Bangkok Expansionism: A Conceptual Framework and Historical Background

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Abstract

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Chapter 1: Modern Thailand

A "Golden Axe" in Maps and Minds

The shape of modern France appears in standard geographical maps, travel guides, and textbook histories as a familiar geometrical figure, a hexagon, while the modern Italian peninsula looks like a boot. Thailand, for its part, looks like an axe. For people with historical sensitivity, the modern shapes of these nations can never be taken for granted. Students of European history realize that it took many years of struggle before the French national territory was finally circumscribed into a clean hexagon, the Italian peninsula into a boot. Before the shape of modern Thailand became an axe, it went through the same cycles of integration, disintegration, and territorial consolidation. World history has always been conflict-laden.

The story of modern Thailand's shape gets more complicated as it crosscuts with the modern Thai imagination. Whereas outsiders see only an axe, for most Thai people there is another symbolic system intertwined with their country's shape. A middle school Thai student studying history learns that this axe is also "golden." This token of national pride is loaded with essentialist and ambiguous claims, and I intend to interrogate the "golden axe" trope. Questioning this trope will result in a revisionist version of Thai history that can stimulate discussion and invite comparison and criticism—substantively, ontologically, and epistemologically—from anyone interested in the panoramic scope of world history.

Demystifying the Golden Axe Trope

Traveling to Southeast Asia by commercial airline for the first time, Summer, a foreign exchange student from upstate New York, is prepared to be amazed by the scenery she sees at a distance from her window seat: wide clusters of green topical forest, long mountain ranges, highland valleys, complex river networks, small dots of lakes and lowland deltas, islands and

archipelagoes. As the plane approaches Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, her first destination in the region, Summer looks forward to seeing Buddhist temples, pagodas, and satupas located among traditional and modern buildings, both short and tall, along with disorganized highways and streets, canals, and golf courses—all of which she read about in guidebooks and websites before her trip began.

Southeast Asia, formerly called Indochina, is an exotic landmass located in the far southeastern part of the world and is a transitory point between two major world civilizations, India and China. This region has sparked the curiosity and imagination of many generations of travelers, merchants, migrants, missionaries, bandits, brigands, pirates, sorcerers, ethnographers, scientists, doctors, soldiers, officials, and tourists since the region came into contact with outsiders during the common era. Apart from the exotic stories and tropical imagination, what an ordinary visitor such as Summer learns is that this landmass is now subdivided into nation-states from the west to east end: Myanmar, Thailand, and the three nations formerly part of French Indochina—the modern nations of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Looking closer at a geopolitical map of the region on her personal screen before landing, Summer sees Thailand, appearing like an axe. The golden axe is a staple of Thailand's school curriculum and is familiar to the nation's children. The golden axe is a rich and complex trope, and unpacking, critically questioning, and conceptually resolving that trope will reveal much about the history of modern Thailand.

To contextualize how Thailand's national history is taught, I present a series of PowerPoint slides developed for use in elementary school.[1] Written in standard Thai poetic prose

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1 This collection of slides is taken from the blog OKnation.net (http://www.oknation.net/blog/rivermoon/2008/07/06/entry-1). Based on my survey of middle and high school history textbooks, this collection is representative.

(*khon pad*), the slides reconstruct the 14 historical episodes when Thailand lost her territories to foreign powers. Together, these slides exemplify what I call the golden axe trope.

"From the North to South, from the East to West, our kingdom is surrounded by the beautiful coasts. Why then was our land eroded and remains only what we see today?"
<u>Note</u>:

<u>Teacher</u>: "Today I'll tell you a story. I urge you to listen carefully, close your eyes, and cultivate your sense of Thainess. Our ancestors deserve to sleep peacefully in their graves, for their have sacrificed their lives for us and our future generations to have our home, a place for all of us to sleep peacefully."
<u>Note</u>:

<u>Episode 1</u>: Losing *Koh Mak* to the British

"We lost our *Koh Mak* remember?
They changed our name to *Penang Island*.
That used to be part of our "golden axe."
More than 100 square kilos was gone."
<u>Note</u>:

<u>Episode 2</u>: Losing *Marid*, *Dawei*, and *Tanowsri* to Burma

"We lost our land for the second time, remember?
We lost *Marid*, *Dawei*, and *Tanowsri*.
It was in 2336 B.E.; We were unlucky.
20,000 square kilos were gone."
<u>Note</u>:

Episode 3: Losing *Bantaimas* to the French
 "For the third time, *Bantaimas* was taken.
 They renamed it *Ha Tian*.
 It was in 2363 B.E.
 No estimation on how much we lost."
Note:

Episode 4: Losing *San Wi*, *Meung Pong*, and *Chiang Tung* to the French
 "For the fourth time, it hurt us that *San Wi* was taken.
 Also *Chiang Tung* in the northern Siam we lost.
 More than 60,000 square kilos—how dare?
 What goes around, comes around, we warn you!"
Note:

Episode 5: Losing *Perak* to the British
 "For the fifth time, we lost *Perak*.
 They dared us. They dared our 'axe.'
 2369 B.E. we hurt.
 Pick up our axe and fight back."

Note:

Episode 6: Losing *Sipsong Panna* to the Imperial China
 "For the sixth time, we were ashamed, our heart broken.
 Losing Sipsong Panna, we cried.
 Almost 90,000 square kilos, how dare?
 We fought our enemy with our broken heart."

Note:

Episode 7: Losing *Cambodia* and the other *six islands* to the French
"For the seventh time, we lost *Cambodia*.
The French went crazy. What were they thinking?
They bloodthirstily hunted for those lands.
We lost more than 100,000 square kilos this time."

Note:

Episode 8: Losing *Sipsong Chutai* to the French
"It happened once again for the eighth time.
Sipsong Chutai, the big land we lost.
It was 80,000 square kilos.
We wept devastatingly for our lost."

Note:

Episode 9: Losing *The Land on the Left Side of Salawin River* to the British
"The ninth time, we were sad. We held the grudge.
We lost our *land on the Left Side of Salawin River*.
We stood still seeing them take those 13 cities.
Who hurt us we must remember."

Note:

Episode 10: Losing *Laos* to the French
"For the tenth time, we lost all our land on the Mae Khong River, *Laos*.
They deceived us while we gave them our trust."

Note:

ครั้งที่ ๑๑

ฝั่งขวาแม่น้ำโขง
สูญเสียให้กับฝรั่งเศส

ครั้งที่ ๑๑
ครั้งที่สิบเอ็ด เสียฝั่งขวา นั่งหน้าดำ   มันเจ็บช้ำ ฝังจำ อยู่กลางใจ

Episode 11: Losing *The Land on the Right Side of Mae Khong River* to the French
    "For the eleventh time, we lost our *lands on the right side of Mae Khong River*. We sat still.
    The pain was still in our heart and mind."

Note:

ครั้งที่ ๑๒

พระตะบอง,เสียมราฐ,ศรีโสภณ
สูญเสียให้กับฝรั่งเศส

ครั้งที่ ๑๒ ใจวันทาด เพราะหมดท่า   เสียมลฑล บูรพา อีกจนได้
เขมาพราก จากแหลมทอง ถิ่นของไทย   อีกสองหมื่น ตารางไมล์
โดยประมาณ

Episode 12: Losing *Pra Tabong*, *Siem Riep*, and *Srisophon (Monthol Burapa)* to the French
    "For the twelfth time, we hurt. We lost our face.
    We lost our land *Monthol Burapa* again.
    They took the land from our 'golden axe.'
    We lost another 20,000 square kilos."

Note:

ครั้งที่ ๑๓

รัฐกลันตัน,ตรังกานู,ไทรบุรี,ปริส
สูญเสียให้กับอังกฤษ

ครั้งที่สิบสาม เสียตรังกานู ไทรบุรี   ในแผนที่ มองเห็น เป็นหลักฐาน
ไปอีงปะลิส ติดรัฐ กลันตัน   อีกสามหมื่น โดยประมาณ ตารางไมล์

Episode 13: Losing *Kelantan*, *Terangganu*, *Sri Buri* (*Kedah*), and *Prelis* to the British
    "For the thirteenth time, we lost *Terangganu* and *Sri Buri*. The evidence is shown in the map.
    It covers *Prelis* and *Kelantan*.
    We lost another 30,000 square kilos."

Note:

ครั้งที่ ๑๔

เขาพระวิหาร
สูญเสียให้กับเขมร

ครั้งที่ ๑๔
ครั้งที่สิบสี่ เสียเขา พระวิหาร   ปัจจุบัน เป็นของเขมร ท่านเห็นไหม
จำไว้เถิด เลือดเนื้อ เชื้อชาติไทย   จงรวมใจ เข้าร่วม รวมพลัง

Episode 14: Losing *Khao Phra Viharn* to Cambodia
    "For the fourteenth time, we lost *Khao Phra Viharn*.
    Now, it belongs to Cambodia.
    Remember all these episodes.
    We are Thai. United, we stand."

Note:

Note:

Note:

"We lost our lands many times—a large number of square kilometers. If we count all of them, they can be more than what we have left for today."
Note:

"Even our neighbors who used to be 'Thai' like us now fight against us."
Note:

"But the worst: We 'Thai' still have no shame no self-reflection. Many are still egocentric, selfish, and only live day by day for self-gratification."
Note:

"Do we need another, fifteenth, episode before we can think about this? Some people still seek out their gratification with wrongdoings. They lack responsibility, dignity, and shame. They are not masculine enough."
Note:

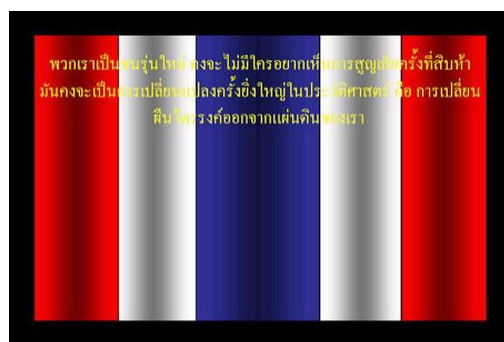"If our ancestors who sacrificed their lives to save our homelands . . . ."
Note:

". . . . know this: They would not be able to sleep peacefully in their graves."
Note:

"Now it is time to wake up! It is time to stand up. We should unite to protect and develop our own nation, so it will return to security once again."
Note:

ลุกขึ้นเถอะครับ...ตื่นชะทีเถอะครับ มันถึงเวลาแล้วที่เรา จะต้องมาช่วยกันทะนุบำรุงประเทศชาติ ให้กลับมามั่นคง

"We, the new generation, don't want to see a fifteenth episode coming. It will be a major change in our history, if we have to lose our flag from our homeland."
Note:

พวกเราเป็นคนรุ่นใหม่ คงจะไม่มีใครอยากเห็นการสูญเสียครั้งที่สิบห้า มันคงจะเป็นการเปลี่ยนแปลงครั้งยิ่งใหญ่ในประวัติศาสตร์ คือ การเปลี่ยน คืนโดยธงค์ออกจากแผ่นดินของเรา

Figure 1. Fourteen historical episodes when Thailand lost her territories.

The first set of myths implicit in the golden axe trope comes from the noun *axe* and has to do with the textbook history of noncolonized Thailand.[2] According to mainstream interpretation, the axe shape of modern Thailand is not a product of intended construction. No one drew the circumscribed border of Thailand into such a complete shape as a blueprint or plan. Instead, Thailand's modern configuration was the unintended byproduct of a long history of struggle and sacrifice between Siam (Thailand before 1939) and two major European powers, Britain and France. What remained after that conflict were the independent Siam and the axe shape of modern Thailand, as Summer can now see from the map.

The golden axe trope is a staple of conventional historicizing. Left uninterrogated, this trope leads to what critics have called "methodological nationalism," which forestalls an

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2 A variety of terms have been used to describe Thailand during this period: noncolonized, uncolonized, semicolonized.

investigation of important issues in Thailand's history, including the "Chinese question," a topic

belonging to a second set of myths infused in the adjective *golden*. On this reading of history,

Thailand, by remaining uncolonized by major European powers during the period of high

colonialism, emerged as an independent country of freedom and abundance, a "golden" land.

This notion has spawned an essentialist discourse depicting modern Thai people and their

ancestors as embracing cosmopolitanism, freedom, solidarity, and independence. From the

perspective of state-centered nationalism, this account is unsurprising, representing as it does an

appealing cultural repertoire of national origins that embraces the national anthem, popular

songs, poetry, high school and college history lessons, heroic tales, epics, fictions, and speeches.

What might appear as a surprise, however, is what an important relationship this myth has with

the "Chinese question" in Thailand.

The Historiography of Southeast Asia

Mainland Southeast Asian nation-states, like many others, arrived recently on the world

stage. Siam's transformation to Thailand in 1939 was preceded by a variety of political projects

and imaginations. Understanding that transformation is aided by a conceptual framework that

contextualizes the "empire-to-nation" transition within the longevity of imperial repertoires. The

historiography of Southeast Asia has been succinctly summarized by Victor Lieberman (2003,

2010), whose work has redefined what "Southeast Asia" means. In the sections that follow, I

summarize and interrogate Lieberman's account.

Traditional Understandings of Precolonial Southeast Asia

Lieberman (2003) distinguished among three phases of precolonial Southeast Asia,

"whose successive emphases display a contrapuntal logic" (p. 6): "externalist" historiography,

"autonomous" historiography, and the "age of commerce" thesis. The first approach, in

Lieberman's opinion, suffers from its underlying Eurocentric assumptions. On that view, the region now called Southeast Asia never engendered its own civilization. Externalist historians assume a condition of "indigenous incapacity/external benefaction" (Lieberman, 2003, p. 7). From this perspective, external "civilizing" agents (e.g., Indian, Chinese, European) shaped the development of Southeast Asian cultures. The historiography of Southeast Asia during the first half of the 20th century, argued Lieberman, was dominated by this perspective. An example is Coedes's (1948) classic work, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, in which he maintained that Indian traders were the main agents of change in the region and that Indian warriors established the first colonies.

In noting the positivistic assumptions underlying externalist accounts (i.e., treating Southeast Asian societies and cultures as objects of laboratory study), Lieberman (2003) drew four conclusions. First, without the beneficiaries represented by external agents, Southeast Asian societies existed in space but not in time. Second, with the exception of Coedes, early historical accounts saw Southeast Asia not as a coherent region but as a landmass of dispersed societies.[3] Third, these writings focused on the courts and high strata of society, not the villages and lower strata. Fourth, "An ontological difference separated Southeast Asian and European mentalities and ensured that the histories of Europe and precolonial Southeast Asia were fundamentally dichotomous" (p. 9).

The second approach, autonomous historiography, emerged in opposition to the externalist approach in the 1930s and 1940s. Historical writings in this camp give more weight to indigenous agency. These include J. C. van Leur's (1955) *Indonesian Trade and Society*, whose work tones down the Indian influence on Indonesian culture and society; Michael Aung-Thwin's

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3 Cf. Lieberman's critique of D.G.E. Hall (p. 9).

(1985) *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma*; David Wyatt's (2003) *Thailand: A Short History*;

O. W. Wolters' (1982/1999) *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*; and

Clifford Geertz's (1980) *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*.[4]

Whereas these works can be seen as a critique of their predecessors, Lieberman (2003) argued that in the end they share the same fundamental misassumptions:

> An emphasis on the self-sufficiency and effortless ability of indigenous peoples to absorb outside influences lapsed easily into a renewed emphasis on social and cultural inertia. Colonial [externalist] historians assumed Southeast Asians were incapable of linear change; some autonomists implied Southeast Asians were not much interested in change, yet the resultant images were similar. (p. 13)

More important for Lieberman is the fact that autonomous historiography still betrays a failure to incorporate Southeast Asia into world history:

> If, as we have seen, Orientalist historians posited a dichotomy between Western dynamism and Eastern inertia, at least their emphasis on the voyages of discovery provided a tie between far-flung sectors of Eurasia. Now, with European activities devalued, connective history—inquiry into contacts between physically distant societies—languished. Comparative history—the investigation of structural similarities between societies regardless of physical linkages—fared no better, precisely because the emphasis on local self-sufficiency militated against a search for features common to Southeast Asia and Europe, or indeed any other region. (p. 14)

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4 The list includes other Southeast Asian specialists such as Keith Taylor (1983), John Whitmore (1968; 1985), O. W. Wolters (1979; 1980), Insun Yu (1978; 1990), and Alexander Woodside (1971) on Vietnamese history; and Wolters (1967; 1970), M. C. Ricklefs (1974), Barbara Watson Andaya (1979), Leonard Andaya (1975; 1981), and Vincente Rafael (1988) on Southeast Asian island histories.

The "age of commerce" thesis has achieved its trademark as a separate historiographical approach. The thesis originated with Anthony Reid, whose two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680* (1988/1993), and *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (1999), identified the 15th-17th centuries as a watershed in the rise to prosperity of the entire region. Maritime exchanges that incorporated the region into the world economy were the main engine of this transformation. According to Lieberman, Reid corrected several problems in earlier approaches. In addition to positing Southeast Asia as a coherent unit of analysis and integrating it in the world economy, Reid paid specific attention to commoners and nonelite merchants, unlike the elite-centered perspective that characterized the first two approaches. In the end, however, when a global economic crisis set in, Southeast Asia went into decline and never revived itself until modern (postcolonial) times.

While praising Reid's ambition and imagination, Lieberman detected some problems in this third approach. First, even when his doubts about some historically specific interpretations are set aside, Lieberman argued that Reid's thesis is appropriate only for the Muslim archipelagic portion of Southeast Asia. When it comes to the mainland counterpart, different patterns of change are apparent. Second, Lieberman questioned Reid's chronology. The 15th-17th-century watershed in the maritime exchange that constituted the growth of the archipelagic world for Reid was, argued Lieberman, a period of disintegration on the mainland. Third, Reid's interpretation tends to shift the balance back toward the externalist approach, thereby reviving the "law of Southeast Asian inertia" by giving more weight to the effects of European agency in connecting the two halves of the world through maritime exchange. Finally, by not going further to explore relationships between Southeast Asia and other sectors of early modern Eurasia, Reid's thesis dissolves into another Eurocentric claim of East-West incompatibility.

Lieberman's Strange Parallels Thesis

In a two-volume work responding to problems he identified with earlier approaches to the historiography of Southeast Asia, Lieberman (2003; 2010) advanced a "strange parallels" thesis, another salvo in the evolving critique of European exceptionalism. Lieberman attempted to develop an overarching framework that incorporates the entire region into world history through long-term transformation at both ends of the Eurasian landmass. Lieberman's thesis differs from the externalist approach and its denial of local stasis and granting of agency only to external actors. And he departs from the autonomous approach by weaving changes in local cultures with global trends. Finally, the strange parallels thesis completes missing elements in the age of commerce thesis. First, it examines a variety of previously ignored parallel transformations in the mainland. Second, it considers maritime exchange as only one critical factor among many. Third, it sets the 15th-17th-century watershed in a broader historical context—from 800-1830 A.D. Fourth, it rejects many ontological differences between the East and West in favor of a focus on parallels. Fifth, it elaborates on historically specific differences between mainland and archipelagic trajectories, as well as among the mainland cases.

A Critique of Lieberman: A Fifth Approach

Lieberman's contribution to the current trend in Southeast Asian historiography is significant. Nonetheless, his work has drawn some criticism. Purdue (2008) argued that Lieberman's thesis, by focusing on the "administrative cycles" of political integration and disintegration, is too materialist and bypasses the "subtleties of psychological and cultural change" (p. 270). Purdue cited Berry's (1999) analysis as casting some doubt on whether Lieberman's model is applicable to the increased cultural diversity characterizing a politically well-integrated Tokugawa Japan. Purdue also referred to Wyatt (1999), a Thai specialist, who

urged historians to examine deeper internal cultural change by studying people's own ideas and the meaning of long-term integration. And Purdue invoked Subrahmanyam's (1999) model of "connective history" that the latter posited as "orthogonal" to Lieberman's. Nonetheless, Purdue argued that Subrahmanyam's model of the connective histories of the Middle East, the Southeast, and Southeast Asia could complement Lieberman's approach rather than supplant it. In his own response to Lieberman, one of Purdue's main concerns was that Lieberman neglected China in his depiction of the strange parallels at both ends of the Eurasian landmass. As a Chinese specialist, Purdue claimed that it is impossible to study the Eurasian landmass by omitting China and the connections stretching along the central Asian steppe.

Despite praising Lieberman's ambition, his careful interpretation and incorporation of detailed histories into a sophisticated model, other critics have questioned the advisability of conceptualizing Southeast Asia as a region (Tarling, 2004). Kelley (2006), for example, argued that Lieberman's analysis is subject to the same limitations as Reid's, which Lieberman set out to correct:

> Yet despite this vast examination of the existing English-language scholarship on the rest of the mainland, I would argue that Lieberman has still fallen into a similar trap as Reid. In discussing mainland Southeast Asia, Lieberman has taken Burma and Thailand as his model, much like Reid based his paradigm on only a part of Southeast Asia: the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Although there are times when Vietnam fits this model, there are many when it does not, and Lieberman repeatedly acknowledges these exceptions. While Vietnam may prove a fruitful source of comparison with France and Russia in the second volume, I suspect that historians of Vietnam will debate Lieberman's efforts to see its developments so closely mirrored in other mainland states. (p. 104).

Another critique of Lieberman was offered by Reynolds (2004), who suggested that Lieberman tries to compare the incomparable: "If diversity [among Lieberman's chosen cases] can be as easily 'compared' as similarity, what is to be gained by comparison?" (p. 1535). Reynolds also detected structuralism and conventional idioms of causation and consequence in Lieberman's work: "The structural vocabulary of consolidation, integration, synchronization, transformation, fragmentation, feedback loops, and pattern is everywhere evident" (p. 1535). For Reynolds, Lieberman has not been reflexive enough about cultural practice, specifically in treating language as a "transparent window onto the past " (p. 1535). Finally, in the same vein as Purdue (2008), Reynolds charged that Lieberman ignored such cultural contexts as ideology, consciousness, mentalities, perception, and emotion. What results is "an overly mechanical view of historical change" (p. 1535).

I agree with Berry (1999) and Wyatt (1999) that Lieberman's model is too materialist and with Reynolds (2004) that it is too mechanical. Although I believe that Berry and Wyatt's concern with the "subtleties of psychological and cultural change" is important and that studying them could enhance Lieberman's approach, I see cultural change not as subtle but rather explicit, in keeping with Reynolds (2004). Second, I agree with Purdue's (2008) contention that the impact of China should not be downplayed when it comes to mainland Southeast Asia and especially Thailand. Third, I concur with Andaya (2004) that Lieberman's work is still elite-centered and neglects the rules and repertoires of political imagination in favor of administrative cycles. Such a focus reverts to the conventional "kings and battles" narratives he ostensibly opposes. Finally, although ambitious in scope, Lieberman's work centers on the precolonial era, what he calls "early modern" Southeast Asia. For Lieberman, 1830 A.D. is the cut-off point of analysis. However, for the Thai case, as I argue below, more recent events must be considered.

What I propose, then, is a fifth approach to Southeast Asian historiography, one that brings culture back to center stage[5]; shifts the focus to the late 19th and early 20th century while relying on Lieberman's work (and other relevant secondary works) as a supplement for the earlier period; pays attention to both elite and nonelite sectors and perspectives; and engages two concerns in the spirit of Lieberman—East-West ontological differences, and Southeast Asia as a unit of analysis—without downplaying colonial and imperial influence.

The Empire-to-Nation Transition and the Longevity of Imperial Repertories

I propose to study the "empire-to-nation" transition during the late 19th and early 20th century, when Siam became Thailand, as well as the longevity of imperial repertoires and their influence on political and social transformation through cultural practice. Although the phrase *empire-to-nation transition* might suggest an abrupt change or epochal transformation, I by no means choose the "change" and discard the "continuity" side of history. Indeed, as I will argue, the transition from Siam to Thailand involved an evolution of political projects and imaginations. When territorial consolidation occurred on a grand scale during the age of high colonialism in mainland Southeast Asia, earlier political forms did not automatically vanish into the clouds while the new state-centered nationalism and cultural mandates surged in Thailand. Slicing these cultural repertoires and compartmentalizing them into or mapping them with clear-cut stages and historical epochs does not produce the kind of revisionist history that I attempt to do.

I contend that in the process of political transformation evident in Thailand, earlier political forms still have significance. As Comisso (2006) suggested, during passage to the

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5 This statement does not imply that culture analysis never been applied to the Southeast Asian experience. After all, as Steedly (1999) noted, Southeast Asia was the breeding ground for an interpretive concept of "culture"—for example, Geertz's notion of culture as a public text. Steedly lamented that "culture is increasingly viewed as an attribute of the state—an object of state policy, an ideological zone for the existence of state power, or literally a creation of the state—whereas the state itself is comprehended in ways analogous to totalizing models of culture" (p. 431). She urged analysts to consider other themes such as gender, marginality, and violence. My study responds to her encouragement by taking both the Thai state and the Chinese people into account, a move achieved in tandem with the "practice" turn in historical sociology.

modern world, the division of empires begat nation-states whose actors created national consciousness and nationalism. There exists no innate tendency toward nationalism and a new form of statehood. "States create nations," and not vice versa. I accept Comisso's argument but want to extend it by bringing culture back in. In lieu of an organic tendency toward nationalism and nation-states, I contend that the continuity of "imperial repertoires" (i.e., rules and modes of social organization) is what undergirds such transformation. Through understanding cultural practices (i.e., how specific actors relied on imperial repertoires in their actions), we can understand the continuing influence of those repertoires in the passage from empire to nation, from Siam to Thailand. Because such repertoires are always overlapping and entangled rather than bounded and compartmentalized, my study will highlight both the change and continuity sides of history simultaneously.

The Golden Axe Trope and Methodological Nationalism

The framework proposed above helps demystify the golden axe trope and its accompanying myths by enabling a critique of methodological nationalism and an ontological and epistemological reflection on the problem of difference. Methodological nationalism—"the assumption that the nation/state/society is a natural social and political form of the modern world" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 301)—is a term coined by geographer P. J. Taylor (1994, 1996, 2000) and urban sociologist Neil Brenner (1998). It was picked up and popularized by several social scientists in the last decade, including Daniel Chernilo (2006, 2007) and Andreas Wimmer (2002).

Wimmer and Schiller (2002) distinguished among three types of methodological nationalism. The first emerged from classical social theory, constructed "as a series of socio-structural types—from feudalism through capitalism to communism, from *Gemeinschaft* to

Gesellschaft, organic to mechanical solidarity, traditional to modern society, and so forth" (p.

303). According to Wimmer and Schiller, this approach betrays a blind spot when it comes to

understanding the process of nation-state formation. In these grand theories of modernization,

nationalism (by definition a collective entity) is placed at earlier stages along the continuum of

social evolution—as a way station to the "modern, rationalized and individualized class society

based on achievement" (p. 303). These theories, they argued, ignore "the paradox that

modernization has led to the creation of national communities amidst a modern society

supposedly dominated by the principles of achievement" (p. 304). In a nutshell, these grand

theories do not acknowledge that nationalism and modernity can exist side by side rather than as

one type preceding another along a continuum of modernization.

The second type of methodological nationalism can be seen in all conventional,

empirically oriented social scientific works that naturalize nation-states. Such an approach "takes

national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing them or

making them an object of analysis in its own right. Instead, nationally bounded societies are

taken to be the naturally given entities to study" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 304). The third

type involves the "territorialization of social science imagination and the reduction of the

analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 307). Social

scientific practices based on this type of methodological nationalism usually set out to explain

processes within nation-state boundaries in contrast to those outside, and ignore connections

between the two.

As noted above, one myth of noncolonized Thailand conceptualizes it as a clearly

bounded and territorialized modern nation emerging out of historical struggle and sacrifice. The

axe shape in geopolitical maps reinforces a view of the modern Thai nation, state, and society as

the same congruent reality. But what, specifically, gave rise to this positive space? As I hope to

make clear, specific kinds of agency were involved in creating this modern space, rendering it

visible in a historically specific way. Unlike those nation-states that came into existence after

struggles with colonial powers (i.e., the postcolonial states), modern Thailand travelled along a

distinctive sociohistorical path by not being colonized. This does not mean, however, that

indigenous agency was the only important factor in the making of modern Thailand. During the

transitional period, from empire to nation, various forces—both external and internal—were part

of the process. By relying on methodological nationalism, it is easy for indigenous agency to be

pitted against outsiders, with winners and losers, ála Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1955) *Tristes*

Tropiques or any mainstream postcolonial study. A more fruitful approach is to focus on the

negative space that allows the axe, modern Thailand, to exist as it appears today. This negative

space and how it came to be is the focus of my study.

The Problem of Difference

A second major concern for historiography is the "problem of difference." When

historical analysis is preconditioned by methodological nationalism—when the congruent reality

of nation/state/society is taken for granted as naturally existing and as a unit of analysis—the

problem of difference becomes acute. When such methodological nationalism is posited from the

outset, it is convenient to see one self-contained unit as a container for other self-contained units.

Casting these as the subunits for analysis—entities that can be grouped, regrouped, compared,

contrasted, or pitted against one another—results in an essentializing of cultures.

"Psychological essentialism" (or "participants' primordialism") is an analytic tendency to

see cultures as "things," as self-contained units of analysis whose salient features and significant

traits are deemed representative of the collective actors who inhabit those cultures. When essentialism colors analysis, the problem of difference is a blind spot.

> The problem of difference—what to make of it and what to do about it—is also called the "problem of other," although the term "other" is used variously in the anthropological literature. It is sometimes used to connote difference per se, without any initial judgment of relative worth. It is also sometimes used to connote unbridgeable differences or a solipsistic gap between self-knowledge and a mysterious or spectral other whose identity can never be truly inscribed. Finally, it can connote the representations of others as less than or other than human, or as different in ways that condemn them to inferior status or justify their domination. (Shweder, 2003, p. 19)

Shweder's (2003) critique of cultural analysis based on a purported ontological difference between two or more subunits of analysis provides the starting point for my revisionist view. Although power relations play a critical role in the analysis Shweder critiques, in taking for granted that those subunits are already different, it is easy to bypass the more fundamental question of how difference is constituted in the first place. Rather than positing inherent differences between subunits of analysis, I suggest that one ask, "Where do these subunits come from?"

By invoking "subunits" of analysis, I by no means assume they represent "groups," or neatly bounded substrata of society. This concern is well addressed by Brubaker (2004), who coined the term "methodological groupism," which he described as

> the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis. I mean the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which

interests and agency can be attributed. I mean the tendency to reify such groups. . . . I

mean the tendency to represent the social and cultural world as a multichrome mosaic of

monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs. (p. 8)

Brubaker noted that "'groups' function as a seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept,

apparently in no need of a particular scrutiny or explication. As a result, we tend to take for

granted not only the concept 'group,' but also 'groups'—the putative things-in-the-world to

which the concept refers" (p. 7).

As I have noted, the golden axe trope invites psychological essentialism and slights

ontological and epistemological reflection on the problem of difference. By rejecting

methodological groupism, I conceptualize the problem of difference in terms of sociological

categories of people. As Calhoun (1996) suggested, social scientific analysis should center on the

historical constitution of sociological categories. Varieties of social organization or processes of

historical transformation constitute and reconstitute basic sociological categories. Most of the

time, such categories do not map perfectly onto neatly bounded social constituents or groups.

When they do not map, they become much more interesting. Power relations play an important

role in constitution and reconstitution. In Calhoun's words, "We understand a position by

knowing why and from where or what one might have moved to it" (p. 320). By not positing an

ontological difference between categories but asking where they come from and how they

become constituted, the prime concern for analysis becomes epistemological—how to discern

difference in praxis. "Working in a theory of practice points up that not all differences

necessitate clashes or resolutions. We can and do allow many to coexist happily" (Calhoun,

1996, p. 320).

Preview of History

On April 18, 1855, King Rama IV of Siam signed the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in order to liberalize free trade between Siam and other foreign nations. By opening her door officially to the outside world, Siam liberated herself from the past and joined the march of modern history, embarking on the journey to nation-statehood. Almost a century later, in 1932, a revolution from above overthrew the absolute monarchy. Seven years later, Siam became Thailand. This succinct narrative represents a standard textbook history of Thailand. The late 19th and early 20th century is routinely commemorated as the critical period in Thai history.

According to this master narrative, it took nearly 100 years for a modern nation called Thailand to emerge, join the League of Nations, and become a sovereign nation-state.[6] That entity has been in existence for about 70 years—a long period if a simplistic and uncritical notion of "modernity" and the modern epoch is accepted. Seen from the wider scope of world history, however, Thailand came into existence quite recently. From such a panoramic view, it took a very long time before a particular part of mainland Southeast Asia formerly called Siam became Thailand, the golden axe appearing in geopolitical maps today.

A revisionist history of Thailand needs to step back in time, not just to locate the classical foundations and lineage of the modern state, but to delve deeper into the kinds of agency and practice that constitute the modern imagination. Political culture long predated the critical period of Thai history—from the late 19th to early 20th century—but the significant action did indeed play out during this critical window, when Siam emerged as a "contact zone" in the age of high colonialism. By not sundering this age from world history, or plunging into another master

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6 Cf. Stefan Hell (2010), *Siam and the League of Nations: Modernization, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920-1940.*

narrative of "European expansion" or the "European miracle," a revisionist view of Thailand's history necessitates re-visioning the long history of mainland Southeast Asia.

Long before the age of high colonialism in mainland Southeast Asia, Siam had been a contact zone. Located in a continental environment, Siam, like other similarly situated countries, moved with rhythmic waves of expansion and contraction in space and time. Unlike other places, however, the Siamese imagined "space" and "time" in their own ways, and how they imagined those cultural categories shaped their political reality and their modern imagination. If we subdivide Thai history based purely on a Western perspective, we overlook the continuity of cultural repertoires.

How the Siamese imagined such categories as space and time involves one in a redefinition of history. Such a redefinition is in keeping with Lieberman's (2003; 2010) attempt to incorporate "Southeast Asia" into world history and with Burbank and Cooper's (2010) call for rewriting world history as a history of empire. Considering the imperial characteristics of Siam, I argue, is central to the Thai experience and allows a complex and nuanced view of modern Thailand. Such an approach avoids the trap of methodological nationalism while at the same time being sensitive to the problem of difference. The next major task is to trace this imperial legacy in Siamese history, before addressing questions of multiculturalism in general and China's influence in particular.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined a conceptual framework for a revisionist understanding of Thai history. My point of entry is an unpacking and demythologizing of the golden axe trope—the shape of modern Thailand that appears in maps, history textbooks, and the popular imagination, as well as its underlying symbolic burden. I described two sets of myths implicit in the trope, one

explaining Thailand's modern shape as a consequence of territorial consolidation, and the other representing abundance, love of freedom, independence, and cosmopolitanism. I then offered an interrogation of methodological nationalism, the assumption of a natural and congruent reality linking nation, state, and society. I also briefly considered how the problem of difference complicates historical analysis and stressed the importance of studying various cultures without reducing them to ontologically different analytical categories from the outset. I argued for the validity of viewing Thai history as an empire-to-nation transition while recognizing the longevity of imperial repertoires. That view necessarily takes in a longer span of history than do many analyses, which usually focus on the late 19th to early 20th century—the age of high colonialism. Through understanding cultural practice, I contend that we can understand how the continuity of imperial characteristics and repertoires played out in shaping the modern imagination during the period when Siam became Thailand.

In the following chapter I will draw on a variety of historical sources to illuminate the influence of imperial characteristics in the formation and consolidation of the Siamese political community in mainland Southeast Asia. After showing how the early Bangkok state did not fit the standard Western European typology of statehood, I will argue that Bangkok is best understood as a "metropole" and that the history of Thailand's centralization and transformation is illuminated by an understanding of how Bangkok achieved its hegemonic status in the region. Using several historical cases that illustrate Bangkok expansionism, I will discuss how Siamese elites constructed various categories of the "other" in overlapping with the imperial projects of the British in the North, West, and South; the French in the East; and Imperial China through commercial and tributary relationships. I conclude by revisiting the notion of imperial repertories before applying them to the "Chinese question."