

1 Sanphasiri Wiriyasiri, comp., *Jao dara thong phu phlik prawattisat [The golden star who changed history]* (Bangkok: Grand Prix International, 1988), 70. A videotaped recording of the event has been released under the title *Romulus returns to Siam* (Isle of Man: Duke Marketing, 2011). Automobile racing is still popular in Thailand today and several new racing circuits have been built. The most modern facility is now in Buriram, built by the politician Newin Chitchob.

2 This chapter refers to the two princes as Chula and Bira. The name that Bira used during his racing career was B. Bira. At times, he was also known as Prince Bira. Prince Chula authored many books, using several versions of his name. These included Prince Chula Chakrabongse, HRH Prince Chula of Siam, Phrajao worawongthoe phraongjao Chulachakrabongse and others. Citations to his works in this chapter reflect the different versions of his name under which the prince published.

3 Craig Reynolds and I once toyed with the idea that we should write about Thai Westernised Oriental Gentlemen (WOGs) because through them we might better understand Thai culture. The original term WOG may have been used in British India to refer to natives who were ‘worthy oriental gentlemen’, although Reynolds now tells me that this etymology and others similar are false. In postcolonial parlance, WOGs are despised by their own people for wanting to be like their colonial masters. Yet they are seen by their masters as mimics who are ‘almost but not quite’. But, in the Thai case, the WOGs are Thai princes sent to study in Europe who became models of modernity and sophistication to be emulated. Even today, fully Westernised Thais are esteemed and not ridiculed. For a discussion of mimicry, see Homi K. (Homi K. Bhabha) Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), especially Chapter 4.

4 Twelve drivers had committed to race in the Bangkok Grand Prix. They were from France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Switzerland and Bira from Thailand: Prince Chula of Siam, *Blue and yellow: Being an account of two seasons of B. Bira, the racing motorist, 1939 and 1946* (London: G. T. Foulis, 1947), 92–3.

was most active in 1936, 1937 and 1938 until the Second World War interrupted its activities. After hostilities ended, Bira continued to race into the 1950s during the early years of Grand Prix Formula One events. He drove for several teams, but less successfully than in the prewar period. His name and exploits are chronicled in most books about the early days of automobile racing.⁵

This chapter introduces the two princes and their racing successes in Europe. It contextualises their experiences in the Thai public's perception of the West, of modernity and of nationalism. Unlike neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, each of which struggles against how Western colonialism defined nationalism, in Thailand, nationalism was based on an embrace and mastery of Western modernity and on harnessing that modernity to raise the nation to an equivalent level of civilisation.⁶

Thai nationalism is thus top-down nationalism, constructed by members of the royal, aristocratic and political elites with little input from below. The successes of the two princes in racing and the celebration of their exploits by the post-1932 civilian–military People's Party regime in Bangkok reinforced top-down nationalism. This nationalism is still manifest today in the close connection between the nation on the one hand, and the monarchy and the 'good and morally superior' aristocracy and bureaucrats who serve the Crown on the other. The people are thus consumers of Thai nationalism, rather than active participants in its construction. During the 1988 enactment of the race that never happened, the Thai government was also proud to point out that Siam or Thailand was the first Asian country to be involved in international motor racing. This affirmation of national pride and nationalism underlined the close association of Thai nationalism with the monarchy and the exploits of members of the royal family.

5 Peter Stevenson, *Driving forces: The Grand Prix racing world caught in the maelstrom of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Bentley, 2000), 187–93; Robert Grey Reynolds Jr, *Prince Bira* (Smashwords ebook, 2016); Bruce Jones, ed., *The ultimate encyclopedia of Formula One* (Osceola, WI: 1995), 133.

6 Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Saichon Sattayanurak, *Khwamplianplaeng nai kansang 'chat thai' lae 'khwampen thai' doi luang wichit wathakan* [*Changes in Wichit Wathakan's construction of 'the Thai nation' and 'Thainess'*] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002); Walter Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the development of Thai nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1978). See also Chapter 1 in this volume.

The Bangkok Grand Prix of 1939

The year 1988 was significant because it brought King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 60th birthday, the important and auspicious completion of his fifth 12-year cycle. General Prem Tinsulanonda, who served as prime minister as the year began, was a major promoter of the authority and influence of the Crown in helping to maintain political stability—especially as an institution to counterbalance the growing political power of elected civilian politicians.⁷ Prem, and perhaps the king, believed that the military still had a role to play in Thai politics, and that the prime minister need not be elected. The Crown and senior military officers were distrustful of the new class of politicians, whose wealth built political parties that contested the power of the military–monarchy alliance put into place by the regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in the early 1960s.⁸

Appointed prime minister with the firm support of the palace, General Prem weathered coups led by young army officers in 1981 and 1985.⁹ The coup in 1981 was especially significant because Prem was able to escape from Bangkok to the headquarters of Thailand's Second Army Region in Nakhon Ratchasima, accompanied by the royal family. It was from that city that the queen broadcast a message on radio supporting Prem. From that time until the present, Prem has been most loyal to the palace. After the elected Prime Minister Chatchai Chunnawan replaced him in mid-1988, the king appointed Prem to the Privy Council. Soon afterwards, he received the title Statesman (*ratthaburut*). Pridi Phanomyong (1900–83) was the only other Thai ever to have held this title.

To honour the king's 60th birthday in 1987, Prem was willing to expend enormous government resources. He also led the popular call to confer the title *maharat*, or The Great, on King Bhumibol. This title had only been used to refer to King Ramkamhaeng (r. 1279–98), King Taksin

7 Munlanithi ratthaburut (The Statesman Foundation), *Ratthaburut chue Prem [A statesman named Prem]* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995).

8 Duncan McCargo, ed., *Reforming Thai politics* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2002), 1–12. The standard text on the Sarit regime is Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition).

9 Chai-anan Samudavanija, *The Thai young Turks* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982); Suchit Bunbongkarn, *The military in Thai politics, 1981–1986* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987).

(r. 1767–82) and King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). King Bhumibol also enjoyed the title of *maharat jao haeng kankila* (Great King of Sport), a reference to the king's successes as a fierce competitor in sailing events.¹⁰

Before his untimely death in a London Underground station on 23 December 1985, Prince Bira had wanted to recreate the never-staged Bangkok Grand Prix to honour the king. He had discussed his idea with Sanphasiri Wiriyasiri, a well-known media personality.¹¹ Sanphasiri later established a museum commemorating Bira and his racing career at Bangkok's Chatuchak Park.¹² With Bira deceased, Sanphasiri suggested this event to General Chaowalit Yongchaiyut, the newly appointed army commander-in-chief.¹³

By 1987, General Chaowalit had begun to position himself to replace General Prem as a future national political leader. He was already army chief, and the unofficial head of the faction of generals known as the 'Democratic Soldiers' who had put together Prem's successful strategy to weaken the Communist Party of Thailand and bring disillusioned students back from the jungles.¹⁴ Chaowalit also had family ties to the palace. This last fact became clearer to the public when the army decided to organise the Bangkok Grand Prix to honour King Bhumibol.

General Chaowalit promoted the event as a celebration of the king's prowess as a great sportsman. He also pointed out that both Prince Bira and Prince Chula were military men, having served as officers in the Palace Guard.¹⁵ More importantly, their royal fathers—Field Marshal Prince Bhanurangsi and Field Marshal Prince Chakrabongse—had helped to build the modern Thai army. Prince Bhanurangsi was a younger full brother of King Chulalongkorn; Prince Chakrabongse was the favourite son of King Chulalongkorn, born to one of his major queens, Queen Soawabha.

10 Sanphasiri et al., *The golden star*, 37.

11 Sanphasiri was the main author of the commemorative volume *Jao dara thong phu phlik prawattisat* [*The golden star that changed history*] (1988).

12 The one time that I visited the museum, it was closed. Through the grimy glass windows I could see a shrine to honour Bira and some very dusty memorabilia. It was as if to say that all his achievements had been forgotten.

13 Sanphasiri et al., *The golden star*, 6.

14 Suchit, *The military in Thai politics*, Chapter 50.

15 Prince Bira was given a military appointment as first lieutenant in the Thai army after winning the Gold Star award for his racing (*Prachachat*, 17 November 1937).

General Chaowalit, a commoner, is nonetheless related to Prince Bira through Bira's commoner mother, whose family name was Yongchaiyut.¹⁶ Therefore, with General Chaowalit's endorsement, the 14 race cars, their drivers and crew were able to bypass the usual bureaucratic red tape that would have blocked such an event.

The most special car was Prince Bira's 1935 ERA (English Racing Automobile) R2B race car that he campaigned with from 1935 to 1947. Momratchawong Narisa Chakrabongse, Prince Chula's only daughter, now owns this car, which is on display at the Toy and Model Museum in London. It was the sixth race car of only 17 that the ERA company produced before it folded in 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War. Bira named his first race car Romulus. He bought a sister—or, perhaps more appropriately, brother—car shortly after as a spare; it was called Remus. Romulus and Remus sported the Bira hyacinth blue colour on their bodies, while their chassis and wheels were painted yellow, symbolising the Thai royal house of Chakri.¹⁷ These colours became known later as the Thai racing colours. During the early days of racing, each nation chose its 'racing colours'. The modern Thai red, white and blue flag was also painted on the hood and rear quarter of Bira's racing cars. A whimsical cartoon caricature of a white mouse standing on its hind legs also appeared on the cowling that protected the side mirror on the driver's left. The Thai team was known as White Mouse Racing, playing on Prince Chula's Thai nickname Nu, meaning 'mouse'. I am not certain whether 'white' was an ironic reference to his complexion, which was quite different from other Thai because Prince Chula's mother was Russian.¹⁸

A short passage from a 1964 book covering seven decades of Grand Prix motor racing gives testament to Bira's achievements.

16 A simplified chart of Chula and Bira's family tree appears in Princess Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I: Life with the motor racing Prince of Siam* (Dorset: Veloce, 1992), 5.

17 At the start of his career, Bira raced under the auspices of the British Racing Drivers' Club. A few years later, Thailand became the first Asian member of the International Automobile Association, which sanctioned races in Europe. Because the colour blue was already claimed by France, Thailand chose blue and yellow instead. The blue colour was from a dress worn by a Danish girl whom Chula and Bira met at a restaurant. They asked her for a small piece of the dress and she obliged: Prince Chula of Thailand (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Wheels at speed* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1946), 16.

18 Chula's mother was Ekaterina Ivanova Desnitsky. The story of his father and mother's relationship can be found in Eileen Hunter and Narisa Chakrabongse, *Katya and the Prince of Siam* (Bangkok: River Books, 1994). Another good source for Chula's life is Narisa Chakrabongse, *100 pi chunchakraphong 1908–2008 [The centenary of Chulachakrabongse 1908–2008]* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), which includes a foreword by his daughter Narisa.

The remarkable successes of the Chula-Bira equipe have been modestly chronicled by Prince Chula in his four books ... and these together with Bira's own contribution, *Bits and Pieces*, give a very interesting and well-balanced account of racing during the years 1935–1946. Although Bira only started racing in 1935, he rapidly gained an international reputation, whether at the wheel of an ERA, Maserati, BMW, or Delahaye, winning many races during 1936–1939. In the three immediate post-war years the Chula-Bira equipe ran with limited success, and towards the end of 1948 the partnership was dissolved. In 1949, Bira drove a 1½ litre 4CLT Maserati for the Plate Stable in a great many events, being first in the Swedish Grand Prix, second at San Remo, Mar del Plata, Albi (France), Perpignana (Juan Manuel Fangio won first), and the Grand Prix of France, and third at Zandvoort and in the European Grand Prix. Bira was an extremely polished and tremendously fast driver, more than capable of holding his own with the best.¹⁹

In November 1987, Romulus arrived in Bangkok by Thai International air freight and was received with great respect and honour. The car was placed in a specially constructed pavilion, draped with auspicious garlands and ultimately blessed by the Supreme Patriarch of Thai Buddhism himself. The Thai automotive magazine *Grand Prix* celebrated the return of Romulus to Bangkok after a 50-year absence by proclaiming that the car 'represent[ed] the bravery and superiority of the whole Thai nation'.²⁰ Later sections of this chapter explore the symbolism of the car, Bira's achievements and their relationship with Thai nationalism.

Most of the drivers and owners of the cars flown to Bangkok for the January 1988 event were men from England, the United States and Australia. The only female driver was Narisa Chakrabongse, the owner of Romulus—Bira's most successful race car. Because her mother was English and her father was half-Thai and half-Russian, she was three-quarters European. However, she spoke impeccable Thai, much to the astonishment of the Thai spectators, as we can see in the video *Romulus returns to Siam*. The presence of *luk khrueng*—Thais of mixed heritage—is today not unusual, as they have found a niche in the Thai entertainment and modelling businesses. But it was unusual to come across an older *luk khrueng* in the late 1980s, especially one who appeared more European than Thai but spoke perfect Thai. Narisa's background meant that the only

19 George Monkhouse and Roland King-Farlow, *Grand Prix racing: Facts and figures, 1894–1963* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1964), 158.

20 'Rot khan ni khue tua thaen khwamyinyong khong khon thai thang chat' ['This car represents the greatness of the entire Thai nation'], *Grand Prix*, 17(6) (1987): 65–8.

‘Thai’ among the group of drivers was the lone female and that perhaps the only obvious outward sign that identified her as ‘Thai’ was her ability to speak the language.

Narisa pushed the boundaries of what it means to be Thai even further than her father had, with his own ambiguous identity. Prince Chula had inherited European looks from his mother. Had his mother been a Thai, he would have been in line for accession to the throne after the abdication of his uncle, King Prachathipok, in 1935. Prince Chula at times expressed his bitterness about not being fully Thai.²¹ More European-looking than her father, Narisa epitomises the central argument of this chapter: Thai nationalism is an embrace of European or Western culture. It is grounded in the ability of the Thai elite to ‘pass’ as culturally European. That elite, and the Thais more broadly, are therefore equal to their Western counterparts. This is the nationalism that is passed on to the rest of the population, people outside the elite, for their consumption.

Of the 14 race cars used in the January 1988 event in Bangkok, five were cars that Bira had raced. Three of the cars made famous by Bira’s exploits were ERA race cars. The most famous of the three were the first pair of ERA cars that Prince Chula had bought for Bira. Giving the cars names reflected the heritage of the owners, whose forebears had given royal war elephants, barges, coaches and automobiles elaborate names suited to the chariots of kings. The gods in Thai and Hindu mythology had mighty steeds with formidable names. Why not then give names to the modern chariots of kings and princes?

21 According to Bira’s first wife, Ceril Heycock, Chula was unhappy that his mother remarried after his father’s death. He allegedly remarked that his chances of becoming king were diminished now that his mother was married to an American; Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I*, 20. The jury is still out on whether Chula wanted to be king. It is revealing, however, that his uncle, the future King Prachathipok, wrote a letter to Chula asking him never to think about this possibility. This letter was written in English, a fact that reinforces the notion of the ambiguous identity of the royals raised in this article. The following is a relevant quotation from that letter of 26 June 1929:

You asked me whether you will be allowed to have any responsible post when you return.
Of course you will. What I meant was that you must never think of occupying the throne.
I doubt what are your ambitions, but I only wish to warn you about one ambition that you will have to put away forever for you and yours ...

(Narisa, *100 pi chunchakraphong*, 66–7). The letter also reflects the growing tension between Chula and this uncle. In contrast, his other uncle, King Vajiravudh, doted on Chula. Vajiravudh’s letters to Chula were always warm, in Thai, and ended with ‘From your uncle who loves Nu [Chula’s nickname].’ Prachathipok did not like the fact that his elder brother, Chula’s father, had married a foreigner. His letter of 29 June 1929 ended with, ‘I wish you would address me as “Dear Uncle” as you used to’. Vajiravudh’s letters to Chula appear in Narisa, *100 pi chunchakraphong*, 58–61.

Perhaps conscious or subconscious symbolism figured in the selection of the names Romulus and Remus for this pair of race cars, relating to the Thai princes' control or conquest of the best of Europe (Rome) in international competition. Romulus was the first successful race car driven by Bira. He used Remus sparingly and also as a source of spare parts for Romulus until it was sold to new owners, who continued to race it in vintage races.²² It still sports the red, white and blue Thai flag on its left flank. The Bangkok Grand Prix of 1988 was the first time in decades that the two cars were reunited.

Another ERA car that saw some success in races was a later and more powerful model. The princes gave it the name 'Hanuman' after the mythical monkey warrior in the *Ramayana*. Bira won five races with this car during 1938–39. The car was hard to control, and Bira thought that it was *kere* (unruly). Hence its name, Hanuman. The anthropomorphised race car was said to have gone berserk (*phlaeng rit*) in July 1939 when it flew off the track, barely missed hitting a tree and landed in a bush.²³ Bira walked away unscathed and unperturbed. The European press reported this incident and expressed awe at how calm and serene Bira had been.²⁴ The car was later sold to the team mechanic who restored and raced it.

The fourth among Bira's and Chula's race cars that came to Thailand for the 1988 event was a Delage race car made in France. The famous English driver Richard Seaman, who went on to European Grand Prix fame, had raced this car. Seaman was hired by the Mercedes Benz racing team, which was subsidised by Hitler. But in 1936, the newcomer Prince Bira in fact outscored Seaman in the competition for the prestigious Road Racing Gold Star award of the British Racing Drivers' Club.²⁵ Subsequently, Chula bought Seaman's Delage and replaced its 1500cc eight-cylinder engine with a 2000cc six-cylinder engine made by ERA.

22 Sanphasiri, *The golden star*, 49.

23 Prince Birabongse of Thailand, *Bits and pieces: Being motor racing recollections of 'B. Bira'* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1942), 11–15. Bira treated his cars as if they had souls and not as inanimate objects. He remarked that this was why he was successful as a race car driver; he really understood and could communicate with his cars. In his 1942 book, Bira made line drawings of his race cars with faces and limbs and in poses in which they interacted with him as driver and friend.

24 On 23 August 1936, King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII), Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej, Princess Galyani Vadhana and the Princess Mother attended a race to see Bira perform. Unfortunately, Bira's car suffered mechanical problems while he was leading the race. A picture of the king at this race was published in Bangkok and widely circulated. Bira kept this picture in his wallet until his death. This picture of the three siblings with Bira and an accompanying account appear in Sanphasiri, *The golden star*, 24–5.

25 Prince Chula of Thailand, *Dick Seaman: Racing motorist* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1948), 100.

Bira and Chula had also once owned the fifth car entered in the 1988 race, the Italian Maserati race car that they had bought in 1936. Bira won two races in that car and placed second eight times. The car was sold soon after the end of the Second World War. By 1988, its owner was an Englishman living in the United States. He had bought the car for £350,000 just before the Bangkok Grand Prix so he could participate in it.²⁶ The car still sported the painted caricature of a smiling white mouse standing on its hind legs, the symbol of Chula's White Mouse Racing Team.

The remaining cars in the 1988 field were an MG K3 Magnet similar to the one that Bira had used to start his racing career, four Bugattis (Type 51), an Alfa Romeo P3 (monoposto) and a 1939 BMW 328.

On 9 January 1988, the 14 cars raced up and down Ratchadamnoen Boulevard as an exhibition for the public to witness. This theatrical display was reminiscent of the demonstration that Bira gave on 5 December 1937, when he was invited back to Bangkok to show off Romulus to the adoring Bangkok public.²⁷ Bira blasted up and down the Royal Boulevard to the delight of the spectators, who were lined thickly along the two sides of the road. Although Narisa re-enacted Bira's original display of speed, the two events proved quite different.

There seemed to be less interest and less bewilderment the second time around. Perhaps the only bewilderment was that the re-enactment lacked the patriotic, even nationalistic meaning intended in the original. The demonstration was anachronistic and seemed out of place—a handful of old race cars, roaring up and down Ratchadamnoen at speeds that most Bangkok cabbies could match. The drivers were also all *farang*, or Caucasian, including a Thai woman who looked *farang*. It was quite a leap to connect this fanfare to the celebration of the prowess of King Bhumibol, the 'Great King of Sports'.²⁸

26 Sanphasiri, *The golden star*, 55.

27 Phrajao worawongthoe phraongjao junjakraphong (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Thai chana: rueang kankhaengkhan khong pho phira nakkhaprot Thai nai yurop* [*Thai victorious: The racing of B. Bira, a Thai race car driver in Europe*] (Bangkok: Thainitthi, 1973), 169–72.

28 The king's interest in fast cars was once again obvious when, on 18 December 2010, the Australian driver Mark Webber brought the winning Formula One Red Bull race car to Siriraj Hospital for the king to see. The Red Bull energy drink was invented in Thailand. Mark Webber also drove that race car up and down Ratchadamnoen Boulevard, just as Bira did in 1937 (*Bangkok post*, 18 December 2010). The appearance of the Formula One car was part of the celebrations for the king's 83rd birthday.

To top it off, the final garden reception for the participants in the 1988 event was a private affair held on the grounds of the British Embassy on Wireless Road. The statue of a seated Queen Victoria loomed over the guests, again somewhat anachronistically in 20th-century Bangkok. The scene suggested gentler times, a colonial era when the British were still lords and masters of the Orient, and when Thai royalty emulated the British and their pastimes in an attempt to appear *siwilai* (civilised) and *than samai* (modern).²⁹

The royals, their toys and mastery of the modern

Maurizio Peleggi's provocative book, *Lords of things*, argued that the Thai royalty's acquisition of gadgets, flatware, art, technology and other objects was a way to project the self-image of an emerging modernising elite.³⁰ It was also a way for members of that royal elite to make a place for themselves among the other royals of the world. In a sense, the Thai royals wanted to appear the same as their counterparts in Europe. By demonstrating to the Thai people that they looked like modern, universal—read, European—royals, they were ipso facto the equals of the Europeans, the harbingers of modernity. This assumed equality was problematic because it was never clear if the European royalty accepted the Thai royalty as equals.³¹

29 *Siwilai* resonates with civilised, a Thai appropriation for what is considered high international culture; see Chapter 1, this volume, note 1. In the early 20th century, this meant British culture. The garden party at the end of the races recalled times for which there was considerable nostalgia. See Duke Marketing, *Romulus returns to Siam*.

30 Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of things: The fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's modern image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

31 Having previously based its legitimacy on mythological Hindu gods, the late 19th and early 20th-century Thai monarchy had to deal with a modern ideal of kingship. The main models were no longer Asian but European. King Chulalongkorn's trips to Europe, visits with European monarchs, the acquisition of the trappings of European culture and the king's decision to send his sons to study in Europe demonstrated the shift in the way that the Thai monarchy viewed its own future. The king's sentiments may be glimpsed in *Phraratchaniphon rueang klai ban* [*Far from home*] (Bangkok: Sophonphatthana thanakan, 1923). Pictures of ruling monarchs that appear in European magazines or postcards would include the non-European monarchs of China, Japan and Siam. But in most instances, the major European monarchs appear in pictures larger than the others. This photographic depiction clearly hints that Chulalongkorn was accepted by other monarchs but perhaps not as an equal. See, for example, Nana Krailoek, *Bueanglang phrabatsomdet phrachulachomklao jaoyubua sadet praphat yurop* [*Fact about King Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe*] (Bangkok: Sinlapawatthanatham, 2006), 18–19, 193.

Prince Chula was born in 1908, the son of Prince Chakrabongse, who was third in line to the throne. Prince Chakrabongse had been sent to Russia to study military science in response to a remark made by Czar Nicolas II to King Chulalongkorn, asking that the latter send a son to study in Russia.³² After finishing military school, Prince Chakrabongse became an officer in the Russian army. He subsequently fell in love with a Russian woman, and they married without the king's consent. Had he asked for permission and had the king refused, Prince Chakrabongse would have had to obey his father's wishes. After returning to live in Thailand, the couple had a son, Chula Chakrabongse, who grew up under the watchful eyes of his grandmother, Queen Saowabha, two of whose sons would become Rama VI and Rama VII. Had Prince Chakrabongse lived longer, he might have been considered for the throne, with the possible objection that his wife was Russian.

Prince Chula's own account suggested that his grandfather, King Chulalongkorn, accepted him but that he was not among the king's favourite grandchildren.³³ Later in life, it was his uncle, King Vajiravudh, or Rama VI (r. 1910–25), who would be his patron. By the time of Prince Chula's birth, Bangkok had already become a nascent centre of modernity. King Chulalongkorn was determined to make Thailand modern, like the Western countries that he had visited and admired for their technological and military achievements. He believed that, if Thailand appeared to be modern like the West, the colonial powers would have fewer reasons to want to save Thailand from itself.³⁴

Chulalongkorn's court became the centre of symbols of modernity. It adopted European couture, cutlery and dinnerware, furniture and art as decoration. English words soon inserted themselves into the speech patterns of the royals and educated elite. Consumption of all things Western, especially technological gadgets and machines, became symbols of modernity. And among these technological wonders was the motor car.

32 Royal Thai Embassy, Moscow, and Boon Rawd Trading International, *From your friend: 110 years of relations between Thailand and Russia* (Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 2007), 34–6; HRH Prince Chula (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Brought up in England* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1943), 11.

33 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 18–20.

34 For a short account of the reforms instituted by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, see David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A short history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), especially Chapter 7.

The motor car was an especially powerful representation of modernity and power. Its complicated mechanical components, loud noise and immense power conveyed a sense of awe and excitement. While the majority of the Thai population still walked without shoes and rode horse- or water buffalo-drawn carts or buggies, the royals paraded up and down newly constructed avenues in Bangkok in their automobiles.³⁵ This parade of cars became ‘spectacles of modernity’ that were hard to ignore.³⁶

After returning from his visit to Europe in 1897, Chulalongkorn was determined to transform Bangkok into a modern city. He built a new palace precinct, the Dusit Garden City, whose compound was crisscrossed with paved roads for the motor car—a model of the modern city. One of the earliest memories that Prince Chula had of his grandfather was a chance encounter in Dusit Palace. The king was trying out his new yellow electric car and stopped to talk to the young prince.³⁷ Soon after, the king gave Chula a red two-seater pedal car.

In addition to being driven along the roads in the Dusit Palace compound, these new motor cars needed to be displayed to the greater population. A new boulevard—named Ratchadamnoen, or the Royal Boulevard, and meant to imitate the grand boulevards of Europe—linked Dusit Palace and its surrounding aristocratic suburb to the Grand Palace. And as early as 1905, members of the royal family and aristocracy would parade up and down this boulevard as spectacles of modernity—a theatrical display of their consumption and mastery of Western technology. Commoners would line up on the two sides of the road to take in the sights, the signs and the symbolism of Thailand’s entry into the modern world.³⁸

35 Steve Van Beek, *Royal automobile stables of Siam* (Bangkok: Castrol Thailand, 1994), 19–31.

36 Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, practice and representation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35.

37 Chulachakrabongse, *Thai victorious*, 43–4. Chula disputes the popular belief that his grandfather, King Chulalongkorn, did not accept him fully. His grandmother and uncles doted on him. This was especially true of King Vajiravudh, who gave Chula his formal name and even elevated his title from Mom Chao to Phraongjao. The latter title was reserved for the children of a king’s legitimate son, but, because Chula’s mother was Russian, he had been demoted by one royal rank.

38 Askew asserts that King Chulalongkorn became the supreme consumer of modern artefacts, including the motor car. In a caption underneath a picture of automobiles driving down Ratchadamnoen in 1905, he identifies what is in the picture as ‘spectacles of modernity’; Askew, *Bangkok*, 35. Members of the Bangkok elite would eventually own cars and would also drive up and down Ratchadamnoen Boulevard to show off their beautiful women. This modern culture of showing, borrowing the English word ‘show’ for use in Thai, is mentioned in the novel *Khwan mai phayabat*; see Chapter 1 in this volume.

Another road constructed for the motor car and the electric tram was Charoen Krung (modern city) Road, often referred to as New Road. This paved road connected the Western and Chinese business and residential communities to the Grand Palace and government ministries. In a sense, Charoen Krung Road was built for the Europeans and their motor cars and symbolised an acceptance of the superiority of Western technology. But Ratchadamnoen Boulevard allowed members of the Thai elite to demonstrate their mastery, control, consumption and perhaps victory over all things Western, too. The importance of the motor car to the Thai court is reflected in Queen Saowabha's remark that one of her great joys was 'to buy some twenty cars every year after the London Show, which she then gave to her sons, relatives and friends'.³⁹ When Prince Chula was nine years old, he was sent to study at the royal military college in Bangkok.⁴⁰ Prince Chula wrote that he was one of the few cadets who were driven to school.

Tragically, Queen Saowabha died on 20 October 1919, and, in June of the following year, Chula's father passed away during a trip to Singapore. Even while he was sick and dying in Singapore, his father told Prince Chula, then 12, to go take a drive around town to lessen his stress and anxiety. After the death of his father and grandmother, in February 1921, Chula was sent to study in England as a companion to his uncle Prince Prachathipok, the future Rama VII (r. 1925–35). He wrote that he was sad to have 'to part from Chom [his nurse], my home, my favourite car, my friends, then my uncle'.⁴¹ Chula was only 13 years old, and his favourite possession was his miniature electric car.

Prince Bira was born on 15 July 1914, six years after Prince Chula.⁴² But Bira was in fact Chula's uncle. His father, Prince Bhanurangsi, was a younger brother of King Chulalongkorn. Bira held the royal title

39 In 1917, Princess Phimramphai became the first Thai woman to drive solo around the streets of Bangkok in a two-seater car; Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 69.

40 Among his classmates were Sarit Thanarat, the future military dictator (1958–63), and the famous writer of comedic fiction writer Po. Intharapalit, whose father taught Thai at the academy. Po. Intharapalit is famous for the wildly popular series of *Phon Nikon Kim Nguan* novels, which began in 1939 and continued for 30 years. Wichitwong Na Pomphet studies the significance of these novels in *Wiwatthanakan sangkhom thai kap hatsaniyai phon nikon kim nguan* [*The evolution of Thai society and the comedic novel Phon nikon kim nguan*], vols 1–2 (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2001–02).

41 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 75, 78. A picture of his first car appears on page 65 of this book.

42 Princess Ceril Birabongse in *The prince and I* writes about her life with Bira even after the two divorced. Of all of his wives, she remained his soulmate.

Phraongjao, as a son of a Jaofa. Although Prince Chula's father was also a Jaofa, his mother was a non-royal foreigner. Therefore, Chula's royal title was only Mom Chao. But after his uncle King Vajiravudh ascended the throne in 1910, Chula asked his uncle to promote him to the rank of Phraongjao. Chula was quite concerned about his status as a Thai prince.

In *Brought up in England*, Chula asserted that as the grandson of King Chulalongkorn and the nephew of the incumbent king, Rama VII, he was well received by the English court, which honoured and recognised the Thai sash that he wore.⁴³ He was proud that King George V invited him to breakfast on many occasions, and that when he attended public functions, such as horse races, protocol placed him very near to the English royal family. If this is true, then it is not difficult to imagine that these young Thai princes were accepted in England and Europe as 'royalty' first and perhaps 'Thai' second. As we shall later see, their portrayal as heroes returning to Thailand in 1937 reversed this perception; their Thainess was emphasised over their royal status.

Chula was a good student who went from Harrow to Cambridge to study history. When he was at university, he was assigned the task of looking after Bira, who followed him to England and began studies at Eton in 1927. At first, Bira was expected to study military science and thus to follow in the footsteps of his father. However, Bira loved art and preferred painting and sculpture to horses and guns. And, for a slightly built man, he had formidable athletic abilities and a daring character suited for racing cars and flying planes. At Eton, he was awarded school colours for several sports and even held the long jump record. Although he would be later known for his racing prowess, there is little awareness of his once having held the altitude record for sail planes. Bira was also a good sculptor. Many sculptures on display at the racing drivers' clubhouse were his work, although few realised it.

Following the 1932 revolution toppling the absolute monarchy in Thailand, Chula became Bira's guardian. After this change in the political situation in Thailand, instead of receiving a stipend from the king of £1,000 per annum, Chula was given his father's entire estate to manage.⁴⁴ His income thus jumped twentyfold, to £20,000 per annum. Further,

43 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 213.

44 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 176. Prince Chula's father had been dead for many years, but Rama VI and Rama VII had taken care of him with a yearly stipend and, after the latter abdicated in 1935, he gave Chula his father's estate to manage.

after abdicating in 1935, Rama VII was no longer able to support Bira financially. He thus asked Chula to take over that responsibility. The jump in his disposable income allowed Chula to live in style and to present Bira with an MG K3 sports car with a supercharger on the latter's 20th birthday. By this time, Bira had already tried his hand at amateur racing in a Riley sports car. The princes also had other cars and, during the holidays, Bira would act as Chula's chauffeur when they toured Europe.⁴⁵

The small Riley sports car allowed Bira to try his hand at serious racing. The Riley was not very powerful, and its speeds were low. But driving it was a good introduction to racing. It is not difficult to go fast on the straights, as anyone with a lead foot can do that in a powerful car. The test of a gifted driver is how to negotiate tricky corners. Bira was talented in the corners, as the racing press was quick to notice and to write about.

In 1935, when Bira turned 21 years old, Chula bought him a proper race car, a 1500cc ERA that they named Romulus.⁴⁶ The car was a fully-fledged race car, capable of speeds up to 130 miles per hour. The princes also established the White Mouse Racing Team that same year. Chula became the team manager and financier. He was responsible for administration, paperwork, managing the mechanics, logistics and public relations.⁴⁷ In a sense, Bira, as the driver, mastered Western technology, while Chula mastered the art of managing a modern organisation. The two princes thus epitomised 'Thai' mastery of modernity. They would eventually engage the West on equal terms and win.

By his second year of racing, Bira was already hard to beat. Because Thailand was not a member of the sanctioning International Automobile Association, Bira had to find an established racing organisation to sponsor him. With the help of Chula's connections, Bira was licensed to race as a member of the British Race Car Drivers' Club. Because of this membership, he was eligible to compete for the overall annual prize—the Gold Star award for best driver. This award was very prestigious and it was considered the championship for sports car racing in Europe.

45 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 177. Chula and Bira had a large stable of cars that impressed friends and acquaintances. They lived large as Thai princes. A 1935 photograph shows Chula and Bira standing in front of some of their cars: Aston Martin, ERA, MG Magnette, Riley Imp, Rolls Royce, Bentley, Voisin, MG Magna, MG Midget, Ford; Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 36.

46 Prince Chula of Siam (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Road racing 1936: Being an account of one season of B. Bira, the racing motorist* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1937), 13.

47 Narisa, *100 pi chunchakrabortong*, 68–79.

To the astonishment of racing fans and the automotive press, Bira won several races in his class of light race cars. His most famous win was the race at Monaco in April 1936. Bira soon became the rising star among many famous race car drivers from Europe. The Monaco circuit was run on city streets, and the course two miles long. The race was 50 laps. In 1936, 22 cars were entered, with drivers from England, France, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Australia, in addition to the lone Thai. Of the 22 cars, only 18 qualified for the race. Bira started from the third row. Before the age of radio communications, signals from the pits were written in chalk on black signboards. The White Mouse Team wrote their signals in Thai to confound competitors.⁴⁸ Miraculously, Bira won the race. As an added bonus, he was granted the privilege of driving the race course in the opening ceremony for the Grand Prix cars. Chula noted that the crowds cheered the Thai driver during that opening lap.⁴⁹

Before and during the Monaco race, eight national flags were flown, representing the participating drivers' countries. The Thai red, white and blue flag⁵⁰ was among the eight. After the race was over, only the winner's flag was left flying. At the awards ceremony, the winning nation's anthem was played. In the case of Thailand, the song used was the royal anthem; racing and the princes were thus symbolically linked to the prowess and *barami* (karmic power) of the Thai monarchy.

Chula emphasised this point in a radio address during his visit to Bangkok in 1937. He told his listeners about the race in Monaco, and about his pride in witnessing the Thai flag flown after the race and hearing the royal anthem played. He asked his listeners to imagine how they would feel to see the *farang* take off their hats to pay respect to the Thai flag and to stand up for the anthem. He told the audience that few in Europe knew about Siam, as it was then called, but that Bira's racing success had brought fame to their country; the Thai was now equal to the *farang*.⁵¹

48 Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I*, 22.

49 Prince Chula of Siam, *Road racing 1936*, 30–44.

50 For a history of the Thai flag, see Chanida Phromphayak Phueaksom, *Kanmueang nai prawattisat thongchat thai [Politics in the history of the Thai flag]* (Bangkok: Sinlapawattathanatham, 2003). The red, white and blue flag replaced the red flag with a white elephant in the middle in 1917. The new flag was designed by Rama VI to reflect the modern idea of the state. It was also easier to make. During one of Rama VI's trips he noticed that his subjects flew red or white flags without the elephant to greet him. As he thought that this looked like China's flag, he was prompted to redesign Thailand's flag.

51 *Prachachat*, 11 November 1937.

From all accounts, English and European drivers acknowledged Bira's special ability as a race car driver. The famous French Grand Prix driver Louis Chiron gave Bira encouragement before the Monaco race by predicting that he would win. That race was the only time that small sports racing cars ran the course. Prior to the actual race, Bira challenged the drivers to race his wind-up toy car around a miniature course set up in their hotel. All the famous race car drivers present, including Hans Stuck and Count Carlo Felice Trossi, tried their hand at it. Bira was only beaten by Count Trossi.⁵²

International motor racing was and is still closely tied to the nation-state. From the beginning, race teams represented their countries in competition. In the 1930s, there was great rivalry between France and Germany. Determined to show the superiority of the Aryan race, Hitler poured money into race teams in order to defeat the British, the French and the Italians. By this time, race teams sponsored by car manufacturers were in fact national teams. Even today, the national anthem of the winning driver of a Formula One race is played at the awards ceremony. In fact, the national anthem of the winning car manufacturer is also played. And the national flags of the winners are flown at the ceremony, too.

It is doubtful that Thailand could have competed in such an expensive sport. Chula was aware of this. He wrote that national teams racing the large cars would spend 100,000 baht per season.⁵³ But there was another class of smaller machines that could be fielded for 10 per cent of that cost. It was in the latter class that Chula and Bira competed. Drivers in that class were still considered representatives of their countries and their people. Bira's victory at the Monaco Grand Prix was therefore indeed a win for Thailand, a source of pride for the Thai princes and the nation. It was the first time that the Thai flag was flown and the royal anthem played before spectators at a major international sporting event.

Bira's racing victories allowed him to edge out the famous race car driver Richard Seaman for the Gold Star award in 1936. At first, many observers thought that it was just beginner's luck, but Bira went on to win two more of these awards consecutively. As the White Mouse Team's publicist, Chula

52 Stevenson, *Driving forces*, 190–3. Bira soon had the courage to approach and to talk to the other famous drivers, including Tazio Nuvolari, Alfred Neubauer Manfred von Brauchitsch, Rene Dreyfus, Piero Taruffi, Count Trossi and Hans Stuck.

53 Phraongjao Chulachakrabongse (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Dara thong: sarakhadi kankhaeng rot khong phraongjao phiraphong* [Golden star: The story of Prince Bira's racing] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Karawek, 1978), 11–27.

was clever in translating ‘Gold Star’ as *Dara thong* and not *Dao thong*. Dara means the ‘star’ of a show or of a movie, rather than a star in the sky. This twist in meaning allowed the Thai public to view Bira as a star driver, and not as a winning race driver who won a medal that looked like a star. Thanks to Chula, Bira became a star and a celebrity in Thailand. News of his successes appeared in the Thai press, and the reading public became aware of Bira’s exploits and his victories over world-class European drivers.

All in all, during the four years (1935–38) that Bira raced in Europe and Africa, he won 16 races, came in second 13 times and was third three times. And, among the drivers who brought fame to the ERA marque, Bira topped the field with 14 wins. The famous race car drivers Raymond Mays, Pat Fairfield, Richard Seaman and Art Dobson were no match, winning nine, seven, three and two races, respectively. The races that Bira won were held all over Europe—England, Germany, Monaco, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Scotland, Sweden and other countries. With each win, the Thai flag was left flying as the flag of the losers were lowered. Bira and Chula were very proud that the spectators and other famous drivers stood up to respectfully listen to the Thai royal anthem. Thailand was slowly becoming an Asian country familiar to the West.

Telling the Bira story

Chula documented Bira’s successes, as well as his own, by writing four books in English and two books in Thai.⁵⁴ Bira wrote only one book.⁵⁵ But stories about their racing were also covered in Chula’s *Brought up in England*, and in 1992 Bira’s first wife, Ceril Birabongse, published

54 The books by Chula in English are *Wheels at speed* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1946), published privately in 1936; *Road racing 1936: Being an account of one season of B. Bira, the racing motorist* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1937); *Road star hat trick: Being an account of two seasons of ‘B. Bira’; The racing motorist in 1937 and 1938* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1939; reprinted in 1944, 1945 and 1948); *Blue and yellow: Being an account of two seasons of B. Bira, the racing motorist, 1939 and 1946* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1947). The first of the Thai-language books is *Dara thong: sarakhadi kankhaeng rot khong phraongjao phiraphong* [*Golden star: The racing exploits of Prince Birabongse*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Karawek, 1978). The preface of this book has a 1936 date and mentions *Wheels at speed*; the edition drawn on here was published in 1978. *Thai chana: rueang kankhaengkhan khong pho phira nakkhaprot Thai nai yurop* [*Thai victorious: The racing of B. Bira, a Thai race car driver in Europe*], published in 1941 or 1945, with a preface by Field Marshal Po. Phibunsongkhram, Thailand’s prime minister at the time, written in 1941. In addition, Chula wrote about one of the princes’ friends in *Dick Seaman: Racing motorist* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1948).

55 Birabongse, *Bits and pieces: Being motor racing recollections of ‘B. Bira’* (London: G.T. Foulis, 1942).

The prince and I: Life with the motor racing Prince of Siam, documenting their life together. Ying Muet also wrote *The golden star prince*, which focused on Bira's love affairs.⁵⁶ And, most recently, *A historical remembrance of Prince Bira, the racer* was published.⁵⁷

Chula's and Bira's English-language books were all published by G.T. Foulis Company in London. The authors confessed that they wrote the accounts of Bira's racing mostly to be shared with friends. However, the books also contained useful information about racing, such as the various classifications of race cars, the many tracks in use and the major personalities active in racing at that time. The books were quite straightforward narratives with few embellishments. They also chronicled in detail the lifestyle of the two princes: where they went, the kinds of entertainment and food they liked, where they vacationed, whom they knew, which European women they dated, and much more. Their lives are normalised as the lives of rich, aristocratic and privileged European young men. Perhaps unconsciously, the authors wanted to show that they were, as Thai, no different from the *farang*.

Chula's and Bira's books quoted accolades from the motoring press in praise of Bira's driving and cheerful personality. Many of his contemporaries were amused that Bira anthropomorphised his race cars. He drew pictures of them with faces and gave them personalities in his book. Even after accidents, such as when Hanuman went berserk and crashed, Bira drew a picture of the car in bandages and recuperating. Peter Stevenson writes:

When he'd crash, coming as close to death as any of them, Bira would draw cartoons of his car in bandages, and vow to make it up to his 'friend' the race car, as soon as possible. A curious Eastern/Western mechanical-age animism?⁵⁸

While Chula's books were like history texts, with abundant detail and carefully selected information, Bira's 1942 account of his own exploits was much more personal and touching. The writing was not as polished as Chula's, but it did have heart and feeling. His book was not introspective

56 Ying Muet (Momratchawong Malini Chakraphan), *Jaochai dara thong* [*The golden star prince*] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2003).

57 Sala Bunkhong, *Yon tamnan jaochai nakkhaeng praongjao phira* [*A historical remembrance of Prince Bira, the racer*] (Bangkok: Kaoraek, 2011). Bira was married six times, twice to Ceril Heycock. Ying Muet is the pen name of Momratchawong Malini Chakraphan. *A historical remembrance* treats current Formula One racing drivers with a nostalgic look at Bira's career in perspective.

58 Stevenson, *Driving Forces*, 189.

like Chula's books, but Bira showed that he let his senses and hunches guide him. Perhaps this unconscious consciousness made him a good artist and a good driver. While Chula's books had a purpose to them, Bira's book was more like putting a stream of thought on paper. Their personalities, different yet complementary, made them a perfect team.

The first Thai book about racing, *Dara thong* [*Golden star*], written by Prince Chula, was most likely published in 1937. The author's preface was written in October 1936. However, it has proved impossible to locate copies of the original edition; the only available edition is a 1978 reprint. *Dara thong* promoted Bira as the Golden Star and not as the winner of the Gold Star award. Just as Bira was able to anthropomorphise his racing machines, the Gold Star as an object in turn animated the man and made him a star, a celebrity.

The second Thai book, *Thai chana* [*Thai victorious*], indicated September 1945, directly after the end of the Second World War, as the date of publication. The 1941 date of Phibun's foreword suggests, however, that publication was delayed because of the war. The title of the book is suggestive: *Thai chana*, meaning Thai wins or Thai victorious, left out the obvious. Victorious over what and whom? Obviously, winning in itself is good, but, in this case, what is left out is mention of winning against the *farang*, against the West. In the early 1940s, the Phibun government was also promoting hyper-nationalism to help ensure that the Thai people would be ready to face unknown enemies because of the conflicts in Europe and Asia.⁵⁹ *Thai chana* could also mean that Thailand would win over whomever it had to fight.

Phibun's foreword linked Bira's success to the newly christened Thailand's nationalist agenda and noted that the two princes were iconic examples of good citizens who dedicated their lives and successes to the nation. Unlike the English-language books *Wheels at speed* and *Road racing 1936* on which *Thai chana* was based, the latter book did not cover the luxurious lifestyle of the two princes. There was perhaps a tacit understanding among members of the Thai public that, of course, the *jao nai* (royals and masters) or princes had the wealth, knowledge and ability to engage in this European sport. Their victories in this activity simply illustrated the greatness of the Thai people, albeit its ruling class.

59 Joseph J. Wright, *The balancing act: A history of modern Thailand* (Oakland: Pacific Rim Press, 1991), 94–115.

Prime Minister Phibun's foreword thanked Chula for donating the proceeds from sales of the book to support the Army Youth Corps (*yuwachon thahanbok*) and reminded the youth of the nation that Bira's exploits should be an example for them to emulate. The book was dedicated to the Thai youth, and in the frontispiece a statement was inserted touting the importance of the Thai flag. It noted that the hoisting of the flag after Bira's winning drive was important, not just because the driver was Thai, but at that moment the Thais and the Thai nation also won because both became known to people all over the world.

Hitler had Hans Stuck, who drove Auto Union and Mercedes Benz race cars; Phibun had Bira, Chula and the ERA. The comparison of course shows the difference. The Thai had to depend on British equipment. But, even though the Thais could not build the technology, they could borrow and master it for their own benefit. Far from being a sign of a colonial mentality, the privileging of Western culture and technology was proclaimed a clever policy of selective borrowing and co-optation. This argument only remained plausible as long as Thailand insisted that it had always been independent and had never been colonised.⁶⁰

Racing and nationalism

Chula's writing suggests that he wanted to be remembered as a royalist who believed in democracy. Perhaps his upbringing in England convinced him that Thailand's absolute monarchy could not survive under the stresses and strains of modernity and the rise of the middle class. Chula appeared to be sympathetic to the democratic cause and admitted to warning Rama VII about a possible rebellion of the new civilian and military officials. He referred to the leaders of the People's Party who took power after toppling the absolute monarchy in 1932 as the Dee Ones, playing on the Thai word for good (*di*).⁶¹ Although Chula was critical of some of the leaders for benefiting from the forced sale of the properties of princes, he praised some of its leaders, especially Pridi Phanomyong, for not participating in such abuses.

60 Perhaps this argument explains why Thai scholars resist admitting that Thailand was indeed semi-colonial and that the discipline of postcolonial studies is irrelevant to Thai studies. Attempts to grapple with this question appear in Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson, eds, *The ambiguous allure of the West: Traces of the colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010).

61 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 164, 173–4.

Chula also distanced himself from some of the more conservative princes who were bitter after the 1932 revolution, such as Prince Chumphot Boriphat. In fact, he decided to give the People's Party a chance and went as far as expressing support for it. He even helped to promote the idea of the modern nation-state and the idea that the Thai people should be loyal to the state and do their best to promote the state. His support of the new military–civilian elite exacerbated the difficult relations between Chula and his uncle King Prachathipok.

Chula also supported the new government's cause financially. Soon after the 1932 revolution, the government floated a million-pound bond to help fund its expenditures. Chula bought £80,000 worth of the million-pound bond. In March 1933, on his 25th birthday, he donated another £25,000 to Thai charities.⁶² With the beginning of hostilities in Europe that forebode impending war, he wrote to Phibun asking if he should return to serve in the army as a Thai patriot and to follow in the footsteps of his father. The government responded that it was no longer necessary for princes to serve in the military as a matter of duty. This news was welcome, particularly to Bira, who did not want to join the military. He had been worried because the Thai government had in fact given him a military commission as a reward for winning the Gold Star. Nonetheless, the two princes ended up serving in the British Home Guard during the war. Thailand had sided with Japan and was therefore an enemy of Great Britain. Chula's and Bira's wartime service and their close relations with the British government helped to soften somewhat the demands that the Allies made of Thailand after the Second World War.⁶³

Although Bira passed the university entrance examinations and was accepted to Cambridge's Trinity College in 1934, he convinced Chula that he was more suited to be an artist and not a historian like Chula. So, instead of studying history, Bira elected to study art. To help fund Bira's studies and his racing career, Chula published a biography of Frederick the Great in Thai.⁶⁴ The book was dedicated to Bira, who was then turning 20. The income from that book enabled Chula to buy the MG K3 Special sports car as a birthday present for Bira. This gift placed Bira on the path towards becoming a race car driver. In characteristic and playful form, Bira promptly named his new car 'Fidget'.⁶⁵

62 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 176.

63 Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I*, 139–48.

64 Phrajao worawongthoe phraongjao Chulachakrabongse (Prince Chulachakrabongse), *Frederik maharat haeng pratsia [Frederick the Great of Prussia]* (Bangkok: Rongrian Changphim, 1935).

65 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 76.

Having forgone Trinity College, Bira chose to study at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London. His short period of enrolment had deep implications, for there he and Chula met Ceril Heycock and Elizabeth (Lisboa) Hunter. Bira would eventually marry Ceril, and Chula would marry Elizabeth.⁶⁶

At first, the two were uneasy about dating English girlfriends because there were rumours that Rama VII planned to abdicate and that some military members of the People's Party were considering nominating Chula as king. However, his candidacy was hampered by the fact that his mother was neither Thai nor royalty, despite the fact that Chula was next in line because the other sons of Queen Saowabha did not leave any male heirs. In the end, the government decided that succession should go to heirs of the other main queen, Saowabha's full sister. Thus, succession to the Chakri throne went to Prince Ananda Mahidol, whose mother was a Thai commoner. In consolation, the government promoted Chula to the rank of captain in the Thai army and assigned him as aide-de-camp to the young king in 1935.

Further evidence of Chula's and Bira's close connection to the English court, aside from Chula's accounts of his breakfasts with King George V, was the fact that, when that king died in 1936, King Ananda chose Prince Chula to represent him at the funeral. Chula also represented the Thai king at the coronation of King George VI.⁶⁷ Before the coronation, Chula had already attended several other important events in Europe on behalf of King Ananda and, that same year, Bira was presented to the new King George for winning the Gold Star award for the best 'British' driver.

Bira's success in Europe was widely publicised in articles and news reports in the Bangkok newspapers. It coincided with Luang Wichitwathakan's campaign of hyper-nationalism. The exploits of the princes buttressed the claim that the Thai were a proud, competitive, militant and successful race. The Thai race and the successful Thai race car driver seemed well suited for each other.

During this campaign of hyper-nationalism, past kings who 'served' the Thai nation by liberating them from Burmese domination or saving Thailand from colonialism were embraced as 'good royals'. Others were

66 Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I*, 15–16.

67 Chulachakrabongse, *Brought up in England*, 191, 227.

ignored or shunned. In this way, the People's Party did not abruptly rid itself or Thailand of the royals, but it chose rather to support those who could advance its political cause. Chula and Bira fit the mould of the new 'national' heroes, even though they were part of the ancien régime. The centuries-old value of respecting the *jao nai* was hard to discard, and the country's new leaders were smart in exploiting this feature of Thai social identity.

In November 1937, the two princes decided to return to Bangkok for a short visit.⁶⁸ Not least, Chula also wanted Bira to return to Thailand so that he could have some contact with the young women there. At that time, Bira had already decided to marry Ceril Heycock, but Chula asked him to hold off the engagement. Chula wanted to make sure that Bira would not regret the choice of marrying an Englishwoman. Chula himself was also dating an Englishwoman of course, but, because his own mother was Russian and he was thus more or less disqualified as a contender to the Thai throne, it would not matter whom he married. The other reason for the trip was to allow Bira to show Romulus to the Thai people. Bira would be allowed to drive at speed up and down Ratchadamnoen Boulevard, and to let his countrymen see the prowess of the race car and of its driver. By this time also, driving fast had become de rigueur for the rich young men of Bangkok.

Accompanying time trials also took place before Bira's demonstration drive. Interestingly, the Thai press complained that holding such races would just encourage more dangerous racing on the streets of Bangkok.⁶⁹ It appears that Bira's successes had fuelled the imagination of many young Thai men. There were 16 prizes for the winners of the time trials. The cups were sponsored by the regents; the ministers of defence, foreign affairs and interior; and the ambassadors of the United Kingdom, France, Japan and Germany. Even Phibun sponsored a trial. The prize sponsored by Prince Chula was for the fastest female driver; Thailand seems by this time to have had many female drivers who liked to race. There was even a class for drivers with less than five years of driving experience. The winner of that trial would receive the cup donated by the Chinese commercial attaché. The trials were divided into sports cars of different engine displacements, a class for saloons and the trial for women drivers. The cars that competed

68 Chulachakrabongse, *Dara thong*, Chapter 10.

69 Van Beek, *Royal automobile stables of Siam*, 19–20.

in the trials included various marques such as MGs, Singers, Austins, Renaults, Fords, Dodges and Chryslers. The fastest driver of all would receive the B. Bira Cup.⁷⁰

Chula described his return to Thailand in some detail, first in a radio speech that he gave after his arrival in Bangkok and later in his books. Chula and Bira were accompanied on the trip by a Colonel Phum of the Russian army and by an English friend who had not been to Thailand before. Colonel Phum Sakhon had in fact been sent from Thailand to study military science in Russia with Prince Chakrabongse, Chula's father. After graduating from military college there, he requested an extension from the Thai government to further his studies, but his request was denied. He was furious and decided not to return to Thailand. He eventually joined the Russian army, rising to the rank of colonel. Because of his actions, he was stripped of his Thai citizenship. After the Russian Revolution, Phum fled to France as a refugee. Chula helped his father's old classmate regain his citizenship and brought him back to Thailand after decades of absence.⁷¹ The group travelled by ship to Singapore and took the train north. From European suits, the two princes changed to Thai clothing after crossing the border, in both a symbolic and a physical change that saw them becoming Thai again. At each stop that the train made, local people displaying welcome banners greeted the travellers. Military and Boy Scout bands played nationalistic marches during those stops. People were well informed about the visit of the two heroes and their winning race car and thus turned out in large numbers to greet Chula and their idol Bira.⁷²

Chula and Bira decided that for official functions during the visit they would appear in Thai military officers' uniforms; for semi-official business, they would wear Western suits; and, if they entertained visitors, they would wear Thai clothing appropriate for princes—*pha muang* (purple silk pants). These choices of what to wear reflected this period of change and the attempt of Thai to engage in cultural adaptation. It also represented the three domestic contenders for political power—the military in its uniforms, the civilian bureaucratic elite dressed in Western suits and the old nobility dressed in *pha muang*. Phraongjao Athitthipapha Aphakorn,

70 *Prachachat*, 25 November 1937.

71 Chulachakrabongse, *Thai victorious*, 146–8.

72 Chula and Bira had also been greeted as heroes by members of the Ceylon Automobile Association during their short stopover in that colony. This welcome reflected the degree to which Bira's success was treated as a major achievement for an Asian race car driver.

one of the regents who was also a cousin and a friend of the two men, was the first to welcome Chula and Bira back. However, it proved an uneasy moment for the princes, because many of the royals in exile did not trust or like Athit. They felt that he did not protect the interests of the Crown.

The two princes stayed at Prince Chakrabongse's palace at Tha Tian on the bank of the Chaophraya River. Romulus was also displayed there. The car drew at least 20,000 visitors to the palace. Even members of the cabinet, including Foreign Minister Pridi, and the Dowager Queen Sawangwathana came to look at this symbol of Thai prowess and success. At the palace, the princes wore Thai garments to greet the guests, while Pridi and cabinet members came in Western suits or military uniforms.⁷³

The Bangkok press reported the activities of the two princes as if they were movie stars. The newspaper *Prachachat* in particular ran daily features on and pictures of the activities of the two princes. It also published the text of their speeches. *Prachachat* was owned by Prince Wanwaithayakorn, a progressive royal who supported the People's Party. The paper also employed the famous novelist Kulab Saipradit as editor. In one of the featured articles, Kulab wrote a detailed history of Bira's racing exploits, based on Chula's English-language books. His article suggested that Chula's *Wheels at speed* was readily available on the Bangkok book market.

The Thai newspapers dubbed the two princes *nuea hom* (sweet-scented flesh), meaning that they were very desirable and eligible. They received invitations to movies, concerts, plays and dances. They were seen in the company of all the beautiful women of Bangkok. Just before a major ball to honour the princes, the Phahurat market ran out of Bira blue cloth because all the young women invited to the dance wanted to attend in gowns of that colour. Having grown up with privilege in England, the two princes did their best to show outward appreciation of Bangkok high society and its tastes, but privately they complained about their compatriots' lack of good taste and especially about the decline of classical Thai drama. They lamented that Luang Wichit's rewriting of history and the insertion of militaristic themes into the performances ruined Thai art forms. As Thai heroes, socialised by life in the palace and conditioned by newly acquired European tastes, they were critical of the emerging plebeian nationalistic art forms.

73 A photograph of Chula in traditional attire together with others in uniforms and Western suits appears in Chulachakrabongse, *Thai victorious*, 166.

While Chula was invited to give scholarly lectures at Chulalongkorn University and on national radio, Bira was spared these tasks. He did agree to one interview about car racing with the president of the Royal Automobile Society, later published in *Prachachat*.⁷⁴ Chula was billed as a scholar, an intellectual and the brains behind the success of the White Mouse Racing Team. Bira, on the other hand, was the one with the special talent, whose physical prowess, daring and reflexes matched the best that the world had to offer.

On 5 December 1937, Ratchadamnoen Boulevard was closed to traffic, and Bira fired up Romulus to race raucously up and down the road for two miles. Fifty thousand of his fellow citizens lined the two sides of the road while he roared up and down at 120 miles per hour. The crowd was impressed. A woman was quoted to say that at those breakneck speeds and with that control, no wonder the *farang* liked Bira.⁷⁵

A week later, Romulus was on display at the annual fair celebrating Constitution Day on 10 December, thus linking the two princes to the emerging democratic form of government. Chula spoke on their behalf to indicate that he supported the new leadership as long as there was a balanced working relationship between the civilians and the military. He implied that the future of Thailand should not be in the hands of an absolute monarch. Because of his support of the new regime, many princes and royalists boycotted dinner parties organised by the government for the two. Nevertheless, Thai nationalism was still formed, supported and legitimised by two 'modern' princes.

To further the cause of Thai nationalism and to demonstrate to the world that Thailand was a modern and civilised nation, the government gladly supported the princes' proposal to stage the Bangkok Grand Prix, to be held in December 1939. At that time, Phibun was already the major force behind the government. Although he did not attend the public celebrations during the princes' visit for fear of another assassination attempt, he did have a private meeting with them. He was very supportive and appreciative of the princes' successes, and he even agreed to write a very complimentary foreword in Chula's Thai-language book about Bira's success.

74 *Prachachat*, 17 November 1937.

75 Chulachakrabongse, *Thai victorious*, 172.

Thai beauties were unable to dissuade Bira from marrying his English girlfriend. Soon after their visit to Bangkok, both Chula and Bira were able to obtain the king's permission, countersigned by Jaofa Narisara Nuwatthiwong, to marry their English girlfriends. The young King Ananda granted this permission, as Rama VIII had already abdicated. That abdication was fortuitous because Chula was not on good terms with his uncle, who accused Chula of collaborating with the People's Party.

The announcement of the weddings appeared in the Bangkok papers. It does not appear to have met with any controversy or public criticism. It seems that Thai princes and heroes were the equals of the Europeans; why should they not marry their women, too? In this instance, Thai men should also conquer and capture beautiful European woman—a reversal of the colonial-era white men's practice of taking native mistresses and wives.

Not only were Chula and Bira Westernised Oriental Gentlemen, but the two were also close to another important family with a similar background. Chula and Bira regularly visited Rama VIII and his younger brother the future Rama IX in Europe. The two brothers, King Ananda and Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej, teenagers at that time, enjoyed playing with miniature electric cars. They regularly asked Bira to take rides with them. Chula noted that the future kings of Thailand spoke Thai and French but could only read French. The two brothers also spoke only French with each other.⁷⁶ I can but pose several questions here. If the future kings of Thailand spoke French, does Thainess become ambiguous? Was the new Thai elite a hybrid of Thai and European? What, then, is the European Other when the West is embedded in Thainess?

Conclusion: Ambiguous other, Thai acceptance of the West and Thai nationalism

The re-enactment of the Bangkok Grand Prix in 1988 seemed incredibly anachronistic. Modern, Westernised and traffic-congested Bangkok was asked to make way for a re-enacted race that highlighted the prowess of a Thai race car driver who mastered *farang* technology and the *farang* game of automobile racing. But instead of Bira, Thailand was represented by M.R. Narisa, who is three-quarters *farang* and looks European.

76 Ceril Birabongse, *The prince and I*, 111. In fact, King Bhumibol (1927–2016) also loved fast cars in his youth. He was involved in an automobile accident in October 1948 and lost his right eye.

By the late 1980s, Thailand had already mastered *farang* technology and administration. The embrace of Western modernity had been relatively smooth and proved all-encompassing, and we have yet to fully assess its impact on Thailand's culture or its religion, language, literature, arts and basic values. One side effect of this process is that, among the people of Southeast Asia, the Thais have long seemed more at ease in dealing with the West and with the *farang*. In fact, colonial and postcolonial thinking is still problematic to most Thai scholars. How does this matter relate to the events of 1937–38, or to the Bangkok Grand Prix of 1939 that did not take place?

Bira and Chula's triumphant return to Thailand allowed members of the public to not just imagine heroes, but to see them in the flesh. They were able to witness firsthand the talents of a Thai driver and his manager—men who were able to manipulate and control (Western) technology, to compete with and to beat their Western counterparts. If the Bangkok Grand Prix had been held and Bira had won the race, the event would have reinforced feelings of national pride and national equality with the West. But would that victory have been a complete one?

Even though Thai kings tried their best to modernise the country and to appropriate Western technology and culture in order to protect Thailand from colonialism, and even though it is true that Thailand was never directly colonised, it was nevertheless forced to concede territory and sovereignty.⁷⁷ Therefore, the victory, the claim that Thailand was always independent and never colonised, is problematic. The royalist historical interpretation holds that the Thai were smart diplomats who knew the art of give and take. But it downplays what appears in hindsight to have been more give than take—loss of territory and the concession of extraterritorial rights. There is no real incident to which Thais can point and say that Thailand was victorious over the *farang*. At best, the argument for winning against *farang* colonial expansion is that Thailand ceded its Laotian and Cambodian tributaries to safeguard the core of Thai civilisation. Some scholars have cited the cleverness of the Thai by pointing out that Thailand gave up lands it no longer controlled, peripheral principalities on the Malay Peninsula and the eastern bank of the Mekong River. There is truth to this reading. Prior to the establishment of borders mostly

77 For a path-breaking study of these concessions and their impact on Thai national consciousness, see Shane Strate, *The lost territories: Thailand's history of national humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824838911.001.0001.

determined by Britain and France, peripheral principalities (*prathetsarat*) were semi-autonomous states that accepted Thailand's hegemony but not complete political control. The 'loss of territory' discourse was later formulated by Luang Wichit in the 1930s following the establishment of a Thai nation-state.⁷⁸

I would argue that what Chula and Bira achieved on the racing circuits of Europe was really a first important win for Thailand. Bira actually won races against the best of the *farang* drivers. Because racing is so closely tied to national pride, as demonstrated by its rituals with the flags and anthems of the winners, Bira's victory was indeed a victory of Thailand over European countries. It should be noted that automobile racing is very much a European sport, and there were no teams or drivers from Asia until the Honda Motor Company decided to compete in Formula One in the 1960s.⁷⁹ Even to this day, no Asian has ever won a major international racing title. In this sense, Bira was unique.

If the events surrounding the visit of Chula and Bira to Thailand in 1937–38 were any indication, the common Thai construction of the West framed in a discourse of modernity was filtered and naturalised or moderated by the achievements of the two princes. The fact that Prince Chula was accepted into the inner circles of the British royalty, and that Bira was accepted as an equal by elite European race car drivers, allowed the Thai public to look at the West through a Thai filter, to see the West through the lenses of the princes. However, these lenses were also tinted. They were not common Thai lenses but, rather, princely lenses tinted by Chula's and Bira's European upbringing and tastes. The Thainess of the princes was probably as alien as the Otherness of the Europeans that their Thai brethren were straining to see.

The princes' acceptance by the European press and peers may have been due primarily to their royal and privileged status. It did not therefore necessarily translate into how the West would view the Thai people more generally. A more recent account of the successes of the two princes is less flattering:

Sent from the tropical splendor and relaxed attitudes of the royal palace in Bangkok straight to the hallowed halls of Eton and then Cambridge, 'Bira', as he came to be known to his racing pals, saw life in the 1930's Europe as

⁷⁸ Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, 163–71.

⁷⁹ Jones, *The ultimate encyclopedia of Formula One*, 83.

a culture shock rivaling a voyage to a nearby planet. Accompanying Bira had been his older cousin, Prince Chula Chakrabongse, his quieter, more restrained duenna in the curious West.

Bira quickly mastered life in England and went searching with boundless energies to ride every attraction this carnival, England, had to offer, in his own very earnest little-boy, Peter-Pan way. To Bira, the kind of endeavors we take as serious undertakings laced with drama, he saw only as another new world to explore, like a new kid's game.⁸⁰

But even through this ambiguous filter, members of the Thai public were, with the help of state propaganda, made to feel that they were quite the equals of the West. The reverse gaze back at the West was in fact a double gaze—seeing the West by gazing at its own princely Other as a model and manifestation of modernity.⁸¹ The Thai public was seeing the West without the West. This sort of nationalistic imagining fits well in the Thai case, in which nationalism has been imposed from the top—from the court and later from the leaders of the People's Party.

Thai nationalism is a nationalism of the elite and not a nationalism of the masses. This is why democracy is not easily implemented; the Crown and the royal aristocracy were never neutralised as 'subjects' of politics. Nevertheless, this elitist nationalism and the ability of the royals and elites to deal with the West on equal terms may have unwittingly allowed the common Thai person to be more at ease with the West and less resistant to the Western influence that was, in many quarters of Asia, viewed as domination and hegemony. If there were any lingering doubts, they were allayed by the princes.

In an interview during his visit in 1938, Chula was asked if the British still looked down on the Thai people. He responded by saying that the educated Englishmen did not look down on the Thai—that is, on him—but rather accepted him as an equal.⁸² This was probably true of a Thai prince who had European features, whose uncle was the king of Thailand, whose wife was English, and who had access to the king of England.

80 Stevenson, *Driving forces*, 187.

81 I modify the concept 'postcolonial gaze' popularised by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Of course the concept of the gaze has been refined over time by Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. In the case of the Thais and their relationship to the West, the gaze involves not just the West and the common Thai. It was also mitigated and complicated by the relationship between the Thai 'Westernised Oriental Gentlemen' and their gaze on the West.

82 *Prachachat*, 10 December 1937.

Both Chula and Bira were the ambiguous Thai Other—at once Thai and European. They, and many other members of the royalty, nobility and emerging bureaucratic elite, were the prototypical Westernised Oriental Gentlemen, truly bilingual and bicultural. It is this hybridity that makes them historically pivotal figures, cultural mediators and arbiters of Thai *siwilai* culture. The West that the Thai public of that period understood was mediated by this ambiguous Thai Other. Through these lenses, the ‘West’ appeared more familiar, less formidable and less threatening. But were they seeing the real West?

This chapter only deals with the formative years of a modern Thai nationalism and does not pretend fully to analyse the development of Thai nationalism in more recent decades. The main purpose of this account is to demonstrate how the regime that overthrew absolute monarchy continued to harness the achievements of members of the royal family to buttress the sense of nationhood that was emerging. The dilemma faced by the promoters of modern Thai nationalism was the issue of preserving the sanctity of the monarchy in light of humiliation at the hands of Western colonial powers.

Scholars have argued that Thailand became a semi-colonial state because it accepted extraterritoriality and compromised its sovereignty.⁸³ However, this view is valid from the standpoint of a modern nation-state. The Bowring Treaty of 1855 was not overly detrimental to the rulers of Thailand. It allowed them to engage in the new international economic regime in ways that helped to fill the coffers of the monarchy, the nobility and their Thai-Chinese allies. Even the loss of territories to France in 1893 did not diminish the central role of the monarchy in Thai nationalism. In that instance, the king and his ministers were depicted as clever in trading territories that Thailand did not fully control to protect the core. It is later, under the Phibun regime, when Thailand embraced the modern concept of a nation-state with clear boundaries and what Thongchai calls a Thai ‘geo-body’, that the discourse of national humiliation was constructed by Luang Wichit.⁸⁴ Phibun’s irredentist foreign policy pushed

83 A good summary of discussions on this topic may be found in Harrison and Jackson, *The ambiguous allure of the West*, especially chapters by Jackson, ‘The ambiguities of semicolonial power in Thailand’, 37–56, and Herzfeld, ‘The conceptual allure of the West: Dilemmas and ambiguities of crypto-colonialism in Thailand’, 173–86.

84 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994).

for the return of these ‘lost territories’ from France during the course of the Second World War. However, the blame for their loss was not put on the monarchy but on the evil French.⁸⁵

As corollary to this construction of Thai royalist nationalism, the Thai people are required ipso facto to owe unending gratitude to their enlightened leaders—especially their kings, their kings’ progeny and their loyal officials. The Thai public is constantly reminded in school books, media pronouncements and other subtle ways that it was the kings, other royals and the royal civil service that saved Thailand from colonial subjugation through a strategy of emulating and appropriating what they saw as adaptable and useful Western culture, administration, knowledge and technology. Even today, this nationalism is still in constant struggle with emergent democratic pressures from below. To members of the power elite, dominated by the military and civilian bureaucracies and their supporters, Thai national leadership should be in the hands of the educated, especially the foreign-educated, the wealthy cosmopolitan and globalised class, and military officers and civil servants whose moral authority is derived from their loyalty to the king. But, with the advent of popular or populist democracy in a Thai political system that allows the participation of the larger public, an inevitable clash of power references has occurred. The current political tension in Thai society today reflects the anxiety of uncertainty on the side of the royalist nationalists and the anticipated rise of a more inclusive democratic political system.⁸⁶

Postscript

Although the collaboration between Chula and Bira ended in 1948, Bira continued to race until 1955. His ability as a world-class racing driver was well documented. He enjoyed many wins in the 1935–39 racing seasons. I have highlighted some of his victories in this chapter. It is difficult, however, to provide complete statistics on his races because records are scattered, though his early racing career was recorded and summarised in great detail in Chula’s books.⁸⁷

85 See Strate, *The lost territories*, 4–19, which details the construction of a nationalism that exploited the national humiliation represented by the ‘loss’ of territory to the French in 1893 while preserving the integrity of the monarchy.

86 Federico Ferrara, *The political development of modern Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

87 In his first five years of racing, Bira competed in 68 races, winning 20 times, and coming in second 15 times and third five times; Prince Chula of Siam, *Road racing*, 87.

Grand Prix racing began in Europe in the 1920s and flourished in the 1930s. In 1946, after the end of the Second World War, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile instituted general rules for international racing, the precursor to today's Formula One racing. In 1950, a World Drivers' Championship was established. Bira became the first race car driver from Asia to compete in Formula One. He raced for several marques, such as the Maserati, Gordini and Connaught teams. After his retirement from racing, Bira tried his hand in several enterprises, such as making prescription racing goggles and starting an air transportation company. Because of his bad eyesight, he endeavoured to make racing goggles for those who needed prescriptions (his own racing goggles had prescription lenses). Bira's corrective lenses allowed him to 'see' the West, but, if his fellow Thais had used those lenses, the West might appear out of focus. After giving up racing, Bira took up competitive sailing. He represented Thailand at the Melbourne (1956), Rome (1960), Tokyo (1964) and Munich (1972) Olympic Games. Bira died from a heart attack on 23 December 1985 at the Barons Court tube station in London. He was 71 years old.

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