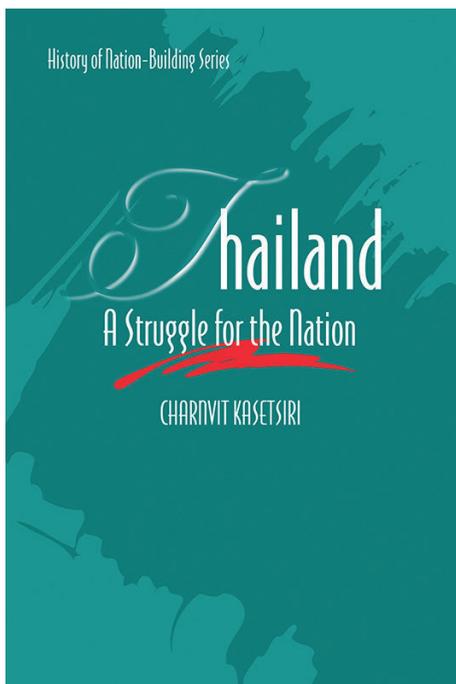


## Reviews

*Thailand: A Struggle for the Nation* by Charnvit Kasetsiri (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022). ISBN: 9789815011241 (soft cover). 752.50 Baht.



Charnvit Kasetsiri, the author of *Thailand: A Struggle for the Nation*, is a luminary among Thai historians. A quick search on WorldCat finds around sixty titles in both Thai and English under his name. This is a low figure given the variability in English spellings of Thai names; a brief professional biography at the end of this book notes he has published around 200 articles alone. Now an octogenarian Emeritus Professor at Thammasat University where he has taught mainly Thai political history since 1973, Charnvit gained a master's degree from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1967, and then in 1973 a Phd in History from Cornell University. Charnvit's work ranges across many subjects and many periods of Thai and Southeast Asian history, and his astounding knowledge of his country's past is framed by a keen sense for comparative history and a strongly humanist outlook. His writing flair in

English is striking; indeed, he writes in the language better than most native English historians.

The book under review here details a kingly master narrative of modern Thai history familiar to readers of this journal. Craig Reynolds, a long-time friend and colleague of Charnvit, notes in his introduction that readers will not find a revisionist "history from below" in the book, nor really much change to the established story about the importance of the Bangkok monarchy in shaping modern Thailand. There is no new argument in the book. Instead, the reader is treated to a lively series of richly detailed reflections on the evolution of modern kingship and the historiography that has put

monarchy at the heart of Thai nationalism. Especially important in the story are the central roles of Kings Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) and Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r. 1946-2016). These two long reigns bookend a complete transformation of the Bangkok kingdom: from a fragmented polity reliant on feudal lords to an integrated modern nation-state; from a semi-colony of the West to an independent power; and from a mosaic of peoples, cultures and languages to a chauvinist Thai state.

The book comprises six chapters and a brief epilogue. The first two chapters respectively describe the historiographic shift from dynasty to nation and the largely congruent change of the kingdom's name from Siam to Thailand. These two topics have been subjects of Charnvit's work for many decades. In both chapters he engagingly explains how the officially approved national history of the country came to be written, when and by whom. Late 19th and early 20th century palace and royalist intellectuals are the main contributors to the master narrative, but also important are the publicists who served the military governments of the mid-20th century. The next three chapters focus on the culture of nation building during the long reign of Bhumibol Adulyadej, which spanned most of Charnvit's life. Like other critical studies of the monarchy, Charnvit explains that the power of Bhumibol grew from conscious political manipulation of the symbols and rituals of Thai kingship during his long reign. He explains, as a prime example of these efforts, that popular attachment to the king as mother and father to the people is not age old but a product of the early 1960s. We learn that reverence for Bhumibol and his immediate family reached such a point by the late 1970s that they had become "the epicentre of the nation, until king and nation became interchangeable" (97). The sixth chapter compares and contrasts the beginning and end of the reigns of Chulalongkorn and Bhumibol, two men whom Charnvit writes possessed tremendous *barami* – or accumulated spiritual merit – that they wielded to modernize their country but that dissipated with their respective passing.

The author's mixture of objective history and subjective attachment to kingship gives an ironic feel to the book. Charnvit has long been an advocate for Thai democracy. He also is an ardent partisan of Pridi Banomyong, the intellectual driver of the 1932 revolution that ended the absolute monarchy, and a defender of his university (which Pridi founded in 1934) and its central role in resisting dictatorship. Via Facebook he has backed student calls for reform of the monarchy. Charnvit also is an advocate for a regional history focus that incorporates Thailand into a larger cultural world, rather than merely following the master narrative of Thai exceptionalism. He founded a Southeast Asian Studies program at Thammasat University in 2000 to this end, and he also leads groups on cultural and historical tours around Southeast Asia. The present book reflects these elements of Charnvit's passion, but in its pages the kingly praise also flows steadily. King Mongkut, Chulalongkorn's father who reigned from 1851 to 1868, was "brilliant and innovative"; his "diminutive and dapper" son impressed Western leaders whom he visited on his overseas tours (201). Bhumibol possessed a "remarkably varied intellect", and his political impulses always buttressed his passion for social welfare but, alas, "on many occasions, his wise words were not heeded by the public" (225). The astounding range of Bhumibol's skills is highlighted by his jazz musicianship. The king possessed a "gentle swinging sensibility" in the American genre (139) and was such an

impressive musician that even the great bandleader Benny Goodman sought him out for jam sessions. The ninth king's social conscience is described in many examples, from the 3,000+ royally invested development projects during his reign to the king personally presiding at more than 490 university graduation ceremonies where he handed out more than 470,000 diplomas between 1950 and 1997 (141). The king's scholarships for overseas study which the ninth king made a key aspect of national development are a triumph of "instructional philanthropy" (148). The ninth king's mother, too, is a highlight of the narrative and is said to have been the most influential matriarch in Thai history. Her "valiant participation" in the state's fight against the communist movement is a triumph of Cold War-era nation building and so too is her rural advocacy, which was a "(D)emonstration of grit and determination that set an example for an entire nation" (173). We are told near the end of the book that "the full extent to which (Chulalongkorn and Bhumibol) were extraordinary when compared to most fellow world monarchs remains to be told" (232-233) and that "(F)ew nations in the modern era can claim such sages as royals" (232).

So, is modern monarchy both an invention of tradition and an essence of Thai-ness? Charnvit explains that the linear "national" history of Thailand/Siam that is widely disseminated from on high and the cult of personality around Ramas V and IX appeals strongly to educated, urban society. Does the author belong in this category as well? This also raises the question of the "struggle" of the book's title. Charnvit's struggle is not a social history of class and power in one of the most socio-economically unequal countries in the world. Is it then a struggle to ensure continuity among good people via reform of the highest institution, and hence a steady *barami* quotient across reigns, an essence that works its magic to solve social conflicts?

The book ends on a rather gloomy note that situates Thai politics in a 21st century of revamped authoritarianisms around the world. Whether monarchic reform is a struggle that would revive democracy in the country is not clear to the reader, and perhaps to Charnvit as well.

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