Abstract

Most scholars believe that monarchy is irrelevant to capitalism. Once capitalism becomes a dominant mode of production in a state, the argument goes, monarchy is either abolished by the bourgeoisie or transformed into a constitutional monarchy, a symbolic institution that plays no role in the economic and political realms, which are exclusively reserved for the bourgeoisie. The monarchy of Thailand, however, fits neither of those two narratives. Under Thai capitalism, the Crown not only survives but also thrives politically and economically. What explains the political hegemony and economic success of the Thai monarchy? Examining the relationship between the transformation of the Thai monarchy’s public images in the mass media and the history of Thai capitalism, this study argues that the Crown has become a “bourgeois monarchy.” Embodying both royal glamour and middle-class ethics, the “bourgeois monarchy” in Thailand has been able to play an active role in the national economy and politics while secretly accumulating wealth because it provides a dualistic ideology that complements the historical development of Thai capitalism, an ideology that not only motivates the Thai bourgeoisie to work during times of economic growth but also tames bourgeois anxiety when economic crisis hits the country.
Introduction: Research Objective

Among scholars of the relationship between monarchy and capitalism, there is a consensus that although monarchy plays a crucial role in the early development of capitalism, it eventually becomes antagonistic, disadvantageous, or irrelevant to capitalism. Once capitalism becomes a dominant mode of production in a state, the question of monarchy must be solved in one of two decisive ways: the monarchy is either simply abolished or it is transformed into a symbolic institution that may play a role in the cultural realm of the capitalist state but has no business in both economic and political realms, which are exclusively reserved for the bourgeoisie. Neither of these two models, however, fits the relationship between the monarchy of Thailand and capitalism. Undomesticated by the bourgeoisie, the Crown not only survives but also thrives in both political and economic realms of Thailand’s capitalism.

What explains the political hegemony and economic success of the Thai monarchy under Thai capitalism? Although some scholars of Thai studies have recently studied the wealth and power of the Thai monarchy, they fail to explain not only how the Crown as a political institution relates to the Crown as a capitalist enterprise and vice versa, but also how this intimate relation between royal hegemony and royal wealth is left untouched by the bourgeoisie in Thailand. This study, instead, proposes a new concept that I call “bourgeois monarchy.” Embodying both royal glamour and middle-class ethics, the “bourgeois monarchy” in Thailand has been able to play an active role in the national economy and politics while secretly accumulating its wealth because it makes two ideological contributions to Thai capitalism: first, an ideology of prosperity, splendor, and luxury that motivates the Thai bourgeoisie to work during times of economic growth, and second, an ideology of frugality, diligence, and prudence that tames bourgeois anxiety during moments of economic crisis.
This study will contribute to three fields of scholarship. First, to the debate about the relationship between monarchy and capitalism, it offers a new account of the institutional adaptation of monarchy to capitalism. Second, to the gap in Thai studies between scholars of royal hegemony and those of royal wealth, it proposes that we should think of these two dimensions of the Thai Crown in tandem. Last, by showing how capitalism in Thailand still depends on the extra-economic powers of the monarchy during both economic boom and bust, this study should trigger further study of the continuation of extra-economic means that still powerfully function in the capitalist state, regardless of its political form, kingdom or republic.

Theoretical Framework and Substantial Background

Two types of literature are relevant to this study: one on the relationship between monarchy and capitalism and the other on the Thai monarchy in Thai Studies. The first literature can be divided into two categories: one on the abolition of monarchy and the other on the transition to a constitutional monarchy. The second literature can also be divided into two categories: one on royal hegemony and the other on royal wealth.

The Relationship between Monarchy and Capitalism

Scholars of the relationship between monarchy and capitalism hold that monarchy plays a crucial role in the early development of capitalism but eventually becomes antagonistic, disadvantageous, or irrelevant to capitalism. What has been debated among them, therefore, is not whether monarchy must give way to capitalism but whether and how it continues once capitalism prevails.

Monarchy contributes to the early development of capitalism in two ways. First, it provides an ideological motivation for the bourgeoisie, the protagonist of capitalism. As Adam Smith (1982, 183) points out, men of inferior ranks always look up to the royal and aristocratic life, a life that is socially perceived as one of beauty, splendor, and greatness. Working tirelessly
day and night and spending their money prudently, lower-class men dream that someday they will possess the courts, servants, and luxury commodities that a king or an aristocrat does. This motivation, for Smith, eventually creates the unintended consequences of civilization, modernization, and the wealth of nations. Benjamin Franklin (2004, 65), whom Marx (1859) and Weber (2002) categorize as the archetype of a bourgeois, notes in his autobiography that industry and frugality are his means to obtain wealth, which is in turn a means to fulfill his youthful aspiration: to stand before the kings. Originating from the ideological attraction to the glamour of the Crown, frugality, an ethic of work, and prudence became the virtues of a bourgeois and overshadowed the royal virtues of courage, honor, and magnanimity in the era of capitalism (McCloskey 1994, 2007; Wells and Graafland 2012; Moretti 2014; Bendix 2001; Lowe 1982; Kramick 1990; Wendling 2012).

Second, monarchy provides political protection to the bourgeoisie’s early accumulation of capital. Marx and Engels (1977, 223) argue that absolute monarchs protected the bourgeoisie because they needed this rising class as a political counterpoise to the feudal nobility. Schumpeter (1975, 136) states that the king, the court, the army, the church, and the bureaucracy in the monarchical state were the “steel frame” that sheltered and protected the bourgeoisie. Hill (1940) argues that the English monarchs in the 16th century protected the rising bourgeoisie from not only the internal threat and revolt but also the external foes, the naval powers and pirates in the overseas trade. Mao (1939) believes that in China the old feudal society had transformed into a “semi-colonial and semi-feudal society” once the emperors allowed foreign capitalism to penetrate. Under these conditions, the emperors and the rising bourgeoisie united as the compradors helping the foreign capitalists to exploit millions of peasants and workers in the country.
Nonetheless, many thinkers and scholars agree that monarchy cannot withstand the force of capitalism and must eventually give way to the bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1977; Lenin 1964; Mao 1939; Schumpeter 1975; Hill 1940; Weber 1946; Bagehot 1966; Wood 1991; Anderson 2013). Wood (2002, 3) precisely recaps this train of thought: while monarchs and aristocratic landlords appropriated a surplus from producers by using the extra-economic means of military, political, and juridical powers, capitalism clearly distinguishes itself from feudalism and absolutism by the fact that its mode of appropriation is based purely on the economic mechanism of the market. Once capitalism prevails, Wood (1991, 75) notes, the extra-economic powers of monarchs and aristocratic landlords are irrelevant and they must give way to the new laws of surplus appropriation regulated by profit-maximization and rising labor productivity. Therefore, at some point in history, as Hill (1940) points out, the bourgeoisie must liberate itself from monarchy, a “parasite” which produces nothing for the national economy but relentlessly taxes the bourgeois enterprises and monopolizes both internal and external trade.

Where these writers disagree, however, is over whether monarchy is simply abolished or transformed into the symbolic representation of the nation. Marx (1978, 30) argues that monarchy, whether in an absolute or constitutional form, is a political system that is based upon magic and mysticism of a single monarch rather than bourgeois rationality and thus is ultimately incompatible with the democratic republic of the bourgeoisie. In the era of modern industry and the world market, Marx and Engels (1977, 223) predict, the bourgeoisie will take over the monarchical state and set up the modern state so that its government serves merely the political and economic interests of the capitalist system. Believing that the Tsar had long exploited and hindered the economy of Russia, Lenin (1962, 1964) emphasizes that the Russian Revolution must not seek to restrain the monarchy under a constitution but simply abolish it once and for all.
Seeing the Chinese Revolution of 1911 as a bourgeois revolution that completely abolished the monarchy, Mao (1939) believes that the restoration of the Emperor is out of the question. He is concerned instead with the political alliances of the bourgeoisie, the old landlords, and the foreign capitalists in the Republic of China.

Acknowledging that these revolutionaries may overstate the demise of monarchy, some scholars contend that European monarchs could prolong their demise. That is, despite the end of their economic domination, royals and aristocrats still had political and cultural influence in European states and societies. According to Mayer (2010), Europe had to wait for almost two centuries after the French Revolution until the two World Wars to finally dislodge the royal and aristocratic elements from its society. Schumpeter (1975, 137-9) similarly argues that the royals and the aristocrats of Europe were not easily eradicated and that they continued to dominate the state until the destructive force of capitalism finally got rid of their powers at the turn of the 20th century. Nairn (2011) goes further by claiming that Europe had completely eradicated its royal and aristocratic elements only after the 1970s. Although this literature seems a counterargument to Marx’s model of the modern state, its conclusion actually reaffirms what Marx and Engels (1977) predict: the triumph of the bourgeoisie over monarchy would eventually come; even though it might take decades, if not centuries.

The second camp of thinkers and scholars believe that monarchy can, instead, be transformed into a constitutional monarchy that is compatible with the modern state of the bourgeoisie. According to Hegel (2006), unlike a republic in which the three branches of government are separated and tend to be in conflict with each other, a constitutional monarchy is a form of government that provides unity, stability, continuity, harmony, rationality, and freedom, the political conditions that facilitate economic activities of the bourgeoisie. Weber
believes that a constitutional monarchy is able to exist in the modern state because its symbolic power serves as a political façade providing legitimacy to a new order of the bourgeoisie. Examining the constitutional monarchy of Britain, Bagehot (1966) argues that there is a division of labor between the government that executes the “effective functions” of the constitution and the monarchy that performs the “dignified parts” of it. This ritual performance of the royals, Bagehot notes, is crucial to political order in Britain because it functions as an ideological tool of the bourgeoisie to deceive the lower classes. Enchanted by the dignity, glamour, and mystery of the Queen and the Royal Family, the uneducated and poor in Britain disengage from the political and economic affairs orchestrated by the bourgeois elite.

The British monarchy is also the main focus of Nairn (1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1964d, 1970, 1976) and Anderson (1964, 1966, 1968) whose series of articles became later known as the “Nairn-Anderson theses.” The main theme of their theses is that British capitalism had declined during the 1960s because it was hindered by some antiquated institutions and cultural backwardness, the pinnacle of which was the British monarchy. Therefore, compared with the capitalist states in Continental Europe, the capitalist state of Britain was stunted, deviant, and immature. Nairn (2011) took this theme again in his acclaimed book criticizing the British monarchy. Instead of a mere tourist attraction, the Queen and the Royal Family, Nairn argues, serve not only as a symbol of the multi-national composition of Britain but also as an ideological tool of the British elite to silence the working class. Wood (1991, 75) disagrees about a mismatch between British capitalism and cultural backwardness represented by the Crown and contends, instead, that in the 16th century, British capitalism had already been more developed and mature than those capitalisms of Continental Europe. Rather than abolishing the monarchy, the aristocratic landlords and the rising bourgeoisie, Wood argues, acknowledged that this institution
was not a threat to their supremacy and thus it could serve as an ideological tool to tame the lower classes.

Contemporary scholars at the turn of the 21st century, however, tend to distance themselves from this critical characteristic of a constitutional monarchy as an ideological tool, focusing more on its function of maintaining national unity and stability or supporting all people in the nation struggling with global capitalism. Examining the history of monarchies around the world, Spellman (2001, 245) finds that constitutional monarchies today serve as the rallying point for nations increasingly facing democratic and economic instability. Prochaska (1995) and Bogdanor (1998) agree that the British royal family’s image as charitable and philanthropic is crucial to the British people who need an ideological support when struggling with national crisis and instability. Studying the modern monarchy of Japan, Hall (1974), Fujitani (1998), and Ruoff (2001) share the same idea that the Emperor represents traditional values and serves as an ideological support for the Japanese people immersed in the global market and modernity. This current trend represents an end to the discussion of how the monarchy is related to political economy, class struggle, and the bourgeoisie, and a “cultural turn” in monarchy studies instead. Distancing themselves from the analysis of political economy, contemporary scholars of monarchy feel at home approaching monarchy merely in terms of its cultural impact on the people as a whole instead of its economic and political relations with different social classes (Geertz 1983; Cannadine 1983; Fujitani 1992, 1998; Campbell 2006; Schwartz 2010; Shape 2013).

While the debate on the relationship between monarchy and capitalism in terms of political economy has ended in Europe, the Commonwealth, and Japan, this debate appears to be alive among those scholars studying the absolute monarchies of the Middle East. At first glance,
the monarchies in this region seem to fit neither of the two European models but rather belong to Mao’s concept of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. As compradors, these monarchies ally themselves with multinational corporations to exploit the oil resources in this region. In this regard, it could be argued that the Middle Eastern monarchies, by keeping their absolute power intact instead of transforming themselves into a constitutional form, not only survive but also prosper in the era of global capitalism.

Revealing how the patrimonial, tribal, and family-based forms of the state contribute to the resilience of the absolute monarchies in the Middle East, some scholars contend that these monarchies can withstand economic and social changes in the 21st century (Anderson 1991; Kostiner 2000; Ben-Dor 2000; Menaldo 2012; Yom and Gause 2012). Following Huntington’s (1968) prediction, some scholars, however, doubt that those pre-capitalist forms of the state can survive the forces of global capitalism in the long run (Herb 1999; Ehteshami 2003; Lucas 2004; Davidson 2013; Kariti 2013). Despite the attempt of the absolute monarchs in this region to appease their people by providing expansionary budgets and a generous welfare state, there will be a bourgeois class forming, rising, and finally putting an end to the monopoly of political power and national wealth under the royal families (Kariti, 2013; Davidson, 2013). While Ehteshami (2003) and Lucas (2004) positively believe that the Middle Eastern monarchies will transform themselves into a constitutional form before it is too late, Davidson (2013) predicts that those monarchies will simply be gone within the next five years. As a result, although the debate on the relationship between monarchy and capitalism seems to be alive among those scholars studying the absolute monarchies in the Middle East, there is actually no debate at all. The fate of those absolute monarchies once capitalism extensively penetrates in this region is obvious: they will eventually be either abolished or transformed into a constitutional institution.
The Thai Monarchy in Thai Studies

The literature of Thai studies reveals the only case that actually keeps the debate about the relationship between monarchy and capitalism alive. The case of the monarchy of Thailand fits neither of the trajectories of Europe. During the 1980s, the economic growth of Thailand coinciding with the decline of the Thai Communist Party not only transformed the national economy from agrarian to industrial capitalism (Pasuk and Baker 2009; Kasian 2009) and thus ended a debate among Thai leftists about whether Thailand is still in a pre-capitalist society (Reynolds and Lysa 1983; Somsak 1982), but it also created the Thai bourgeoisie, which is more coherent, numerous, and powerful than other bourgeoisies in Southeast Asia (Takashi 2004). Despite those conditions, many scholars acknowledge that the Thai Crown has never been domesticated by the bourgeoisie but is continually active in the national economy and politics (Anderson 1977; Gray 1986; Somsak 2005; Giles 2007; Porphant 2008b; Ivasson and Isager 2010a; Kengkij 2008; Thongchai 2014; Jory 2014; Pavin 2014). Ironically, it has been the Thai bourgeoisie itself that keeps asking the monarchy to intervene in national affairs (Connors 2008; Thongchai 2008; McCargo 2009). These scholars of the Thai monarchy can be divided into two groups: those who focus on royal wealth and those who focus on royal hegemony.

The wealth of the Thai monarchy has been barely explored in Thai Studies. Nonetheless, as Thanapol and Chaitawat (2014, 11) point out, after Forbes ranked Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the longest-reigning of the world’s current monarchs, as the world’s richest royal in 2007, thanks to his fortune of $30 billion, the origin of the Crown’s wealth has become a puzzle that has gained more attention in Thai Studies. Although the absolute monarchy in Thailand was overthrown, deprived of its wealth, and transformed by the Siamese Revolution of 1932 into a constitutional institution, financially dependent on the government budget (Prakarn 2007; Thanapol and Chaitawat 2014), some scholars have shown that the Thai Crown actually regained
its wealth seven decades later (Porphant 2008a, 2008b; Handley 2006). The Crown Property Bureau (CPB), according to Porphant (2008b), is the largest corporate group in Thailand and even in Southeast Asia. Not only does the CPB own the largest and most valuable commercial land in Thailand, but it is also the biggest stockholder in Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement Group, the largest bank and the largest industrial conglomerate of the country, respectively. Porphant (2008b) and Somsak (2006) suggest that this outsized wealth should be studied alongside the political role of the Crown, but no scholars in Thai studies have yet responded to this suggestion.

Studies of royal hegemony have been more abundant and can be divided further into two categories: those examining royal hegemony in national politics and those examining it in the national economy. Although the Thai Crown is de jure a constitutional monarchy, standing above political conflicts and playing no political role, many scholars agree that the Crown is de facto political (Somsak 2005; Thongchai 2005; McCargo 2005; Ivasson and Isager 2010a; Pavin 2014). The King, the Royal Family, and the Privy Council have been studied as political actors intervening in many political events in Thai history such as the Massacre of October 6, 1976 (Anderson 1977; Bowie 1977), Black May of 1992 (Handley 2006; Kittisak 2013), the ultraroyalist movements in the late 2010s (Connors 2008; Thongchai 2008), and the last two military coups in 2006 and 2014 (Thanapol 2007; Pavin 2014; Halan 2014). The many contributions have been through theories of nationalism (Thongchai 1997, 2005; Prajak 2005; Prin 2012), democratization (Connors 2007; Hewison and Kengkij 2010), conservatism (Nattapol 2010, 2013), authoritarianism (Thak 2007; Ockey 2014), and lèse-majesté (Streckfuss 2010, 2011). These scholars, however, barely explore the political economy aspect of the Thai monarchy.
The second group, by contrast, focuses more on the Crown’s active role in the national economy. Although the King’s failure to deal with the economic crisis in the 1930s was the main cause of the downfall of Thai absolutism (Batson 1984; Pasuk and Baker 2009), today the bourgeoisie praises King Bhumibol not only as an expert on national development but also as a national savior when the Asian economic crisis hit Thailand in 1997 (Chanida 2007; Stengs 1999, 2009; Jackson 1999, 2010). His deep influence includes the transformation of his development projects into national policies and the integration of his “philosophy of a sufficiency economy” into the Constitution and the National Economic and Social Development Board plans after the 1997 crisis (Chanida 2007; Chanida and Bamford 2007; Ivaasson 2007).

Studies of royal hegemony in the national economy further subdivide into two groups: a focus on the King’s vision of the national economy and one on the religious images of the Thai monarchs. The first group holds that the King’s hegemonic role in the national economy after the 1997 crisis is due to the popularity of his philosophy of a sufficiency economy, a utopian vision of returning to a self-sufficient, agrarian community instead of a capitalist society (Kasian 2006; Kengkij 2008; Ivarsson 2007; Ivarsson and Isager 2010b; Glassman 2010). The second focuses on the religious belief of Hindu-Buddhism in Thailand whereby the popularity of the images of King Bhumibol as a “god-king” and, thus, a national savior, has helped the bourgeoisie handle the challenge and crisis of capitalism (Gray 1986, 1991; Stengs 1999, 2009; Jackson 1999, 2010). While the first group does not address what makes the King’s philosophy popular among the bourgeoisie in the first place, the second group tends to overstate the role of religion as the basis of the popularity of the King. Most important, both schools leave three aspects of the Thai monarchy unexplored: the Crown’s transformation from traditional and religious to modern and
secular images, the relationship between those new images and royal wealth, and a non-religious ideology that binds the monarchy with the bourgeoisie.

Even though the discussion of the relationship between monarchy and capitalism remains alive in Thai studies, this literature still needs to overcome two limitations: first, bridging the gaps between a focus on royal hegemony or royal wealth, royal hegemony in the national economy or in national politics, and the King’s vision of the Thai economy or the religious images of the Thai monarch, and second, going beyond their static and one-dimensional analysis of the Thai monarchy’s ideology, images, and relationship to the bourgeoisie to its multifaceted features and historical transformation of the institution through many periods of capitalism.

Statement of the Argument

I argue that the Thai monarchy has historically transformed itself into a “bourgeois monarchy” embodying two interdependent components: one functions at the economic realm and the other at the political realm of Thai capitalism. Armed with these two components, the Crown, which was established in the 13th century, not only survives but also thrives in 21st century capitalism.

First, the “bourgeois monarchy” in Thailand is not only a political institution but also a capitalist enterprise. Going beyond Kantorowitzc’s (1957) idea that the monarchy has two bodies, the corporeal body and the body politic, I argue that the Thai monarchy has a third body hidden from the public: a capitalist body. Dispossessed of most of its wealth when the absolute monarchy was overthrown, the royal household, long accustomed to a lifestyle of luxury and socially expected to be the country’s biggest patron, sought to escape the constitutional limits on its budget and its financial dependence on the government by paving a new route to capital accumulation that challenges a conventional idea in political economy, an idea that monarchy is
a pre-capitalist institution whose wealth is based upon the extra-economic means of coercive extraction of rent. Although the large commercial land that the Thai monarchy has historically inherited still yields a large income, the majority of the Crown’s wealth today comes from capital investment and profit-maximization in financial and industrial enterprises.

The Crown’s active role in capital accumulation, nonetheless, not only violates its legal status as a constitutional monarchy but also threatens its image of honor. Constantly criticizing the greed, corruption, and immorality of national bankers and industrialists, the Crown, which has been prospering greatly from Thailand’s transition to capitalism since the mid-80s, must distance itself from those capitalists and disguise its capitalist activities from the public. To do this, the Crown needs a powerful ideology that not only prevents public inspection of its wealth and enterprises but also creates a perception that the Crown’s active role in the national economy and politics is indispensable to the Thai people.

Second, this ideology of the “bourgeois monarchy” contains two features: royal images of splendor, luxury, sacredness, and nobility embedded historically in the institution for centuries, and, more recently, middle-class images and virtues of frugality, industry, and prudence that are more appropriate to the country’s transformation to a capitalist society. The first features of this ideology can be attributed to a traditional belief in Thai Hindu-Buddhism that the monarch is the god-king, the next Buddha, the Lord of Life, or the Lord of Land. The second set of features of the ideology, however, have just recently been invented and promoted during the economic boom of 1985-1996, and have now become popular images of the Thai monarchy. This recent invention of the Crown presenting King Bhumibol as frugal, ascetic, and most importantly laboring day and night to help his subjects is an ideology that makes the King’s philosophy of a sufficiency economy popular with the Thai bourgeoisie. These invented virtues
of the Thai Crown also challenge a conventional idea in political theory: work and labor, physical activities that Nietzsche (2006), Jevons (1871), and Arendt (1958) describe as painful, repulsive, and disgraceful, are ironically embraced and publicly performed by King Bhumibol, a monarch who sweats and toils for all Thai subjects, rather than relying solely on the spectacle, luxury, and dignity of the palace.

This dualistic ideology, at once royal and middle class, has hegemonic status in the national economy and politics because it is compatible with the contradictions of capitalism itself. On the one hand, borrowing a concept of the aristocratization of the bourgeoisie from Smith (1982) and Wallerstein (1988) and a concept of the re-enchantment of the modern state from Jenkins (2000) and Lee (2010), I argue that an aspiration to live like royals motivated the lower classes in Thailand to work tirelessly to accumulate wealth, and that aspiration was compatible with the crucial historical moments of Thai capitalism during the mid-80s to the mid-90s: the rise of the bourgeoisie, the transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism, and the economic boom. On the other hand, when Thailand’s economic boom eventually crashed with the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the national economy was radically restructured, the Thai monarchy, while recently engaging itself with the processes of disenchantment, secularization, bourgeoisification, and even proletarianization, finally took a hegemonic position in the national economy and politics of Thailand. Inventing and reproducing institutional images that are compatible with bourgeois ethics, the Crown was able to tame the anxiety, frustration, and grievances of the Thai bourgeoisie after the crisis. Despite the loss of wealth, jobs, or even its own enterprises during the crisis, the bourgeoisie could abandon its recent lifestyle of luxury and return to a frugal, industrious, and simple way of life as long as the Crown led by example.
Although this dualistic ideology has hitherto enabled the “bourgeois monarchy” in Thailand to enjoy both political hegemony and economic success under Thai capitalism, the Crown may need to adjust itself again when it faces another round of contradictions of capitalism. As capitalism penetrates further into Thailand after the economic recovery, a large section of peasants and laborers has been transformed into a new entrepreneurial class. Unlike the old bourgeoisie, this new class does not see the Crown as the savior of Thai capitalism but supports, instead, Thaksin Shinawatra, a small entrepreneur-turned-business tycoon-turned-prime minister, who promotes consumerism instead of frugality, advanced technology instead of laboring, and global capitalism instead of a self-sufficient community. The Crown’s involvement in the last two coups d'état that toppled the elected governments led by Thaksin’s parties, and the increasing number of political prisoners charged by lèse-majesté laws, signify that although the “bourgeois monarchy” still has a strong support from the old bourgeoisie, its ideological trick may not work for the nouveaux riches unleashed by the new phase of capitalism in Thailand.

Research Design

To support my argument, I will gather three types of data: first, that there is a historical transformation of Thai monarchy’s public images and that this transformation begets a dualistic ideology, at once royal and middle class; second, this ideology establishes the monarchy’s hegemonic power over the Thai bourgeoisie both during economic boom and bust; last, this ideology enables the monarchy to distract the public from the Crown’s capital accumulation.

To gather those data, I borrow theoretical approaches from Marx (1977), Althusser (2008), and Buck-Morss (2000, 2007). For Marx, once the economic conditions of production have changed from one mode to another, this change triggers a reconstruction of a political, religious, or philosophic ideology of the state. Armed with this approach, I will focus mainly on
the last three decades of Thai history instead of stretching my project to cover the period when
the Thai monarchy encountered global capitalism for the first time in the mid-19th century
(Mead, 2004) or the early period of King Bhumibol’s reign, 1946-1984 (Handley 2006; Thak
2007). Unlike those two periods, 1985-2014 is the critical era when Thailand went from agrarian
to industrial capitalism and became deeply immersed in the world market. While King Bhumibol
in his early reign or the former Thai monarchs faced only the seeds of capitalism in Thailand,
King Bhumibol in the last three decades had to deal with Thai capitalism in its mature stage,
necessitating both ideological reconstruction and ideological contestation in Thai politics.

Althusser’s approach enables me to categorize that critical era of 1985-2014 into three
periods. For Althusser, to find when an ideology becomes dominant in a state, one needs to look
at the moment when that ideology depends less upon the repressive state apparatuses such as the
military and police and more on the ideological state apparatuses such as the mass media,
schools, and churches. Borrowing this approach, I will focus on three periods where the Thai
monarchy had different types of relationship with the Thai army and the Thai media: first, during
1985-1992 when the monarchy gradually distanced itself from the army and attached itself more
to the mass media, which became a new instrument of connecting with the rising bourgeoisie;
second, during 1993-2005 when the monarchy enjoyed ideological domination by relying mostly
on its popular portrayal in the mass media; last, during 2006-2014 when the monarchy not only
needed the media but also returned to depend upon the military junta and the repeated use of
draconian lèse-majesté laws to sustain its hegemonic position.

Buck-Morss’s approach is useful to my analysis of the Thai monarchy’s images. For
Buck-Morss, the popular perception about any political institution today as portrayed by the
mass media can be challenged by comparing that perception with the images of the same
institution in the past. By juxtaposing the two, one can see how the present images have been recently constructed while the past images were gradually replaced. By comparing a juxtaposition of images from different periods, I will explore how the portrayal of the Thai monarchy in the media has gradually changed. Like Buck-Morss, I will study not only virtual images that occur in various types of the mass media (newspapers, books, archives, films, art galleries, photographs, advertisements, theatrical plays, songs, and public statues) but also the public discourses narrating those images in each historical period.

The public images of the Thai monarchy that I will examine are the images of King Bhumibol, the Royal Family, and the Privy Council. To trace how the Crown itself has transformed its public images in each historical period, I will focus on those images that the Royal Household permits to be publicized in the mass media during the week that Thailand celebrates the national day, the King’s birthday on December 5th. To be precise, I will pay attention to the royal news that every TV channel in Thailand has to report daily during 8.00-8.20 pm., the royal biographies licensed by the Royal Household, and the royal ceremonies organized by this institution. If the Crown’s images associated with the bourgeois ethics are just propagated during the last three decades and added to those of tradition and sacredness, it means that there has been a historical transformation of the royal images in line with my theory and, I deduce, that the Crown consciously constructs its dualistic ideology.

I will then explore the public response of the Thai bourgeoisie to those images. For data, I will focus on how the Crown’s images are narrated and reproduced by the Thai bourgeoisie in the mass media during the same week of celebrating the King’s birthday. I will focus on specific types of media that are closely associated with the Thai bourgeoisie, for example, Bangkok Post and The Nation (the two English newspapers in Thailand), Channel 3 (a TV channel targeting
middle-class viewers), theatrical plays (the entertainment that only the middle class in Bangkok can access), and Preaw and Dichan (fashion and lifestyle magazines targeting middle-class women). If the royal images and royal stories become a theme that overshadows those of the bourgeoisie in the media, it means that the Crown has successfully established an ideological domination over the Thai bourgeoisie.

In addition to the response of the bourgeoisie, I will explore the response of the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) to the historical change of royal images. For data, I will focus on the same week of November 29th-December 5th, examine market advertisements of the two capitalist enterprises for which the CPB is the biggest stockholder, Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement Group, and investigate whether and how the royal images are used and reproduced in the advertisements that are placed in Thai business newspapers such as Krungthep Turakij and Manager Daily. If those two enterprises use the Crown’s images, especially those of frugality, diligence, and prudence, in their advertisements instead of their corporational images of profit-seeking and investment or their report on the business performance, it means that the CPB appropriates the royal images to distract the public from its wealth and capital accumulation.

I will conduct my research in three steps. First, I will examine the period of 1985-1992 and explore how various historical developments in this period (the economic boom, the rise of the middle class, and the transformation from an agrarian to capitalist society) relate to the Thai monarchy’s public images. I anticipate that the Thai monarchy’s images will gradually change in this period from the symbols of nation, religion, and prosperity, that is, from those of the traditional monarch who normally either donned the military uniform, carried a machine gun signifying his support to the junta (Figure 1) or dressed in an elegant wardrobe displaying the spirituality of the Hindu-Buddhist “god-king” (Figure 2), to those of the bourgeois lifestyle and
culture in a businessman who dressed in a western suit and embraced bourgeois hobbies (Figure 3 and 4). I also anticipate that the data will reveal that the rising bourgeoisie still embraced the Crown’s traditional images because they were compatible with the economic boom and that the CPB had not yet appropriated the new images of the Crown.

Second, I will examine the period of 1993-2005 to analyze how the Crown’s images changed in relation to the events of the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the restructuring of the Thai national economy. Is there a change in the popular representation of the Crown from royal glamour and bourgeois lifestyle to bourgeois virtues, embodying a king who is frugal, sweating, and toiling for his subjects rather than one who either enjoys bourgeois hobbies or, by birthright, lives comfortably in a luxurious palace (see Figure 5 and 6)? Do the frustrated bourgeoisie during the economic crisis salute and embrace these new images? Does the CPB widely appreciate these images in its advertisements?

Last, I will explore the contemporary era of 2006-2014 and investigate how the historical events of economic recovery, two military coups, and the increasing use of lèse-majesté laws in Thailand relate to the Crown’s images. In this period, I will investigate three types of data: first, the portrayal of the monarchy's images alongside the two military leaders, General Sonthi Bunyaratgrin and General Prayuth Chan-o-Cha, the leaders of the 2006 coup and the 2014 coup, respectively (Figure 7); second, the juxtaposition of the royal figures with Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, the former prime ministers of Thailand who were toppled by those coups (Figure 8); and last, the response of the bourgeoisie and the CPB to that juxtaposition of the King with those political figures.

To demonstrate my thesis, I also need to consider that the Thai monarchy may not embody a twofold ideology. Either the royal or the middle-class features may be singly
employed by the Crown as an ideological tool to acquire power and wealth. Second, the ideology of the Thai monarchy may embody a twofold ideology but this embodiment may have existed before the economic boom in Thailand during 1985-1996. That is, a twofold ideology of the Thai monarchy might already be constructed in the early period of King Bhumibol’s reign, 1946-1984, or in the 19th century when the Thai monarchs firstly encountered global capitalism. Third, the wealthy and powerful status of the Thai monarchy may be due instead to the arrested development of capitalism in Thailand, that is, itself, a result of the Crown’s long abuse of the capitalist development in Thailand through its extra-economic powers in the military, political, and juridical apparatus of the Thai state to extract an economic surplus from Thai producers.

The sources of the information I need can be accessed through the Thai mass media. Newspapers, magazines, books, advertisements, plays, television programs, films, and songs related to the celebration of King Bhumibol, the Royal Family, and the Privy Council are publicly accessible. In the U.S., the John M. Echols Collection on Southeast Asia at Cornell University and the Southeast Asia Digital Library at Northern Illinois University provide archives, newspapers, and books about the Thai monarchy, the history of Thailand’s capitalism, the Thai bourgeoisie, and the CPB. In Thailand, the National Archives, the Thammasat University Archives, the Chulalongkorn University Library, and the National Library provide further data of television programs, films, advertisements, and songs about the Thai monarchy that may not be accessible in the U.S. Both libraries of the Office of the Royal Development Projects and of the Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary in Bangkok also provide the rare royal images and archives that the Crown itself has long preserved.
Chapter Outline

Introduction
   a. Puzzles, methods, and findings
   b. Outline an argument and review each chapter

Chapter 1: King and Capital: Theoretical and Historical Trajectories
   a. Review literature on the relationship between monarchy and capitalism
   b. Review literature on the Thai monarchy in Thai studies

   a. Wealth and power of the Crown during economic boom
   b. The royal images and the bourgeois lifestyle
   c. Impact of the Crown’s images over the rising bourgeoisie and the CPB

Chapter 3: The Triumph of the Bourgeois Monarchy, 1993-2005
   a. Wealth and power of the Crown during the economic crisis
   b. The royal images and the bourgeois virtues
   c. Impact of the Crown’s images over the frustrated bourgeoisie and the CPB

Chapter 4: The Decline of the Bourgeois Monarchy? 2006-2014
   a. Wealth and power of the Crown after the economic recovery
   b. The Crown’s attempt to sustain the dualistic ideology
   c. Thaksin and his supporters challenging the Crown?

Conclusion
   Recap
   Suggestion to further studies
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Appendix

**Figure 1**: King Bhumibol in a military uniform, carrying an assault rifle

**Figure 2**: King Bhumibol dressing in full regalia
Figure 3: King Bhumibol playing Jazz music

Figure 4: King Bhumibol painting the portraits of Queen Sirikit
**Figure 5:** The “Royal toothpaste,” King Bhumibol’s toothpaste tube shown in a Thai museum

**Figure 6:** King Bhumibol sweating all over his face while working on his royal projects
Figure 7: The leader of 2014 coup, General Prayuth, receiving an endorsement from the King

Figure 8: The then elected premier, Yingluck, and her cabinet listening to King Bhumibol’s vision of solving national problems in 2011