THE VICTORY MONUMENT
and the Politics of Representations for the Thai Identity

Presented by

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The history of “the South of East Asian” nations is framed and re-framed by its colonial experiences, which can be seen from public monuments across the region as telling evidences.

Siam—which later became Thailand—did not experience a direct colonization by any Western power. However, the conventional accounts of Thai national history mostly operated within the framework of colonialism.
The Victory Monument functions as a Discourse for:

- mediating power for the state
- signifying the Thai identity known as Thainess or khwampenthai
- forming the characteristics of otherness on the neighboring peoples for the Thais
Objectives

By using “Thainess” as a mode of problematization, this paper aims to:

• foster self-reflexive dialogues among the peoples of Southeast Asia on cultural diversities, collective images, and colonial legacies
• investigate the mechanism in cultural dynamics that has been reinterpreted and used to represent something other than itself, such as nationalistic ideology and national identity
• generate debates on the repercussions from the above for the built environment
A Political Form of Architecture and Urban Space
- the ways in which the Victory Monument have served as a symbolic instrument for the Thai ruling authorities to assert, legitimate, and maintain power under ideological guises, such as nationalism and anti-colonialism.

An Architectural and Urban Form of Politics
- the manners in which successive administrations in Thailand have re-appropriated and revised the design and meanings of the memorial to suit their interests via allusions to ideologies, such as patriotism and democracy.
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Panoramic View

Aerial View

Bangkok, Thailand
Historical Background

Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkhram (Pibun) Prime Minister of Thailand 1938-1944

Thailand’s Territorial Gains from The Franco-Thai War (December 1940-January 1941)

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THE VICTORY MONUMENT

Bangkok, Thailand

RESEARCH PAPER for ICTS 2011

Bangkok, Thailand
Militarism / Nationalism 1938

Constitutionalism 1932

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Historical Background

RESEARCH PAPER for

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Bangkok, Thailand

Thainess (KHWAMPENTHAI) and
The National Building Program (1939-1942)

Handbook for Citizenship 1936

M O D E R N    I D E N T I T Y
M O D E R N    A R C H I T E C T U R E

Constitutionalism 1932

Militarism / Nationalism 1938

Thainess (KHWAMPENTHAI) and
The National Building Program (1939-1942)

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Physical Descriptions

DESIGN MOTIFS AND ELEMENTS

The Mausoleum
The Elevated Radial Platforms
The Heroic Figures
A Political Form of Architecture and Urban Space

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Aerial View

View from Ratchawithi Road

View from Phaya Thai Road

View from Ratchawithi Road

Aerial View
A Political Form of Architecture and Urban Space

I N T I M I D A T I O N

M I L I T A R I S M

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BANGKOK, THAILAND

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Bayonet / Sword

Obelisk
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MANIPULATION
Patriotism
Self-Sacrifice

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SEDUCTION

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A Military Honor at the Victory Monument

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The Mausoleum
A Political Form of Architecture and Urban Space

The THAI NATIONHOOD CONCEPT

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AUTHORITY

CHAVAUNISTIC CULT OF LEADER HYPOCRACY
Several measures taken to define the Thai identity were in many respects as much Western as Thai. Pibun’s cultural mandates on Thainess were in fact conceptually schizophrenic.

Accordingly, the monument’s dialogues with power, identity, and ideology were complicated, dialectical, and contradictory, resulting in a slippage of meanings that had later been re-appropriated and exploited.
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RECENT / ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS

A Public demonstration by supporters for the use of more Stringent measures against Cambodia in resolving the Disputed area around Preah Vihear Temple at the Victory Monument in late 2010

The Blockade and Seizure of the Victory Monument by UDD Protestors on April 9, 2009

Thai Troops patrolling the pedestrian walkway around the Victory Monument as smoke from burning fires rising into the air amidst the street riot on April 10, 2010

Bangkok, Thailand
Via a discursive mode of signification, architecture and urban space can serve interests for which they are not initially intended.

The identification ascribed to an ideology does not offer any intrinsic quality of it, but simply represents what it creates: a discourse of power mediation.

Khwampenthai is made by joint effects of ideological discourses in defining its domain, conferring definitions, and competing with each other. The essence of Thainess is an illusion produced by a temporarily discursive conjuncture.

The symbolic signification and revision of meanings for the Victory Monument resulted from the projections of ideological predisposition to mobilize people to express patriotic feeling and solidarity that could be politically exploited.
Conclusions

The tasks of advocating and managing cultural diversity across the Suvarnabhumi region cannot be met, unless the following mutual recognitions are forged:

- While patriotism and altruism are virtues for a nation-state, national and cultural identity should not be promoted at the expense of antagonistic and xenophobic attitudes towards other races, ethnicities, or countries.

- Not only did the practice of colonization in Southeast Asia come from the West or states outside the region, but also take place among the natives of Suvarnabhumi themselves.

- Besides ideological deception and nationalism, Thai people’s experience with Western colonization, or the lack thereof, framed the creation and revision of the Thai identity.

- Thailand was a regional colonial power, not a wronged victim of Western aggressions as widely publicized by the official Thai national historiography.


