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IRVINE

# Waterways of Bangkok: Memory and Landscape

DISSERTATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Anthropology

by

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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Tom Boellstorff, Chair
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**DEDICATION**

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กรุงเทพมหานคร

To

Bangkok

Moment after moment, life, gloriously improbable, advances.

Michel Serres

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# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Michael Hurley

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Tom Boellstorff, Chair

This is an ethnography of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, Thailand. It is about life along the river and its canals, the culture of water in a modern metropolis. More broadly, this is a study of the relationship between memory and landscape. Waterways, at the time of writing, are still an important part of Bangkok's urban infrastructure. I use waterways to explore collective memory. What meanings are found in waterways? How do waterways connect people and places? How do waterways connect past, present, and future? I examine stories, images, and senses of a collective past. Memory and landscape are often entangled with national myths and ideologies, but Bangkok's waterways can also allow us to see the nation in new perspectives. Some of the prominent themes discussed in this ethnography are: stories of national origin; continuity, change, and the landscape of loss; forgotten violence and the experience of landscape; heart-spirit and notions of collective trajectory; and the place of Islam in Bangkok and the Thai nation. This ethnography is based on 16 months of fieldwork in Thailand, mostly during 2012 and 2013.

# INTRODUCTION

This is an ethnography of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, Thailand.[1] I take waterways as an empirical starting point to explore and try to better understand people's lives. More broadly, this is a study of memory and landscape, and the relationships between the two. My hope is that this work will have enough area-focus to contribute to communities of scholarship formed by specialists, those who study Thailand or other countries in Southeast Asia. At the same time, I hope that my theoretical work on memory and landscape is expansive enough to be of interest to scholars who do research on other parts of the world.

In what follows, I often discuss associations, the meanings and connections that people make by way of waterways. This is one of the things that makes waterways so interesting—we begin with water, but end up talking about something else: ghosts, royalty, ancient cities, the rural hinterland, ASEAN, and so on. In the opening pages of *Pai Daeng*, Kukrit Pramoj guides us along the waterways from Bangkok to Red Bamboo, the village where the story will unfold. We go up the Chao Phraya, some 90 kilometers, turn off into a canal, travel some additional distance along the water, and finally arrive at a quiet village with a rundown monastery (คึกฤทธิ์ 2009:7). Waterways take us places, connecting city and country. Of rivers, Bachelard observes, "water flows and leads life elsewhere" (1983:8). We will also see some of the ways that water gathers other times and places, bringing, so to speak, elsewhere to here. The past can become present and the faraway can arrive in Bangkok. In the course of fieldwork, material began to generate from the moment people discovered that I was studying the Chao Phraya River. And, crucially, there were patterns—my interlocutors raised certain questions and observations, certain themes, again and again. Such repetition is significant, even if perspectives do not converge on a single point of

[1] The Thai pronunciation of the river's name can be approximated as *jow* [rhymes with cow] *p'ya*.

view. Culture may be weird, multiple, or fragmented, but patterns do emerge. Taking inspiration from Benedict (1934), some of these patterns might be called patterns of memory.

Let me begin with one prominent association. Many in Bangkok see a link between waterways and a certain "way of life." This holds true for those who live along the waterways, as well as for those who do not. It is said to be an old or original way of life. It is said to be authentically Thai. What are the features of this way of life? Houses on stilts, for example; boats as a primary means of transportation; floating markets; itinerant merchants, paddling through the canals, calling out the names of their fruit, wares, or other goods; fishing; the use of canal-water for cooking and cleaning; an annual festival in which people set afloat banana-leaf boats, make offerings, and apologize to the spirit of the water-mother; canoe races; dramatizations of royal power, such as the royal barge procession; and so on. This is all part of collective memory, which I will discuss in a moment. I often focus on how Thais see or imagine the Thai past and present, how the collective is imagined by its members. Thais are are often said (by themselves) to have a special relationship with water. For example, many said, "We (Thais) have long been tied (*puk pun*) to waterways." But this way of life is also perhaps outdated, in a state of decline. Some said it has, for the most part, already vanished. So it seems that what one sees today is merely a decayed remnant of the past. Some informants interpreted my project as salvage. These matters come into focus in Chapter 2, which concerns cultural loss and decay. I do not comment on the empirical validity of loss, but rather consider loss as a cultural idea. The waterways of Bangkok connect past and present, and I explore some of the situated and culturally-specific ways that they do so. In the aftermath of World War II, Benda (1969) raised the question of continuity and change in Southeast Asia. Colonial regimes were being broken, nations were emerging, peasants were taking up arms in Vietnam and elsewhere. I do not try to measure continuity and change. I begin with the landscape, the river and its canals, and ask: where do people see continuity and change?

The Chao Phraya River is also part of a national timeline, what I call the progression-of-centers narrative. Since the 1930s, the Thai past has been periodized as a series of city-kingdoms: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, Bangkok. This, to some extent, suggests an ancient cultural logic, widespread in Southeast Asia, in which polities are named after their urban centers, but this particular configuration is closely tied to a more recent process of nation-building. Sukhothai is a city, but also a time period, the Age of Sukhothai. Ayutthaya is a city, but also a time period, the Age of Ayutthaya. And so on. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. One of the key points here is that these cities are all linked together by the Chao Phraya River. Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok were all built directly on its banks. Sukhothai is a little further north, on the Yom River, one of the four rivers that flow into the Chao Phraya. Children are taught to sing the names of those four rivers: Ping, Wang, Yom, Nan. The Chao Phraya is, as one informant put it, "the most important river in Thailand." The Chao Phraya ties together the centers of the national past and present. This progression-of-centers narrative has sometimes been challenged, but it remains very prominent, and most books on large-scale national history use it for organization. It is still difficult to imagine the past in any other way. This narrative is part of collective memory. It gives the past a structure, a simple, but firm outline. It organizes the past of a collective, national "we."

In the pages ahead, I explore the progression-of-centers narrative as pattern of memory. The river forms a material timeline; a temporal progression is written in the landscape. This is part of how my project began, part of what intrigued me about the river. But in the course of fieldwork I became more critical of the progression-of-centers narrative. I'll soon discuss why. The river, as a certain kind of landscape, opens possibilities of imagining the nation in new ways. In the first chapter, I set up a contrast between two stories of origin. Each story captures movement in a different direction: one upstream, one downstream. In the progression-of-centers narrative, the centers of power, the centers of Thai culture, move, stage by stage, downstream from Sukhothai.

As the Thais migrated, settled, spread through the river basin, they remade the landscape, cutting networks of canals out of the Chao Phraya. But I was in Bangkok and many of my friends and neighbors were of Chinese descent. It seemed urgent to ask: where do the Chinese fit into the national story? The river has been incorporated into a narrative of pure origins, with Sukhothai as the center and birthplace of a culturally and ethnically pure nation. The massive presence of Chinese in Bangkok, past and present, however, suggests a different story. A certain large, concrete replica of a Chinese merchant ship, built in the early 19th century, prior to the Thai nation-building project, captures that past in a glimpse. I argue that the Thai nation began not in Sukhothai, but in Bangkok—or, what I call, the great Chinese metropolis of Southeast Asia.

I try not to contribute to the myths of "True Thai," or, more generally, to reifications of Thai. Hansen writes, "My own view is that the task of the social scientist is to produce knowledge and writing that defies ethnic closures by documenting and exploring the richness, diversity, and multivocality of the social world of even the smallest of localities. Good scholarship is usually unsettling to established or widely held ideas, and scholars, to my mind, should strive to make their work as useless as possible for those who promote ethnic closures" (2001:17). Anderson (1978), in a now classic essay, points out that the reification of Thai is a serious problem in Thai studies. This problem has not gone away. Scholars in Thailand such as Charnvit Kasetsiri and Kasian Tejapira have long worked against closures, ethnic and otherwise, of the national imagination. More recently Ong Bunjoon, a young, independent scholar of Mon descent, has written several excellent books (องค์ 2010, 2009, 2006) that reflect on the complex ethnic terrain of Thailand. His book *Siam: A Diversity of Peoples* is nicely summarized by the bold quote printed on the cover: "It is True Thai, rather, that is strange"—rare or anomalous, that is, in contemporary Thailand (องค์ 2010:n.p.). A brief vignette will provide a glimpse of the problem. Once, during a celebration for Mon National Day, Ong was confronted by a senior police officer,

who chided him for writing so much about Mon people. The officer asked, “Why don't you do something for Thai people?” Ong describes his reaction: “I didn't know what to say. I am Thai. I live in Thailand. […] People who have different ethnic backgrounds—Mon, Khmer, Lao, Chinese, Vietnamese, Malay, and so on—each is one part of Thai society. […] When he said that, I felt very, very bad. I was angry, and couldn't stop being angry” (องค์ 2008:85).

The words Thai and Thailand are still encrusted with exclusionary politics, but it is difficult to avoid them. I would like to see “Thai” opened up, and to see the country that we call Thailand today become safe for those who see themselves as Thai as well as for those who do not.

Now, in the twilight of the Ninth Reign, this problem is implicated in contemporary fears, attachments, and conflicts. The most recent seizure of power by the military, in spring 2014, was carried out in the name of the monarchy, said (in the official announcement) to be the institution that unites the heart-spirit of the Thai people (ไทยรัฐออนไลน์ 2014). It is worth noting that the name of the river itself invokes Thailand's royal institution—*chao phraya* is a royal title, indicating a particular rank, and the word *chao* means lord, king, or royal figure. Although absolute monarchy officially ended in 1932, the monarchical institution persists and royal power remains deeply and widely etched in the broader Thai landscape. Many roads and bridges, for example, have royal names. Are Thai's royalists by definition? Many seem to think so. Spokespersons for the Yellow Shirts, a conservative, royalist movement, speak in the name of “Thai,” denouncing Reds as traitors, king-topplers, as burners of the country. Spokespersons for the Red Shirts, on the other hand, tend to speak in the name of “the people,” denouncing the Yellows as backward, as a pro-dictatorship, privileged elite. What we are seeing here is, in part, a conflict over the definition of the nation—a matter that has much to do with belonging, freedom of expression, and the distribution of power.

The Thai nation was first defined in Bangkok, the urban center. But my aim here is not simply to give the periphery its due. My research was conducted in the center—and the center has never been so True Thai as the nation-builders imagined it. Indeed, the center, built in the basin of the Chao Phraya River, has for many centuries been the meeting point, and product, of many different peoples. And today it is even more mixed, even more of a melting pot, than ever before.

## Key Words

I often use the word *memory* in a rather conventional sense to refer to recollections of things that have come to pass in the course of life. But I also use it to describe recollections of the collective past. This might refer to facts or stories learned from others, or to images. Certain photographs, for instance, may invoke a sense of life in the old days along the river. There is, of course, a difference between memories from direct experience and memories received in the classroom. What I try to attend to and highlight are those instances in which the received and/or imagined past is "our" past. For example: Ayutthaya, an ancient city, was defeated by Burma in 1767. If one grows up in Thailand and goes to public school, if one listens to the old people, the defeat of Ayutthaya is not simply a fact that one learns—it is a definitive part of "our" past, part of a broader, existential framework: our nation, our past. This makes it difficult to separate memory from imagination. Memory is shaped by imagination; imagination is shaped by memory. Memory can include distortions. Memory can even include things that never happened. This holds true for memory in the more conventional sense as well as in this broader, collective sense. Note also that such collectives are usually limited, defined by some boundary. In chapter 5, I discuss a canal-side community with a mosque at the center. Some memories are particular to this place; as a person of the place one has a claim to such memories. One is not, however, limited to a single collectivity. The "people of the place" (a term discussed in chapter 5) are also members of a

nation, a more expansive kind of collectivity; its culture of memory transcends place.

The expression “collective memory” does not, in my usage, mean that everyone remembers all the same things in the same way. Memory is part of culture. And culture, as anthropologists have long known, is always internally differentiated. In the pages ahead, one will see some boundaries and divisions within Thailand. But the existence of a boundary does not mean that nothing crosses it. See, for instance, chapter 1 and the discussion of “boundaries and entanglements,” which concerns relations between Thai and Chinese. Sometimes, however, one finds remarkable convergences. The destruction of Ayutthaya, as mentioned above, is a good example—a tragedy of national-scale. It is built into Thailand's highly centralized system of education. Most people know something about it, know that Burma was the perpetrator, etc. And, crucially, it was “ours.” It was “our” city-kingdom, its destruction was “our” national tragedy. The broader point is that memory is part of collective life; it is not just storage in the minds of detached individuals.

Furthermore, there is no reason to exclude non-humans from collectivity. This ethnography begins with waterways and returns to them, brings them into focus, again and again. Students of anthropology are, of course, preoccupied with people and their ways of life. For me, waterways offered a starting point. I learned about people by exploring the Chao Phraya River and its canals in Bangkok. Waterways, as one will see in the pages ahead, are an important part of Bangkok's culture of memory. Bangkok's waterways are full of meaning, stories, fragments of the past. This may sound like the “biographical objects” described by Hoskins (1998). Working in a society with no tradition of narrating life histories, she learned about people's lives by way of objects. Bangkok's waterways, however, are vast, extensive; it feels awkward to refer to them as an object or set of objects. The word *landscape* seems more appropriate—the waterways are a key feature of the landscape, and given the landscape's shape, extension, temporal depth, as well as its availability, past and present, for practical use, it allows us to see some aspects of a broader

culture of memory. Perhaps we can call it a framework, or part of one. One will find here not so much a biographical object, but something more like what Raffles, also writing of rivers, calls a "biographical landscape" (2002:4). Note that even Halbwachs, usually regarded as the first scholar to systematically develop the concept of collective memory, included the non-human, material world—e.g., topography (1992) and urban space (1980)—in memory's framework. Memory and landscape are entwined, with each leading back to the other. I ask: how is memory incorporated into landscape? How is landscape incorporated into memory?

Let me say a few things about the etymology of the word landscape. I do not intend to appeal to the word's origins—if, indeed, origins could even be pinpointed—but to consider some of its dimensions, and also its possibilities. Its meaning has changed over time, some authors apply it in idiosyncratic ways, and I make my own contributions here and in the pages ahead. I have not only used the concept of landscape to understand Thailand. Many months of reading, pondering, data collection, and analysis have also shaped my use and interpretation of the word landscape.

The word landscape predates the existence of the English language. If one follows its traces, one finds an extensive past in the Germanic world. Today, some may make quick associations with painting, artistic renderings of countryside scenes, and indeed the word has carried such connotations for centuries. Such associations inform my own use of the term. Renderings and representations are among the forces that shape landscapes, including Bangkok's waterways. The word landscape has also, at times, had strong associations with earth put to productive use, and this seems to predate the explicit practice of landscape painting.[2] J. B. Jackson observes that in medieval Europe the word *land* referred to "a defined piece of ground." He then adds, "We can assume that […] it was most often used to indicate a patch of plowed or cultivated ground, that being the most valuable kind" (1984:148). The Chao Phraya River has a long, productive past

[2] On the origins of landscape painting, see Gombrich (1966).

and it is still very much a part of agricultural life in Central Thailand. This is important, even though my fieldwork was carried out in urban Bangkok. There is still a strong sense that the river leads up—or even back (the landscape is soaked in temporality)—into a world of rice fields. When I talked to people about the river, our discussions often traveled upstream, into the rural hinterland. This happened even when talking to informants with little or no rural experience. The broader point is that the word landscape, in my usage, includes culture. There are no culturally-vacant landscapes in this ethnography. And, since we are talking about land, one might recall that the country named Siam was re-named in 1939—it became Thai-land, the land of Thai. England, the land of the English, might have provided a model. But I strongly suspect that the model came not from England, but from Germany—*Deutsch-land*. In the mid to late 1930s, Nazi Germany, viewed from afar, was a source of inspiration for the Siamese leadership, who, with much enthusiasm, constructed their own racial myths, and also aimed for territorial annexations.

The word landscape was present in Britain more than a thousand years ago, but appears to have fallen out of use and then been re-introduced hundreds of years later (Jackson 1984:148). Schama observes that the word landscape came (back) to Britain by way of trade: "It entered the English language, along with herring and bleached linen, as a Dutch import at the end of the sixteenth century" (1995:10). In the Low Countries, the landscape was understood to include its human inhabitants and their works: "The human design and use of the landscape […] *was* the story, startlingly sufficient unto itself" (ibid). The word landscape has been, in recent centuries, encrusted with notions of pristine nature or, if not pristine nature, some sort of idyllic rural life. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. In this ethnography, however, the reader is confronted with, and led into, an urban landscape. As I see it, there is no reason for landscape to exclude the urban. It should also be emphasized that I want the reader to see and hear the city. There is, no doubt, much artifice involved here, a fictive immediacy. One senses a city

reconstructed, as text, from memories and field notes. But, since this is an ethnography of waterways, it is crucial to bring the reader into the landscape, as much as possible, and thereby, I hope, help the reader understand that the landscape, a tangible reality, a domain in which people move and breathe, is also part of the framework of memory.

Scape, the latter part of this compound, once denoted a “collection,” and thus a landscape might be seen as “a 'sheaf' of lands, presumably interrelated and part of a system” (Jackson 1984:148). There is nothing inherently preferable about a word's earlier meanings, but, in this case, it has quite a strong resonance with my project. I appropriate this to my use of the word landscape, but also consider other ways in which landscape might be seen as a collection. Note that, according to Ingold, scholars who write in English have a tendency to confuse scape with scope (2011:126). This, he argues, introduces a distortion, whereby one imagines prior separation from the landscape, with the observer standing outside, looking from afar, projecting maps, fantasies, constructions. Ingold's conception of landscape is discussed in more depth in chapter 3. Let us, for a moment, consider landscape as a collection, sheaf, or system. How are the patches or parcels held together? In many cases, there is some kind of boundary, and, in the pages ahead, one will see that national boundaries are of great importance. The Chao Phraya River, however, is not much of a boundary. Sure, it has banks and one might need to wait for a ferry to make a crossing, but it is quite different from, say, the Mekong, which marks the border between Thailand and Laos. There are even some differences, real and imagined, from one bank of the Chao Phraya to the next. In Bangkok, the west, Thonburi-side of the river is often seen as less developed, quieter; at the same time it is sometimes said to be more rough or “savage” (เถื่อน). But the Chao Phraya River does more to connect than divide. And in connecting, it collects. It binds, but not so much in the sense of a boundary. This aspect of landscape is often overlooked.

And from this point one might return to the concept of collective memory. What is collected in the landscape is not only land, but memories. One might ask: what sorts of collection become possible given the characteristics of the waterways, their specific flows, trajectories, use?

Perhaps the word *water-scape* would work just as well. J. B. Jackson observes that "An English document of the tenth century mentions the destruction of what it called a 'waterscape.' What could that have been? […] [It was] a system of pipes and drains and aqueducts serving a residence and a mill" (1984:7). It seems that the Chao Phraya River and its canals do constitute a water-scape, but, for the most part (this paragraph is the exception), I have resisted using this expression. This, in part, is because while traveling along these passages of water one is never far from land. Perhaps it would have been different if I had conducted fieldwork in 19th century Siam, when much of Bangkok's population lived on boats. But rivers and canals always have banks, and that is where most of the places in the pages ahead are located. It is a landscape in which the waterways have a prominent, definitive role. Furthermore, it is my intention to situate this work within the broader fields of landscape studies and anthropology of landscape.

Cosgrove, an influential figure in landscape studies, uses the word landscape in a more specific way than I do, but he makes a point very much relevant to my work on waterways. His focus is on Europe and North America, and his concern is with landscape as a very particular, historically-specific mode of seeing and representing the cultivated earth. In Cosgrove's analysis, landscape first emerges during a transition from feudalism to capitalism. Landscape, he says, is a "controlling composition," an objectification of the earth by outsiders (Cosgrove 1998:270). It is, if I interpret him correctly, both a reflection and an instrument of power. Insiders, by contrast, do not objectify the earth as landscape. My use of the word landscape is somewhat different. I am not especially concerned with whether or not my informants say "landscape," but I am concerned with how my informants perceive, remember, and imagine. Cosgrove shows that perception and

representations of the earth are shaped by power and historically-specific processes. This, for me, brings to mind a crucial observation made by Srisak Vallibhotama, a leading archeologist in Thailand: prior to the Fifth Reign, i.e., the late 19th century, there was no Chao Phraya River. That is, it was not yet imagined as a totality. Rather it was divided (so to speak, since really it had not yet been aggregated) into segments, and each segment had a unique name (ศรีศักร n.d.). The unification of those segments during the reign of Rama V surely amounts to a new kind of composition, and students of Thailand will surely notice that it appeared in parallel with new kinds of control—the early stages of top-down nation-building, the dramatic centralization of state administration, the elucidation of a national geography in which all subjects would hitherto be located, and so on. This new composition has had a definite impact on the worldviews of insiders. One can now imagine the Chao Phraya River as a whole, even if one knows intimately only one small segment of it. The riverine landscape has been nationalized.

In Thai, the word landscape is sometimes borrowed from English. I have heard Srisak Vallibhotama use it in a public lecture, but the word is probably not well known. Although there are words in Thai that capture aspects of landscape, it should be stated that I use landscape, mostly, as an etic expression. I will, of course, in the pages ahead, discuss insider views on the waterways. The word landscape is convenient and productive; it brings Bangkok's waterways into a larger domain, wherein one can make comparisons or contrasts with other landscapes.

## Fieldwork

This ethnography is based primarily on 12 months of fieldwork in Thailand, mostly Bangkok, between 2012 and 2013. Prior to that, I did about 4 months of preliminary work during my summers off from the University of California, Irvine. In that preliminary period, I spent a lot of time in Bangkok, getting to know the city, meeting people, but also traveled around the country. I

took notes and also committed a lot of time to language study. Later, during my 12 months of "real" fieldwork, I lived in three different apartments in Bangkok, residing for the longest period in a mostly Thai-Chinese neighborhood, just a short walk from the Chao Phraya River. My fieldwork included a lot of movement within Bangkok, often by boat, but also by foot, bus, car, and train. Informants were scattered around the city. In this ethnography one will meet people from a variety of communities. Transit in Bangkok was sometimes exhausting and, more than once, I was overtaken by a nostalgia for an old ethnographic ideal: working in a village, or on some island—in other words, in a single, collocated community. Everyone would know everyone and the researcher would stay in one place. My situation, however, was different. I might, for example, go out in the morning, talk to people in my alley, order soup and coffee, buy a bag of sliced mango, then go to the nearest pier, board the boat, go upstream, stop, stay for awhile, then go upstream again—spending time at, perhaps, several sites in a single day—then return to my alley in the evening. One advantage, in terms of results, is this: one will see contrasts, different points of view from people who lived in different communities. One will also see convergences.

I collected data using a variety of research methods, including participant observation and interviews. I use the word *interview* specifically for those conversations committed to "tape" (the actual device was a small, simple, hand-held digital recorder). For the most part, interviews came late in the course of fieldwork. I wanted interviews to follow rather than precede participant observation. In the course of participant observation one gets a better sense of what and how to ask. But interviews can sometimes be an effective way to establish relations with people. One of my first interviews was with a man to whom I had only recently been introduced. His responses were concise and the interview was over in about 10 minutes. Not wanting to impose further, I turned off the recorder. But he had much more to say. We continued to talk for a long time—and, for the most part, I was the one listening. This, of course, is an important skill: an ethnographer

must learn to listen. And, as I listened, something remarkable happened. People began to wander out of their hovels. People were curious. Some hovered over us for a while, and then a group gathered further down the alleyway. The actual interview was short, but this encounter gave me a new status in the community. For one thing, it solidified my position as researcher. Most people had never heard of anthropology. I had to explain: yes, I'm studying the river, but I have no intention of carrying water to a lab—it's not that kind of project. Sitting down with the audio recorder to carry out a "real" interview made matters clear: I wanted to learn about them and their community. Crucially, this engagement also indicated approval from my interviewee, an older, respected member of the community. People became more comfortable with my presence.

There were times, however, when I wanted to carry out interviews, but found people reluctant. They would insist that they had nothing to say, or say that they did not know anything. This was, based in part on a misunderstanding. The Thai word for interview (สัมภาษณ์, i.e., to interview) is rather official-sounding, and may convey notions of fact-gathering. One interviews experts, authorities. Some voiced concern that I would ask questions they were unable to answer. Some recoiled and said that they were unable to speak "academic language." I gradually learned to tell people, gently, that this was not exactly what I was seeking. Some informants were helpful in this regard, giving me suggestions on how to go about asking for interviews, i.e., alternative ways of wording my request or suggestion. One said, plainly, "Don't call it an interview." With practice, it became easier. It should be emphasized, however, that most conversations in the field were not committed to tape. More often, fragments of conversations were written down in my notebook.

I also made audio recordings of events and ambient noise. These later helped me reconstruct scenes and places. I took photos. I took hand-written notes while traveling around the city, trying to capture the gleam, grit, and momentum of modern Bangkok. Informants sometimes drew maps, sometimes at my prompting. Others did this without being asked. For them, it was just a

convenient way to explain the layout of the waterways. For me, this material was valuable because, as informants drew the maps, they also described places, memories, and relationships.

Let me add a brief note on language. During most of my fieldwork, Thai was the language of my everyday life. I did not have a field assistant, nor did I work with an interpreter. When I arrived in Bangkok in 2012, I was conversational in Thai, able to discuss politics and everyday matters. I was already able to read the newspapers, write by hand, and touch-type. I had already read several Thai novels, some of them two or three times, and had also spent hundreds of hours reading and listening to news in Thai. But I still had a lot to learn. For the most part, during that one year, I eliminated English from my life. And I made a lot of progress. All interviews were in Thai. All conversations, unless otherwise noted, were also in Thai. All translations from Thai to English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.[3]

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 is about origins. It is also about the Chinese in Bangkok—the predominance, that is, of the Chinese at the cultural, geographic, political, and economic center of the nation. I consider origin stories as part of collective memory, and also how origins are situated in the landscape. Sukhothai, which lies on the banks of the Yom River (which flows into the Chao Phraya), is said to be the first capital city of Thailand. And thus, from the standpoint of Bangkok, origins lie upstream. This chapter often cuts back and forth between two kinds of ethnographic vignettes, some about the Chinese in Bangkok, others about Loi Kratong, an annual festival. On the day of Loi Kratong, Thais gather at the edge of the river to release banana-leaf boats, and also to apologize to the river (or water-mother) for polluting it. This tradition is said to originate in Sukhothai, and so Loi Kratong is closely tied to a national story of origins. It is said to be an

[3] One exception is book titles. Some Thai books have a title in both Thai and English, thus I often default to the already available translation of the title. I have also used some conventional title translations (e.g., *Four Reigns*).

original and authentic aspect of Thai culture. In this chapter, I explain the progression-of-centers narrative in some detail, how it maps time onto the landscape. Each capital city is identified with a certain age. Time, as well as the national trajectory, goes downstream. Origins lie upstream. But the Chao Phraya River, as an aquatic landscape, as a passage, also allows movement in the opposite direction. I observed Loi Kratong in Bangkok at a Buddhist temple known as the Temple of the Everlasting Ship,[4] at the center of which lies a large, concrete replica of a Chinese merchant ship. Two stories of origin meet, with banana-leaf boats coming downstream from the ancient "Thai" capital and merchant ships coming upstream from China. How does movement fit into memories of origins? Landscapes, and their patterns of memory, can offer new ways to imagine nations. I argue that the Thai nation began not in Sukhothai, but in Bangkok, a city shaped by the Chinese—the people who came upstream by merchant ship, and their descendants.

Chapter 2 is about loss. It is also about melancholy and notions of decay. It is about the complex patchwork of memories that reside in the aquatic landscape, and also about perceptions of continuity and change. This developed as an exploration of a paradox: my informants often noted that Thais have always had a close relationship to waterways. Waterways are part of how the Thai past is imagined, but now, especially in Bangkok, water manifests as a frightening, destructive force. The Chao Phraya River is often associated with a way of life. It is also associated with destructive floods. When I arrived in the field in January 2012, floodwater in Bangkok was still receding. People were aware, and often reminded me, that floods had not always been a cause of destruction. In the past, floods were simply a part of the seasonal cycle. Loi Kratong, discussed in chapter 1, was once a celebration of the flood season. Floodwater, as it spread through Bangkok, filling streets, alleys, offices, and houses, reminded people that ways of life had changed, and dramatically so. In the introduction, an informant laments that Thais have

[4] This is Vella's translation of Wat Yannawa (1957:47-8).

already turned away from waterways. This so-called “turning away,” or loss of a way of life, is, I argue, itself part of a present or emerging culture of water. Loss is part of the vitality of the landscape. The waterways have a temporal depth; they are full of images. Some may invoke such images to express discontent with the present. The chapter is in part about a small, riverside community facing eviction, in spite of generations of continuity in place. I felt compelled to include this in the story of loss—not so much a turning away, but an impending eviction. This is part of the unfolding culture of memory. I also want to show that memory is part of the practice of day-to-day life. Memory is generative—it gives shape, continuity, and sense to the landscape.

Chapter 3 is about forgetting. It is about the Lao in modern Bangkok. It is also about the erasure of a violent past from the landscape. The chapter begins with the destruction of Ayutthaya, so central to the official history of river and nation. During my research, people in Bangkok often said something to the effect of “upstream lies Ayutthaya,” and then reminded me that Ayutthaya was once destroyed by the Burmese. But no one ever mentioned Vientiane. Decades after the destruction of Ayutthaya, Vientiane was also destroyed—by the Siamese. Most of Vientiane's ethnically-Lao people (the survivors) were then transferred to the basin of the Chao Phraya River, one of the largest forced migrations ever in the history of Southeast Asia. Lao from Vientiane were among the builders of Bangkok. This chapter is about the power dynamics that shape what can and cannot be remembered, and, as a corollary, what can and cannot be seen in the landscape. I consider both experience-near and representation-centered approaches to landscape—and try to build a bridge between them. The reader will see the urban landscape, get a sense of the city's materiality. The reader will also see the royal barge procession, a dramatic state ceremony, featuring golden barges said to be based on originals from Ayutthaya. But one still needs, I argue, a critical awareness of the power dynamics that shape experience. I try to build tension around the edges of phenomena, to trouble appearances, the world of the senses,

with shadows of invisible events and bodies: the massive forced transfer of Lao from Vientiane.

Chapter 4 is about trajectories. How do people imagine the trajectory of society? Here I consider the formation of lines, orientations to the future. Such lines are, in part, formed from the stuff of memory; orientations to the future may be seen as part of the culture of memory. A sense of where "we" have been is often related to a sense of where "we" are going. This chapter is also about rueful self-recognition, a term I borrow from Michael Herzfeld. I used this term to discuss non-official national imaginaries of society's trajectory. Material development, especially the ongoing construction of the aquatic landscape, was a persistent theme during my fieldwork. One day, sitting by the river on a plastic crate, I made an offhand observation. "This country is developing rapidly," I said. My informant, a 50 year old man, quickly replied: "We've developed materially, but not in terms of heart-spirit." In the months ahead, I began to incorporate this into interviews. It became a standard closing question: "I have heard people say [insert quote]. What's your point of view?" In this chapter, the focus is on four individuals, or four case studies. Each case is a combination of place and person—a simple portrait—and a discussion of trajectory.

Chapter 5 is about belonging. The reader will be introduced to a small Islamic community which lies at the edge of the Canal of a Hundred Thousand Stings (แสนแสบ), the most notoriously foul canal in Bangkok. Belonging, I try to show, takes place at the intersection of multiple landscapes, and memory helps create these intersections. Memory, as I emphasize in other chapters, is connective. Place is a key part of the question of belonging. In this chapter, I trace the ways that this place—a mosque-centered community, canal-side community—fits into broader national and transnational geographies, both real and imagined. Muslims occupy a curious, and sometimes difficult position, in Thai society. Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country. Buddhism is enshrined, in many ways, by the state. Thais are often said to be Buddhist, and some say that Muslims cannot be Thai. But approximately one-tenth of Thailand's population is

Islamic, with the greatest concentration in the southernmost provinces, near Malaysia. This chapter is about Muslims at the center, an old Islamic community in Bangkok. The position of Muslims in Thai society is both social and spatial. I examine the socio-spatial arrangement, the interweaving of multiple landscapes in place.

And now let us proceed downstream,
or upstream, if you prefer,
to Bangkok . . .

# 1. ORIGINS

I observed *Loi Kratong*[5] in Bangkok in the Buddhist year 2555, the Year of the Dragon. It arrives annually, in the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, which falls in November. People gather at the water's edge to ask the river for forgiveness. Small, candle-carrying boats, traditionally made of banana leaves, but now more often foam, are released on the water's surface. This popular festival is said to be an instance of "original Thai" culture, passed on, downstream, from the ancient city of Sukhothai. Indeed, as the day approached, many informants suggested a trip to Sukhothai to see the ancient form of the festival that had been preserved there. But I remained in Bangkok, and, by happenstance, observed Loi Kratong at the Temple of the Everlasting Ship, a riverside Buddhist temple, at the center of which lies a large, concrete replica of a Chinese merchant ship. An image emerged: Loi Kratong, as a cultural practice, travels downstream; the merchant ship travels upstream. In the twilight by the river's edge, punctuated by candles and fluorescent bulbs, two stories of origin, each moving in a different direction, came into contact.

This chapter is about origins. Sukhothai, according to the dominant narrative of Thai history, with its progression of centers downstream along the Chao Phraya River, is a cultural point of origin.[6] Children in public schools learn that Sukhothai was the first capital of Thailand (see สุเนตร 2009; see also Winichakul 1994:163). Any yet, many Thais in Bangkok trace their origins to recent immigration. Many still tell stories about Chinese parents or grandparents who came upstream by merchant ship. Origins are not only a matter of time and place, but also of direction. In what direction do origins lie? In this chapter, I examine the spatial extension of memory, how memory incorporates the landscape—not as flat, homogeneous territory, but as passage.

[5] The full name is *Wan* Loi Kratong (the day of Loi Kratong) or *Ngan* Loi Kratong (the Loi Kratong festival). I use an abbreviated expression, as often appears in English: Loi Kratong (see, for example, Rajthon 1954).

[6] Sukhothai was built on the banks of the Yom River, which flows into the Chao Phraya. It lies just north of the confluence at Nakhon Sawan, the starting point of the Chao Phraya proper.

Landscape is, in all nations, incorporated into the culture of memory (see Smith 1986, 2010). And perhaps, as one historian suggests, "national identity […] would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland" (Schama 1995:15). Winding its way through Bangkok, the Chao Phraya does have a particular mystique. It also allows particular kinds of practical engagement, such as travel by boat. Even today, with the spread of roads and rails, connection by air as well as fiber-optic cable, it remains an important part of Bangkok's infrastructure. Other landscapes will surely offer other possibilities, other forms, shapes, patterns of memory.

## Center of Origin

In Thailand, all rivers are mothers, but the Chao Phraya is the mother of the nation. The word *mae nam* (river or water-mother) is made up from the words *mae*, which means "mother," and *nam*, which means "water." The Chao Phraya River is of national significance because it links together the royal capitals, all of which are in its basin. These cities are conceived as the centers of the Thai past, with Bangkok as the center of the Thai present. History goes downstream. The story of the Thai nation—its official version, at least, as promoted by state institutions—is divided into ages, with each age named after a different royal capital: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, Bangkok. This biographical outline of the nation, traceable to the eminent historian Prince Damrong, was standardized in school textbooks in the 1930s (Peleggi 2002:15). It remains current at the time of writing. It is powerful and circulates in everyday life. One morning a fruit vendor from Ayutthaya, now a resident of Bangkok, said to me, "There are only a few cities in Thailand that have anything to do with history—Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok."

One afternoon in Bangkok . . . the month is October, and Loi Kratong is weeks away. I find a book about the Chao Phraya River at the library, borrow it, and carry it to a copy-shop. The shop

is dark, its walls are brown with age; the shelves are lined with framed photos of Thai royalty, including (she says) a photo of the current king's Chinese grandmother. She, who works and lives here, is Chinese, but has never been to China. Her skin is very white. Rabbits are rooting in the debris strewn about the floor. Floodwater arrived in Bangkok from up-country last year. A friend, her house flooded, brought the rabbits, putting them in care of the woman and her father. No one came back for the rabbits. "You should go to Sukhothai for Loi Kratong," she says. "The vessels are made from coconut shells instead of banana leaves. This is the way the original Thai did things. Sukhothai is the ancient capital. If you want to see the real thing, go to Sukhothai."

Loi Kratong at Sukhothai, said to be original and very beautiful, attracts mostly Thai rather than foreign tourists (Peleggi 2002:67). Instituted in 1987, it is a fine example of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm 1983). But why is the ancient center so important? The relationship between center and polity is a recurrent theme in Southeast Asian studies, one that concerns culturally-specific notions of space and power. Ancient kingdoms in Siam, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, were often named after their urban centers. An artifact of this pattern is present in contemporary Thai language, wherein the word *muang* (เมือง) works at two scales: it means both city and country. Bangkok is a *muang*. Thailand is *muang thai*. And although the name Thailand does not incorporate the name of the metropolis, the current age, in which the entire country is absorbed, is the age of Bangkok. In the ancient kingdoms, power was concentrated at the center and unstable at the periphery, where it overlapped with fields of power radiating from other centers. Tambiah (1976, 1977) referred to this configuration as a "galactic polity," wherein each center holds a multiplicity of satellites in its orbit and each satellite is a lesser center with satellites of its own. Tambiah saw the galactic polity as persisting in contemporary Thailand—now, however, locked into its most extreme polarity: the "radial polity," wherein all roads lead to Bangkok and the latter has become an overgrown monster, "a mammoth [of] uncontrolled urban

growth" (1976:273). It is dangerous, however, to say that current patterns of power in Thailand reflect an ancient cultural logic. Such logic, to the extent that it exists, has been absorbed and refracted through the nation, still only recently imagined (Anderson 2006)[7]. As Winichakul (1994) has shown, the nation-building process in Siam often involved clashes between irreconcilable cultural logics—new and old, domestic and foreign. In my view, the progression-of-centers narrative cannot be separated from the still-recent process of nation-building in Siam/Thailand.

Sukhothai was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century during the reign of King Rama IV. In subsequent years, the ruins were cleaned up, transformed, and re-signified. Sukhothai is now a well-manicured national park and World Heritage Site. The context of the discovery is important. It was at approximately this time that the Bowring Treaty of 1855 was signed between Siam and Britain, a trade agreement that transformed the Siamese economic structure. Today many Bangkok residents remember it (indirectly, of course) as a treaty in which "(we) Thai people" were disadvantaged. It was a time when the king was aware of powerful outsiders—especially the British, French, and Dutch—who were taking control of neighboring lands. This time precedes the birth of the Thai nation, but forms a crucial part of the background from which the nation would appear. When Sukhothai was discovered, the ancient city's remains enabled new claims to antiquity—not for the nation, but royal power. An inscription carved on one of the ancient city's pillars indicated the kingdom's expanse and claimed royal rule over many ethnic groups. With the later advance of nation-building, this emphasis on ethnic variety would give way to an imagination of Thai homogeneity—a natural, racial unity beneath only superficial differences of name and custom among the peoples of Siam (Barmé 1993). Rama IV, however, a pre-national Siamese king, saw rule over a multiplicity of peoples as an index of royal power.

[7] Note also that Siam/Thailand is one of Anderson's case studies of "official nationalism," a project directed top-down to consolidate elite (royal) power against the specter of nascent, popular imaginaries of nation (2006:101).

Not only did this resonate with his self-image and ambitions, but it might be used in negotiation with the imperial powers of Western Europe (ธิดา 1982:13). Since Sukhothai existed hundreds of years prior to Ayutthaya, the ruins might extend the image of royal power's temporal depth.

Later the ruins were subordinated to the origin myth of the Thai nation. Anderson writes, “It is difficult today to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt to be something utterly new” (2006:193). It is even more difficult to imagine a time when the nation did not exist. The problem is further complicated by the subsequent forging of a supposedly indissoluble relationship between the Thai nation and the royal institution. This began in the 1910s and was captured in the king's newly-minted slogan: Nation, Religion, Monarch (see Vella 1978). Today one might easily believe that this slogan dates to the age of Sukhothai. The notion of a primary and unbreakable bond between nation and royal institution is so deeply etched in day-to-day life in contemporary Bangkok that it is difficult—for many, perhaps, impossible—to conceive of a distinction between the continuity of royal power and the continuity of nation.

Sukhothai and Ayutthaya were both added in 1991 to UNESCO's roster of World Heritage Sites. Peleggi argues that this “amounted to the ultimate validation of their central place in the national historical narrative” (2007:180-1). According to this narrative, Ayutthaya is successor to Sukhothai. This linear arrangement, however, as Dhida Saraya (ธิดา 1982) explains in detail, is considerably flawed. It is correct to say that Sukhothai is the more ancient of the two cities, but there is a temporal overlap of hundreds of years; these cities/kingdoms existed simultaneously. Saraya writes: “Sukhothai was a city [muang] with its own historical evolution, independent from that of Ayutthaya and Bangkok” (ธิดา 1982:12-3). When Sukhothai collapsed, parts of it were absorbed into the power structure of Ayutthaya. But there is no reason to believe that Ayutthaya sprouted from Sukhothai. Furthermore, such a notion would make little sense to the people of ancient Ayutthaya, for whom narrative traditions—oral storytelling as well as royal chronicles—

tended to associate the "birth" of Ayutthaya "with myths and external forces beyond human control" (Kasetsiri 1979:165). In addition to matters of temporal depth and sequencing, the question of spatial extension is also important. Winichakul notes that "Sukhothai has been regarded as the first capital of Siam because it is believed to have ruled over most of the present territory of Siam and beyond whereas other major centers had not" (1994:163). Its expanse has often been exaggerated. As Charnvit Kasetsiri has pointed out in public appearances, textbooks in Thai public schools depict the kingdom of Sukhothai enveloping the entire Malay Peninsula, and even Singapore—exaggeration of astonishing proportions. This imaginary spatial extension has been both projected into the past and domesticated into a linear trajectory. It now shows the Thai nation's temporal depth, and also, in its neat, progressive arrangement, frames a purity of origin.

## True Thai

A Chinese zodiac diagram was taped to the wall. I asked if she was Chinese. "Of course," she said. "What? You don't know? Everyone around here is Chinese!" She elaborated: "There are no True Thai (*thai thae*) anymore. People have mixed together. Let me tell you something. When I was a schoolgirl, I had a friend who was True Thai. She lived in an old-fashioned house made of wood. We were afraid to visit her! If we went to her house, we'd have to crawl on all fours. It wasn't like this; you couldn't just sit in a chair like that. We had to keep ours head low, especially if there were older people around. Who would be brave enough to visit? She was *Four Reigns* Thai! She was fucking suppressed!"[8]

A few days later, I discussed this with an informant on the opposite river bank. When I told her that, according to my Chinese friend, there are no True Thai anymore, my Bangkok-born informant pointed to herself. "I'm True Thai," she said

[8] I recorded her words in my notes as follows: แม่งเก็บกดว่ะ

"How do you know?" I asked.

"My family is from Central Thailand. Everyone in my family has a Thai face. And there are no strange names."

I was intrigued by the expression "*Four Reigns* Thai." *Four Reigns* is the title of a thousand-page, historical novel written by Kukrit Pramoj—polymath, former Prime Minister, the actor who once appeared onscreen face-to-face with Marlon Brando. Kukrit, some say, is still unmatched; he is the towing figure on the skyline of Thai literature. *Four Reigns* (คึกฤทธิ์ 2011), written in the early 1950s, is his masterpiece, quite possibly the most highly regarded novel in Thailand. It follows the life of Ploy, an upper-class, Bangkok-born Thai woman, from her childhood to death. The reader sees a changing kingdom through the eyes of Ploy. The story begins during the reign of Rama V, one of the most revered kings of the Chakri dynasty (see Ivarsson and Isager 2010:6). Ploy, still a child, is delivered by her mother into the care of a royal woman in the palace. She learns how to conduct herself; she learns the values and practices of the palace. But this was a time of transformation, and even the people of the palace had difficulty keeping pace with the forward-looking king. Rama V visited, and carefully studied, various colonial states, including Burma, India, and the Dutch East Indies, and set about reconstructing the Siamese state on similar lines. Customs were changed. For instance, at the beginning of the reign, people knelt or crawled in the presence of the king. Years later, they stood, the king having declared such obsequiousness unfit for a civilized people. Ploy represents the values of pre-modern Siam, the Siam that Rama V sought to transform. We see her disoriented by a rapidly changing world.

Kukrit was a promoter of all things Thai. He also contributed to the definition of Thai. Ploy, the main character of the novel, is often seen as a representation of authentic, True Thai culture. Although it seems that few Thais read this novel (it is more often used as a decoration, an object to display on one's shelf), it is certain that the author's vision has been very influential. It has put

down roots in everyday life, as seen in my informant's outburst: “She was *Four Reigns* Thai!” Even those who have not read the book can still imagine its content. Such images might be shaped by snippets from TV renditions of the novel, or day-to-day popular commentary on the current round of dramas. *Four Reigns* has been committed to film many times. Bootleg copies are on sale near one of the docks on the Chao Phraya in Bangkok. Like the aptly-named “sewage dramas” (soap operas, ละครน้ำเน่า), dramas on the order of *Four Reigns* are also often taken in bits and pieces. Knowledge about the past is acquired through fragments. But fragments are scuttled into frames, outlines of time's transpiration, such as those drilled in the public school system.

What is True Thai? It is an obsession in Bangkok. The two ethnographic examples above reflect broader patterns. One position suggests that True Thai vanished in the recent past. The other position is an insistence on self-identification as True Thai. Both seem to agree, however, that there is a model of ethnic or cultural or national authenticity. Let me add a point about the second case. She often lamented the loss of her ancestors' way of life. One day, as we crossed the river by train, she explained that life in the city was not her true way of life. “It's not that life in the city is fake,” she said. “It's just not appropriate for me. My ancestors didn't live like this.” She is self-described True Thai, by blood, appearance, and origin, but lives in a way somehow mismatched. Like Loi Kratong, her origin lies upstream in the basin of the Chao Phraya River. But this river also flows out to the gulf, and has always connected Siam to the wider world. Chinese, among others, have been arriving for centuries by water. In the study of ethnic categories, one group of scholars have argued for a focus on boundaries, practices of boundary maintenance, and for the empirical value of cases in which people “*change* their ethnic identity” (Barth 1998:6). In contemporary Thailand, the boundaries between Chinese and Thai are complex, confusing, sometimes difficult to settle, often permeable. Simple, easily expressed distinctions often deteriorate. But it is clear that, somehow, the two have arrived in the same

place: Bangkok, City of Life. This is not exactly a story of confluence, wherein two streams meet. Peoples meet, mix, negotiate difference, despise one another, and also find one another irresistible, along one stream. Chinese cannot be True Thai. But at the center of True Thai, one finds the Chinese.

## Boundaries & Entanglements

People in Bangkok, if asked, can usually offer a quick comparison of Thai and Chinese. One is likely to hear long-standing stereotypes: Thais are lazy and self-indulgent; Chinese are hard-working, frugal, satisfied with a single bowl of rice. Strangely, it does not seem to matter much whether one asks a Thai or a Chinese—one hears the same thing either way. But there is also a tradition of scorn for the Chinese, often expressed with the pejorative word *jek*. One informant said, "Whatever you do, don't call a Chinese person a *jek*. If you use that word, you'll be boxing for sure." This is part of the terrain in which people position and re-position themselves. Some informants insisted on being Chinese from day one. Others were Thai, Thai, Thai, until, one day, becoming, so to speak, Chinese. Perhaps something shifted in our relationship, or perhaps a situation arose, such as the death of a relative, in which one could only be one or the other.

Sometimes one can be both. Benedict, studying Thailand from afar, claims that Thais "have an indestructible conviction that existence is good" (1952:34). Riding in a Taxi in Bangkok one evening, a radio program (a talk show) plays in the background. The interviewer interjects, "Hey, are you sure you're Thai?" Rain pelts the windshield. The interviewee responds, "I do have a bit of *cheua jin* [เชื้อจีน, Chinese germ or substance], but I'm Thai. I'm happy everyday!" Vikrom, a well-respected capitalist, owner of industrial complexes, and self-made public intellectual, once stated on Thai PBS, "I might look like a *jek* but I still consider myself Thai." Scholars have pointed out a shift in the status of the Chinese in Thailand during the boom-years of the 1990s

(see Baker & Phongpaichit 2009:204). In the light of economic success, the status of the Chinese improved. In the process, they became more Thai, and they began to self-identify as Thai, and, perhaps even more importantly, others began to recognize them as such. Yet the examples above also show that the dividing line persists. That is, the border between Thai and Chinese is still there, even if it is porous and people make daily, routine crossings.

Social class clearly plays a role, even if it is not absolutely decisive. This is depicted in *Four Reigns*, when Ploy's closest friend, a woman of the palace, discovers that her brother is going to marry a "*jek*." She is horrified, deeply ashamed. Her brother's wife-to-be is a Chinese merchant who makes and sells curries, a low-status occupation. But, as it turns out, Ploy also marries a Chinese, Bprem, a state-worker from a wealthy family, who lives in an opulent home with an entourage of servants. Signs of his Chinese ancestry are displayed in their home. Given his status, his ethnic background is of no issue, brings no shame. It is not even discussed until a later point in the book, when Ploy balks at the discovery that her daughter's suitor is Chinese—*jek*, she mutters. Ploy's son quickly reminds her that her children are also part-Chinese. But the contrast is most clearly indicated following the death of Ploy's husband. The funeral is of the *gongdek* variety, as still practiced by the Chinese in Bangkok today. Paper objects are burned, sent thereby to the deceased. Ploy's brother, a close friend of the deceased, suggests the addition of a small troop of minor wives. "Just have one of the *jek* [i.e., Chinese servants] make them," he says.

Near the end of Jit Phumisak's most well-known work, originally written in 1957, he writes about the position of the Chinese in Thai society: "Ever since the old days, the feudal lords have mislead, intoxicated, Thai people, encouraging them to hate Chinese [*jek*]. The anti-Chinese [*jin*] messages get stronger, heavier, every day. It is all to divert the eyes of the public away from the feudal lords" (จิตร 1998:275). Contempt for the Chinese persists in Bangkok. At the same time, characterizing the Chinese as a besieged minority is problematic. Today, at least. In a recent

geographical study of Thailand, the author observes: "Estimated at 14% of the population, [the Chinese] probably control more than 80% of the capital" (Kermel-Torrès 2004:40). In addition to prominence in business, Chinese occupy many, and quite possibly most, prominent posts in government. Keyes points out, for instance, that "in 1999, according to one estimate, two-thirds of the members of parliament [in Thailand] were of Chinese descent" (2002:1192). This is remarkable given, not only centuries of prejudice, but especially the centrality of anti-Chinese sentiment to the nation-building project in Siam/Thailand. The Chinese were among the others—perhaps the primary other—against which the myth of True Thai came into being. Tejapira writes, "This imagined nation of pure Thais had from the beginning been positioned by the Thai royal and subsequent military rulers primarily not against the western colonial powers, nor its colonized and hence pacified neighbors, but against Chinese immigrants and their descendants who […] dominated the modern sector of its economy and urban society" (2001:189). Urban society in this context means Bangkok. What, one might wonder, would "Thai" mean today without Bangkok, the great, Chinese-dominated, aquatic city of Southeast Asia?[9]

One morning, early in my fieldwork, I crossed the Bangkok Bridge, which spans the Chao Phraya River, and went down to inspect a Chinese temple on the river's edge. A man invited me inside. I removed my shoes. The interior was full of gold effigies and burning candles. My self-appointed guide showed me the central figure of the temple, a statue of a venerable-looking man with a gray beard and glossy, red flesh. This deity, he explained, offers protection against fire. He then led me to a small platform that overlooks the river. Incense smoke wafted from a small shrine by the platform. He gestured with his hand, first to the shrine, then to the sky: "This is for the divinities of earth and sky [*fa din*]." These beings are honored specifically in Chinese temples. He then pointed to the water, a wide, sunlit expanse of the Chao Phraya River: "We will

[9] Kermel-Torrès writes, "Among all the countries of South-East Asia, it is in Thailand that the Chinese have most influence" (2004:40).

loi kratong in the 12th month to honor Mother Ganga [*mae kongka*].” Before leaving, he pointed out a black and white photograph of the original temple, framed and fixed to the wall. It had been torn down to make way for the bridge.

The reconstruction of this temple was accomplished through donations, mostly from Chinese-owned companies in Bangkok. One of the long standing features of Southeast Asia is the contrast between temple and house (Reid 1988). Houses were traditionally built from simple materials, and with much speed and efficiency. Houses could be abandoned in times of crisis, and, in the case of fire or destruction by storm, easily rebuilt. Nowadays there is a great emphasis in Thailand on the house-of-birth as heritage, a place to which one will return, especially if it is outside Bangkok. Such attachments to the house-of-birth are sometimes said to express the persistence of traditional values. It seems, however, that this is an artifact of modern life. Buddhist temples, on the other hand—institutions in which one contemplates the impermanence of all things—have long been the most durable parts of the built environment. As Reid puts it, “If domestic architecture [in Southeast Asia] was light and impermanent, religious buildings were built to last” (1988:67). Although the cycle of building and demolition in Bangkok can be disorienting, its Buddhist temples are reliable points of anchorage. A friend told me a remarkable story. A new road was under construction and, at first, it seemed that his home might be in its path. Nearby, however, was a Buddhist temple. Sacrosanct, it cannot be disrupted, much less demolished, so development must proceed in another direction. His home was saved.

On the morning of Loi Kratong, I visited the shopkeeper in my alley. She was born in Bangkok, but her father came from China. Her mother was Thai-born Chinese. I asked if she would loi kratong in the evening. “No,” she said, “I don't really like it. I never loi kratong.” When she was a child, her father did not want her to participate. “It's dangerous,” he would say. “You could fall in the water and drown.” Indeed, as reported by newspapers and TV in Bangkok,

every year children die of drowning on Loi Kratong. The shopkeeper always works. Her only regular holiday is Chinese New Year. I sometimes suggested to friends in Bangkok that Thai people celebrate New Year's three times a year: Thai New Year, international New Year, and Chinese New Year. They were quick to correct me: Chinese New Year is Chinese, not Thai.

On the back wall of the store, there is an image of Rama V. He is remembered in Bangkok as a modernizer, and also as the one who saved Thailand from the British and French "colony hunters." He is popular among merchants, many of whom believe his spirit brings good luck. Unlike Rama VI, author of several anti-Chinese pamphlets, Rama V saw the Chinese as a benign presence. Not always, but sometimes. Much of this, if examined up close, gets rather weird. If Chinese New Year is Chinese, not Thai, one might reasonably infer that the Thai king is Thai, not Chinese. But Skinner demonstrates compellingly that Rama VI, who, in addition to writing pamphlets castigating the Chinese, was also the primary architect of Thai nationalism in the years prior to the end of absolute monarchy, was "over one-half Chinese by ancestry" (1957:26). Consider also Luang Wichit Wathakan, who, in the years following the end of absolute monarchy, worked harder than anyone to create a national Thai identity. He was born with a Chinese name (Kimliang). He later denied his Chinese heritage, claiming that, in the Thai village of his birth, it was traditional to give Thai children Chinese names—in other words, according to Wichit, this curious naming practice was an instance of local Thai culture (Barmé 1993:57).

As I spoke with the shopkeeper, customers came and went. Children wandered in to buy ice cream. Another customer, a middle-aged man, requested a shot of whiskey. On my way out, I asked, "So you're not going to loi kratong?"

"I prefer Chinese traditions," she said. "Many of us are Chinese in this neighborhood. I was born not far from here, but now I live here with my mother. This is our house. I cannot speak Chinese. Hardly anyone around here can speak Chinese. I traveled once to Shanghai, just for a

couple weeks. But I can only visit China as a tourist. I cannot communicate with people there. Now everyone wants to learn English. There used to be many schools where children could learn Chinese. But the government closed those schools. Why did they close them? I don't know! But, if they hadn't, all these people would speak Chinese. They'd be clever." Another informant, much younger, a music teacher of Chinese descent, had also mentioned the closure of Chinese schools. He claimed that many of them had been converted into apartment complexes. I asked the shopkeeper if she was referring to a previous era, when anti-Chinese sentiment was more severe. "No," she said. "It was this reign. It was the current reign." This suggests that the closure of the schools and other, parallel, forms of discrimination, have shaped and are still part of her social reality. But, when I asked her on another occasion how Chinese and Thai were different, she said, "They aren't really different anymore. For the most part, the Chinese have already become Thai."

## Chinese Metropolis

On the day of Loi Kratong, I traveled upstream by boat in the early afternoon. When I told my friends that I would not be going to Sukhothai, many suggested a visit to the Temple of Dawn. With its imposing gray spires, the Temple of Dawn is one of the defining features of Bangkok's riverside skyline. It is a *wat luang*, one of the top-tier temples under royal patronage, most of which are built along the Chao Phraya River. I sat in the park across the water from the temple. Express boats and long-tails were still running, but the police were preparing to take control of the river. Some officers were on jet skies. Others commanded inflatable rafts with outboard motors. In a few hours, with the onset of evening, the police would close the river to traffic. The water was still choppy. People were buzzing with anticipation. And then the tropical sky began to change. Loi Kratong follows the monsoon rains, but rain is still coming. Shadows thicken. Droplets fall on the page of my notebook. Umbrellas open. The pineapple merchant, hunched

over his cart, with amulets swinging from his neck, shouts, “The deities are furious!” People flee.

Weeks later, a Thai friend sat down with me to discuss Loi Kratong. She is also Chinese. We were on one of the upper floors of Central World, a giant shopping mall. She speaks Thai with a college-educated, Bangkok-born accent. “Thai people still feel gratitude towards the river,” she said. “They really do apologize. This is tradition.” The basic idea is this: Thais depend on the river, or water-mother, and, in the course of their dependence, often pollute the water. On Loi Kratong, they ask for forgiveness. She described the riverside dwelling of her grandparents, both immigrants from China. It was a wooden stilt house. One arrived through a nest of twisted, narrow alleys, but the house itself was open to water and sky. It was very small. Even as a little girl she felt squeezed by the walls. She drew a picture of the house, discussing its features. “Here's the toilet,” she said, “just a hole cut in the floor with river water below.” She drew an arrow through the hole into the water. When her Chinese grandmother (*ama*) swept the house, all the detritus went into the river. “Oh, ama swept the house,” she said, recalling her childhood visits. “Where did it go? And so I felt bad—I felt bad for the river.” One might wonder: how did her grandmother feel? Did she also feel bad for the river? This much is clear: my informant, ethnically Chinese, two generations removed from China, has had Thai feelings since childhood.

“If ama had moved to Bangkok today, she would live along Sukhumvit.” Sukhumvit is a long road at the heart (what has become the heart) of Bangkok. But, when ama migrated, the main road, so to speak, was the Chao Phraya River. It was the socio-economic center, convenient in terms of transportation, and it was also where the Chinese had been settling for hundreds of years. When the construction of Bangkok—the city, not the fishing village—began in the late 18$^{th}$ century, the Chinese were already present, and they were certainly among the builders of the city. Later their number multiplied. The rulers had a use for them. Tejapira points out that, “since the early nineteenth century, it had been a deliberate and consistent policy of successive Chakri

monarchs to encourage the immigration of Chinese coolies into the kingdom to serve as an increasingly needed and taxable pool of wage labor" (2001:10). Almost all of them arrived by water, aboard Chinese junks—merchant ships. Until the late 19th century, there were almost no roads in Bangkok. Patterns of residence were shaped by waterways. The only road, aside from the lanes in the interior of the palace compound, was the one that ran through the "Grand Bazaar," a ganglion of shops, all Chinese owned and operated, built at the river's edge (Skinner 1957:106). Most people lived in stilt houses or on boats. In the 19th century, "on arrival at Bangkok, most of the Chinese junks were converted into retail shops" (ibid). The Chinese transformed the Chao Phraya River—and with it, Siam's capital city—into a marketplace.

Bangkok, birthplace of the Thai nation, was Chinese. Not entirely, of course, but to a surprising extent. Skinner, in his classic work on the Chinese in Siam/Thailand, points out that "the Chinese probably constituted over half the population [of Bangkok] throughout the first half of the nineteenth century" (1957:81). More recently, a prominent scholar in Thai Studies, an anthropologist, has observed that "one of the most dramatic differences between the Bangkok of today and the pre-World War II city lies in its present 'Thai' flavor. In the prewar period […] the city had a strongly Chinese character" (Keyes 1987:172). Notice the quotes. One might wonder about the content of that category, "Thai." Bangkok, from which the Thai nation-building project was directed, was Chinese. Warren, a long-term resident of Bangkok, has suggested that the metropolis remains in large part a creation of immigrants from southern China. To this, perhaps, one might attribute its extraordinary ugliness—the immigrants, concerned above all with functionality, have paid no heed to the Thai cultural emphasis on beauty (Warren 2002:105).

But beauty is to be found elsewhere. Aside from temples—in which beauty is of immense importance—do not look to the built environment. For centuries, in many Southeast Asian societies, "the body itself was the first and most important medium of art" (Reid 1988:75).

Among the highlights of Loi Kratong are the beauty contests, which take place all over the kingdom. Women, and also many of Thailand's famous, ultra-feminine ladyboys or "girls of the second sort," compete for the title of Miss Nophamat. Lady Nophamat, a woman of the court in ancient Sukhothai, is credited with the origination of Loi Kratong. One year, with the river overflowing, she wanted to make an offering to the river spirit, so she made a banana-leaf boat and presented it to the king. Finding the idea satisfactory, the king released the boat himself, inaugurating a Thai tradition which persists to this day. That, at least, is how the story goes. The written account of Lady Nophamat, supposedly dating to the Age of Sukhothai, was long taken by scholars as factual (see Rajthon 1954, Wales 1931). This was a mistake. Nidhi Eoseewong argues, and provides ample evidence, that it was written in the early Bangkok period, around the time of Rama III. It is written in the literary style of that time. It includes references to weapons unknown in the age of Sukhothai, and also references to Americans—that is, hundreds of years prior to the voyage of Columbus (Eoseewong 2005:229). Lady Nophamat is a fiction.

The beauty contests, however, are real. Miss Nophamat is real. And she absolutely must have white skin, the primary attribute of a beautiful body. This preference is ubiquitous in Bangkok. A preference for white skin, I am told, is an essential characteristic of Thai people. When the sun is shining, women in Bangkok carry open parasols. Entire aisles of supermarkets are committed to skin-lightening creams. Clinics administer pigment-reducing injections to the already fair-skinned women of Bangkok's elite universities. Foreigners from Japan and Russia, sprawling on Thailand's beaches, bathing in sunlight, are viewed with astonishment, total incomprehension. Nothing is more True Thai than an attraction to white skin. The critical point, however, is this: the standard for white skin is set, above all, by the Chinese. Beauty is defined by young females with "Chinese" skin and faces, often referred to as *muai* (หมวย). An informant from the northeast offered a succinct, but very much typical, definition: a muai is "a white-skinned, ethnically-

Chinese girl, the kind most boys like." It should be added that white skin is also regarded as a desirable attribute for males—white-skinned, ethnically-Chinese boys are called dtee (ตี๋). Thais, it seems, find these fair-skinned, Chinese bodies irresistible, and this has surely contributed to ethnic mixture in Bangkok. Skinner writes, "The average Thai of Lower Siam and to a lesser extent of all the regions bordering on the Gulf is today fairer skinned and more Chinese in appearance than the Thai of North and Northeast Siam.[10] Few Siamese families whose residence in Bangkok dates back more than one generation do not have a Chinese ancestor" (1957:134).

## Migrant Memories

My informant sent me an SMS: "I'm sorry, but I can't meet you," she said. "I have to work late. Maybe I will just loi kratong in my bathtub." When the message arrived, I was sheltering from the downpour in a coffee shop near the pier. Soon the rain stopped. Preparations were underway at the Temple of Dawn. Earlier that morning, someone had suggested an alternative—one could celebrate Loi Kratong at Wat Yannawa, the Temple of the Everlasting Ship. Released from rain and abandoned by my informant, this appeared to be a suitable destination. A friend had pointed out the temple, months before Loi Kratong, while we were crossing the river on the train. We sat under an endless blast of cold air. It appeared below, through the window. "Older sibling, have you visited this temple yet? Listen, if you want to write about the river, you have to go. There's a big replica of a Chinese merchant ship. Go in and take a look!"

It was once known as the Temple of the Buffalo Coral. In the reign of Rama III, it was renovated and a new monument was built, the aforementioned concrete replica, a Chinese merchant ship. The king foretold, accurately, that the ships would disappear from the Chao

[10] The comparison with the Thai of the north and northeast is fascinating. Skinner's point concerning ethnic mixture around the gulf holds, but one should note that the peoples of the north and northeast were not until recently seen as Thai. And, prior to the Thai nation-building project, they certainly did not self-identify as such. Skinner worked in Bangkok only a couple decades after vigorous government campaigns to change the identity of the peoples of the north and northeast, to make them Thai (see Barmé 1993). More on this in chapter 3 ahead.

Phraya River. He ordered the construction of a monument in their honor. It was also so that future generations would be able to imagine the ships, what they looked like. As such, it was an intervention in the culture of memory. Sometimes memory needs imagination. Mary Warnock reminds us that "recollection […] is an active and creative undertaking" (1987:145). Memory creates continuity, some series of linkages that connect then and now, even if many or most of the intermediary links are lost. Having seen the monument, one can imagine a river full of such vessels, as it once was. But there is more than one way to read the monument. It is also a material fixture for memories of origin, travel, and arrival. After renovation, the temple was renamed. It remains popular with Chinese, local as well as tourists from China. Statues of Rama III stand near the replica, along with a plaque, clearly of recent manufacture, that describes him as the "royal father of Thai commerce," who, in the aftermath of Ayutthaya's destruction by Burma, renewed the "Thai economy." The recovery, it says, was achieved by commerce with foreigners.

Some people, when they see the Everlasting Ship, tell stories. An old woman who had grown up along the Canal of a Thousand Stings, one of Bangkok's oldest canals, told me that the language of her childhood home was Chinese. No one spoke Thai. When I interviewed her, she still spoke with a Chinese accent—despite having lived all her life in Siam/Thailand. She rarely leaves the house. Unlike her three daughters, she is a little out of place in the new Bangkok. I asked, "During what reign were you born? Was it the seventh reign?" She did not know. She knew the year, but not the reign. "We didn't think about politics," she said. "We only thought about making a living." With her thick accent and occasional substitution of Chinese for Thai words, some of what she said was difficult to understand. Her daughters, full-blooded Chinese, but speaking crystal-clear Bangkok Thai, came to my assistance. They also told me about their father, who had passed away. He was an immigrant from China, a fierce, hard-working man. Their memory of him left a mark on their perception of the present. "Today," one said, "life is

easy. In our father's time it was difficult." The other agreed. In the early days, as a young immigrant in Bangkok, he survived as an ambulatory merchant. Many years later, he took his daughters to the Temple of the Everlasting Ship. He pointed to the concrete replica: "This is how I came to Bangkok."[11]

Others told similar migration stories. Sitting on the ground floor of a shopping complex, I sipped coffee and spoke with an old Chinese man, who had been born in Thailand. He was preparing a trip to a casino on the Cambodian border. "Chinese like to gamble," he said. I asked him about the differences between Chinese and Thai. "Oh, they are very similar," he said. "Thais *wai pra*; Chinese *wai jao*!" Roughly speaking, this means that Thais honor monks and Buddha images (*pra*), whereas the Chinese honor the lords (*jao*), spirits that dwell in a place. But things have changed: "These days, Chinese also *wai pra* and Thais *wai jao*!" He insisted that we go immediately to the produce section of the nearby grocery store so that he could show me all the vegetables that Thais have received from China. He also told me about his father. One had to spend many days at sea before arriving in Bangkok. Prior to departure, one's eyes were examined. "Are you healthy? Do you have any infectious diseases?" The man says his father boarded a merchant ship destined for Klong Toey, one of Bangkok's main ports, now a notorious, drug-washed slum. There were no passports. On arrival, the official collected a fee—6 baht, he said. That was it. His father entered Bangkok, never to return to China.

## Bits of the Past

One really should avoid the roads in Bangkok. The BTS (skytrain) system has provided much relief from the city's notorious automobile traffic. One morning I ascended the steps at the BTS

[11] Strangely, no one ever mentioned other sorts of vessels. It was always a merchant ship, never a steamship. Baker and Phongpaichit write, "By the 1880s there were regular steamship services between Bangkok and the southern Chinese ports, and a regular supply of the poor and desperate ready to make the unpleasant trip" (2005:93).

station; from the platform, I could see the Chao Phraya River. Although road and rail have proliferated and many old canals have been filled in and paved over, it is worth remembering that there would be no Bangkok without the Chao Phraya. Much has changed in the last hundred years. Bangkok has developed, "reached the age" (modernized), stepped forward. But an aquatic past has persisted, sometimes quietly, into the present. Water is even written into the name of the city: a *bang* is a riverside village. The second syllable, *kok,* probably comes from *kor* (เกาะ) which means island (see ศรีศักร 2010:ix). Bangkok was a fishing village crisscrossed by waterways—an island, so to speak. In the late 18th century, with the royal command to recreate Ayutthaya, the fishing village began its dramatic transformation into a port city. The Siamese were not, for the most part, a seagoing people. They never failed, however, to attract the outsider, to bring the merchant to Siam. Standing on the platform, engulfed in heat and humidity, a text message arrived from my local cellphone carrier: "Put a statue of a Chinese merchant ship on your work desk—this will bring progress."

Commerce. Recovery. Progress. The everlasting ship is multivalent. It might also be considered in relation to other signs of Chinese migration and labor that appear along the river. Some, such as the statues at Asiatique, are of recent manufacture. Asiatique, a new, riverside shopping complex, was still under construction at the time of my first visit. The air was thick with the smell of paint and nail guns continued to pop. The complex is open-air, a grid of warehouses and alleys—a reconstruction of an old river-scene, now packaged as a shopping experience. It was designed so that visitors could arrive by boat, with free trips to and from the complex in the evenings. Going downstream, one sees a line of national flags, marking the complex as an international meeting place. Here the past is converted into a commodity; one consumes experience, a sanitized version of an antiquated scene. But perhaps there is more. Nora calls memory "a phenomenon of emotion and magic." It "thrives," he says, not on facts or dates,

but “on vague, telescoping reminiscences, on hazy general impressions or specific symbolic details (Nora 1996:3). Statues of Chinese laborers are found throughout the complex: men with partially shaved heads and long braids. Some carry sacks of rice. One pulls a rickshaw. These figures point not only to a past, but also a conceivable future—one in which the past of Bangkok and the nation will have been re-imagined.

Dockworkers in Bangkok are still referred to as coolies, a reminder of a long-standing ethnic division of labor. But many of the old rice mills have been dismantled. Such work is much less visible. Bodies have also changed. The pigtails are long gone. The banks of the river are no longer teeming with the figures seen in statue-form at the shopping complex. Such images, however, are quickly brought to mind. A woman in her mid-40s from a village in another province, told me that when she was a child she saw Chinese rice-carriers working near the Santa Cruz Church, a Catholic church by the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. I was intrigued to discover this, surprised that a loading dock had been there so recently. She said she saw the coolies loading the ships. But when I talked to older people in that neighborhood, they all said the same thing: this was before they were born. Those loading docks had long ago been dismantled. No one had ever seen them.

There is no way she could have seen the rice carriers. What kind of memory is this? The Thai word *jum* (to remember) also suggests imprisonment. The same word is used to refer to the incarceration of convicts. It can also refer to temporary storage, as when one pawns an item (*jum num*). Put simply, it suggests containment, a state of being locked in place. Perhaps it can be released or taken back in the future. Images of riverside Chinese laborers are here and there, scattered, in Bangkok's ecology of images, appearing in films and TV dramas, in picture books, in conversations about the old days, and now at a riverside shopping complex. I do not think she lied to me. Rather it seems like something she would have observed there. She remembers, in a

sense, a Bangkok that vanished many years before she arrived in the city. What seems to be a very personal memory—traveling along the river with her mother—also reflects a collective memory, in which fragments of old Bangkok remain scattered. “My mother took me there,” she said. “I remember the coolies carrying sacks of rice. But I'd forgotten for many years. Then, when I was older, I went back and said to myself, Oh! This is where my mother brought me.”

Did she really see the rice carriers? I am less interested in the accuracy (in the conventional sense) of the memory than in what it suggests about collectivity. She was born in a village in eastern Thailand. She arrived in Bangkok as a child. She recalls seeing it as a new arrival: a strange, frenetic place, filled with unfamiliar sights and sounds. The memory of Chinese rice-carriers is part of her picture of Bangkok. Her past includes migration to the city; the past of the city includes the rice carriers. The memory seems plausible because of a lingering, widespread imaginary of the large and long-standing Chinese presence in Bangkok. Her memory is one piece in a puzzle, yet to be articulated. Regarding the Chinese in Thailand, Winichakul notes that “immigrant history is regarded as an individual rather than an imagined communal past. The past they identify with is a Thai past, but their Thai identity is a recent acquisition” (1995:116). But perhaps there would be no Thai past without the immigrant, without the merchant ship.

Goody, writing about non-literate societies, argues, “It is dangerous to speak of a collective memory in oral cultures. An oral culture is not held in everybody's memory store […]. Memories vary as does experience. Bits may be held by different people” (1998:94). Thai society has a high rate of literacy and a profusion of the printed word, but this comment on collective memory is still worth considering. Is memory collective only when it can be generalized to the whole society, when everyone remembers (or forgets) the same thing? Such cases are certainly of interest, and chapter 3 ahead addresses something of this sort. But the variability of memory, as well as its breaking into bits, is surely a feature of all cultures. This does not mean the bits have

nothing to do with one another. Imagine three people sitting side-by-side, telling a story. Each contributes, fills in various gaps, creates connections. Perhaps there are disagreements about some parts of the narrative. This is all part of collective life. The bits have interlocking parts or edges amenable to stitching and the story comes to life as the bits are articulated. I want to suggest that the merchant ship has a place, not only in an ethnically-delimited communal past, but in an even broader collective past, that of Bangkok as well as the Thai nation.

## Banana-Leaf Boats & Merchant Ships

A police officer yells through a megaphone, "You don't have to hurry!" We all laugh. We were suspended on the water for several minutes. People usually speak little on these express boat trips. Many doze off, lulled by a combination of wind and the hum of the engine. But today everyone is full of energy, chattering, eager. After a few minutes, we start moving again. An urban landscape passes, street corridors open and close, a small Ferris wheel appears for just a moment. I disembark at the Oriental Hotel and walk past its white, peeling hulk. A small stage is being set up by a school. Tables along the street have orderly displays of *kratong* for sale, little boats made of leaf, bread, or foam. Turning onto the main road, the markets are bustling. When I reach the Robinson shopping complex, I can feel the thickening crowds ahead, gathering at the bridge and the Temple of the Everlasting Ship. As always, vendors have set up tables in front of the department store, piled with sandals, shirts, and belts. But the speakers by the front entrance, which usually play electronic dance music, now squeal with an old, scratchy recording of the Loi Kratong song: On the day of the full moon, in the twelfth month, the banks overflow . . .

Bodies swarm at the Thaksin bridge. Students are out with donation boxes and tambourines. A man announces boat trips, an opportunity to release banana-leaf boats in the middle of the river. Night has fallen and the streets, crowds, vendors, and platforms are now under artificial light. I

ascend the stairs, stop at the platform, and lean over a rail. Ascending further, I find myself on the bridge, which supports auto traffic in two directions, and also the BTS rail. Both sides of the bridge have sidewalks for pedestrians. Many are gathered: photographers and small groups of friends. Crossing, slowly, the voice from the PA system below dissolves into mush, the ambient pulse of a male voice amplified. Red lights are blinking just above the water's surface, signs of police presence. Some had warned me to be careful. Beware of crowds. Beware of young people.

Crossing over, descending the steps, one finds a safety rail at the river's edge. Some out-of-service long-tail boats are moored. Green vegetable matter floats near the dock. On an ordinary day, fishermen perch by the rail, lines cast and poles propped. Now those gathered (the number is not yet substantial enough to call it a crowd) are mostly just watching the opening scene of Loi Kratong. Little candle-lit boats, just a few, begin to appear on the water. Men lean against the rail and sip from beer bottles. Merchants sell flashing mouse ears, in purple, green, and pink. A young couple arrives with their son and daughter. They stop and collect themselves by the dock. The daughter learns how to handle the kratong. “Hold it above your head and make a wish.” The parents adjust the child's hands and arms. “Stand straight!” One might recall Mead and Bateson's (1951) work in Bali, where they studied the enculturation of bodies, how children learn to walk, sit, stand like proper Balinese. But note that, in this case, there is a strong tie to an image of the past. Loi Kratong is said to be an authentic and original Thai cultural practice, passed on, downstream from Sukhothai, with “no break,” persisting into the present. It is also a kind of performance. One must know how to grasp the kratong, how to stand, when to make a wish. Connerton points out that scholars have rarely attended to how “social memory” is sedimented in the body. As a corrective, he argues that “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past […] are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (1989:3-4).

The parents try to bring the children out to the platform. Sustained by pontoons, it gently rises and falls. The son does not like the looks of it, but the daughter crosses without qualm. The father stands on the footpath, beckoning, but the boy is absolutely unwilling to take a step. “I'm not going!” he says. The father gives up. He joins his wife and daughter on the platform. A police officer arrives on the scene and sees the boy lingering quietly by the pier. He tries to lead the boy over the footpath. “Are you coming?” he asks. “No!” the boy says. “I'm not going!”

I decide to take the ferry across the river, rather than walk across the bridge. I put a couple coins on the desk, then clamber on with the rest, securing a spot on one of the benches. The metal ferry rocks steadily, rubbing the edge of the pier—metal against water, against metal, against rubber tires. We are released and, very, very slowly, we make an arc from this bank to the next. A man on a bench points up at the sky and a little girl looks up. A floating lamp, just one, is making its way up into the sky. It goes up and over, then *way up* over the hotel-and-condominium skyline of the Chao Phraya River.

Activities are picking up on the opposite bank. Some children have jumped into the water and now cling to the dock, waiting for the kratong to come within reach. Few people put fingernail clippings, or hair clippings, or betel in the kratong anymore, but one usually drops a few coins in before lighting the candle and setting it afloat. People say the coins represent a sacrifice. Some children collect these coins and buy snacks. Others buy glue, to be inhaled from plastic bags.

The grounds at Wat Yannawa are very crowded. The concrete merchant ship is in full view under the night sky, bathed in lamp light. One must slow down, move with the foot traffic. The complex is full of vendors, commerce: ice cream, pork on a stick, noodles.

Not so long ago, noodles were Chinese food. This changed around the time of World War II, under the dictatorship of Pibul Songkram. Noodle soup was re-signified, and the people of the freshly-anointed “Thailand” were encouraged to eat noodles. It was the age of radio, and the

government announcements came blaring: “Noodle is your lunch!” (Numnonda 1978:236). The campaign, “closely followed” by the dictator (ibid), was very successful. Noodles have become Thai food, even though, unlike rice, which is eaten with a spoon, noodles are eaten with chopsticks. And now, on Loi Kratong, many Thais have decided, not surprisingly, to eat noodles, all happily huddling under hot, electric lamps, in the shadows of the Chinese merchant ship.

Let us walk toward the edge of the river. Along the way, long strings extend from the upper-story windows of a building, down to the asphalt, where they are fixed. Paper currency is clipped along the length of the string, with more being added as temple-goers make donations. The temple is noisy. Fortune sticks rattle in wooden tubes. In Bangkok, this rattling—a distinctive, insect-like sound—is part of the sensory experience of many Chinese shrines as well as Thai temples. Kneel, focus, make a wish. Shake the wooden tube until a stick falls onto the mat, then take the stick and retrieve your fortune. I recall a friend in Bangkok, a Thai friend. One day she told me that she was Chinese. Take her advice: “If the fortune is good, keep it. If not, throw it away.”

A steady stream of people is making its way out to the dock. The water is out of reach, so people lower the kratong with a scoop fixed to a pole. Many are also sitting along the rails, watching and chatting. Both young and old are present. Men, women, and children. People accumulate at the water's edge. Some toss pellets to the fish. Couples sit together and light sparklers. A monk is speaking through a microphone, commenting on the donations. These are merit-making activities, and so one anticipates good fortune in the future. The monk says, “You'll be rich for sure! Just wait a few years—you'll be famous!” An abundance of kratong are now afloat, each with a lit candle. In the 1920s, a British ethnographer observed this festival from his riverside home in Bangkok. Thousands of kratong floated downstream, “on their way out to be swallowed up by the sea” (Wales 1931:292). Now, by contrast, the kratong cross a distance of

perhaps 10 meters. Workers from the department of the environment are out in small, yellow boats, armed with fishing nets. The kratong are scooped and piled in a smoldering heap. The monk continues to comment on the donations. He instructs people in their prayers: “Repeat after me,” he says. “I ask that my family and I may reside beneath the umbrella of moral authority provided by the three institutions: Nation, Buddhism, and Monarchy. Forever.”

## Conclusion

In a classic article, Leach analyzes the influences of China and India on mainland Southeast Asia and suggests that “the influence of China has been mainly in the fields of trade and communication and has affected the Hill People rather than the Valley People” (1960:54). This point intrigues me, though I still do not understand it—perhaps because I studied Bangkok, where, for centuries, the center of trade and communication was the Chao Phraya River. The Chinese came upstream; the Chinese shaped Bangkok, and, subsequently, shaped the Thai nation.

It is still difficult to imagine the Thai nation without falling into the progression-of-centers narrative. Most books on Thai history fall into its categories, regardless of whether they are written in Thai or English. Prince Damrong's vision continues to colonize scholarship. It also continues to shape everyday life in Thailand. It provides a simple outline in which people can position themselves. But what if we imagined the past in a different way? In this chapter, I suggest that the Thai nation began not in Sukhothai but in Bangkok—the great Chinese metropolis of Southeast Asia. The progression-of-centers narrative incorporates landscape, with cities, or centers of power, following the water. Closely attending to the landscape—looking, and listening to its voices—one will see that the river and its canals can allow us to see the nation in new ways. Banana-leaf boats can be reasonably expected to float downstream, at least until they are scooped up by the fishing nets. Merchant ships (as well as those now rather ghost-like

steamships) have often traveled in the opposite direction, and many of their migrant passengers never returned to their places of origin. In the 19th century, the merchant ships often stayed, became nodes in a network of aquatic commerce. The merchants, mostly from southern China, made vast contributions to the life and vitality of Bangkok. The Thai nation begins there.

How Thai and Chinese are similar and/or different is not always clear. As one informant said, "If you ask me if I'm more Thai or more Chinese, it will be difficult to answer." Ethnic boundaries do persist, but there has also been a tremendous amount of mixture and border-crossing. But even this way of putting it is not altogether satisfactory. If we look carefully at the Chao Phraya River, past and present, we will see that peoples of different cultural backgrounds have met there. But it is not clear that a consolidated, fully formed "Thai" subjectivity predates the late 19th century. The whole fuss about nation-building and national self-identification must have seemed rather distant, or alien, to most of the people of Siam, at least until compulsory education, radio, and the cultural interventions of the Bangkok-centered state started to take hold of day-to-day life. The Chinese were right at the center of this process. I have tried to provoke the reader by asking: what would Thai be without the Chinese? "Thai," and the obsessions with "True Thai," originate not in Sukhothai, but in Bangkok, a port-city, thriving with commerce at Chinese command, an aquatic city, one of the great cities of Southeast Asia, a Chinese metropolis. And many of those figures who did most to define "Thai" were themselves descended from merchant Chinese. Even Kukrit Pramoj, the author of *Four Reigns*, one of the most prominent and important Thai authors, who did so much to promote and shape Thai identity in the aftermath of World War II, is known to have "boasted about a Chinese element in his heritage" (Baker & Phongpaichit 2009:190). The Chinese were and are at the center—geographical, political, and creative—of the Thai nation.

The landscape is a crucial part of this story. Anthony Smith, who I discuss further in the next chapter, points out that landscape is an under-explored aspect of national imaginaries and experience. The specific form of those landscapes, as well as how people use them, and how they came into being, can be a fruitful starting point. The Chao Phraya River is a passage. Rebecca Solnit writes, "Part of what makes roads, trails, and paths so unique as built structures is that they cannot be perceived as a whole all at once by a sedentary onlooker. They unfold in time as one travels along them, just as a story does as one listens or reads" (2000:72). This is also true of the Chao Phraya River, but some onlookers know about downstream and upstream, about ancient city-kingdoms, about a glittering collective past. The Chao Phraya River is a connective landscape, a snake-like line of water that connects sites. It extends across or through space. The progression-of-centers narrative, which incorporates this landscape, is a powerful, institutionally supported framework of collective memory. And my Chinese friends and informants in Bangkok were among those who taught me about it. "If you want to see the real thing," she said, "go to Sukhothai." But these informants also shared other kinds of memories with me—memories of parents or grandparents who came by ship, by water, who became, with ease or difficulty, part of Bangkok and Thailand. These memories also incorporate the landscape. I have drawn inspiration from these memories to suggest that the Thai nation can, and probably should be, re-imagined. So much of doing ethnography, it seems to me, lies in learning to listen. In the contemporary aquatic landscape of Bangkok, one hears many voices. The waterways did much to bring these voices together, providing a basis for a vibrant port-city, a meeting place of memories.

# 2. LOSS

We were sitting near a fish tank, on the ground floor of a shopping complex, amidst masses of still-uniformed college students. My informant, a Bangkok native and self-described "True Thai," had narrated her ambition to move up-country and practice the way of life of her ancestors. I thought the interview was complete. She was quiet for a moment. "I want to ask you something." Should I turn off the recorder? "No!" she said. "Don't touch it! I want to know: why did you come to study the river?" She had asked me this before. I recalled again the process through which my project took shape. As I studied the literature on Thailand, the connection between people and water drew my attention. Thais apologize annually to the river. They use water to wash away the detritus of the foregoing year. I noted Bangkok's elaborate aquatic infrastructure. Now, near the end of fieldwork, I was more aware of how waterways fit into romantic images of the past. I did not want her to think I had illusions. I said, I know things have changed. It's not the way it was before . . . "But that's just it," she said. "We've already turned away from the water."

This chapter is about the relationship between collectivity and landscape, their linkage and decoupling. Every landscape has its memories. Here, loss is a definitive part of the landscape. Thai society is said to have turned away from waterways and their corollary, a water-centered way of life. This was brought to my attention at the beginning of fieldwork. I arrived in Bangkok following floods that brought much destruction to life and property. It was referred to in media and politics as the Great Water Disaster (มหาอุทกภัย). In the wake of this disaster, people lamented that Thais—river-dwellers since dawn—no longer know how to live with water. The floods served as a reminder. When water poured into streets, houses, and office buildings, many Thais recalled or imagined fragments of a way of life that both was and was not their own, and some saw this as an indication of loss. But loss is not reducible to an empirical fact—loss is also a

cultural phenomenon. What counts as loss? What cultural logics configure change as loss?

At the end of a book called *Life along Canals*, Sombat Plainoi, a man born in Ayutthaya in the late 1920s, writes, “Today, the way of life of Thai people, in terms of our relationship to water, has really changed. In water that was previously full of fish, few fish remain. In some places, the fish are completely gone. Canals once full of clean, drinkable water, are now corrupted, filthy and stinking. Who would have thought that, someday, Thais would have to buy drinking water? In the future, if we continue to neglect the water, if we fail to keep it clean, we might suffer outbreaks of disease, as once happened long ago: King U Thong [in the 14th century, prior to founding the city of Ayutthaya] had to abandon his old city, which was short of water and ridden with plague. What if that were to happen to us? Where would we go?” (สมบัติ 2001:122).

In this chapter, we will explore continuity and change, with a focus on the culture of loss. Change is not necessarily loss; it may be progress—and sometimes it is both at the same time. We will see associations made with waterways, some of the meanings, stories, images, and possibilities that reside, so to speak, in the landscape. I argue that loss does not merely constitute an absence. Loss, recalled with bitterness or nostalgia, is also part of the landscape's vitality.

## Poetic Landscape

What has been lost? A way of life, one that belongs to the Chao Phraya River and its canals in Central Thailand. It also belongs to a particular collective. The Chao Phraya River can be thought of as what Anthony Smith, a scholar of nations and nationalism, calls a poetic landscape. He argues that we need to consider how people relate to the terrains within their borders, features of the earth that are not “mine” but “ours” as national subjects. How do these landscapes speak? Smith writes, “We can hardly begin to enter into the world-view of nationalism without appreciating the profound effects of these 'poetic landscapes' on the self-understanding of many

members of the nation […] – an aspect that has till recently been rather neglected" (2010:35).

In debates on the origins of nations, Smith often stands opposite to Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm. The latter three have built a paradigm in which the nation is a quintessentially modern construct. Anderson argues that the nation form emerges only with the breakdown of certain pre-modern entities, namely "sacred communities, languages and lineages" (2006:22). Gellner takes the position that the nation appeared and persists because it suits the requirements of industrial society. He writes, "[Nationalism] preaches and defends continuity, but owes everything to a decisive and unutterably profound break in human history" (Gellner 1983:125). Hobsbawm argues that nations were "so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past […], either by semi-fiction […] or by forgery" (1983:7). Smith makes concessions to these authors, but maintains that pre-modern experiences leave decisive imprints on nations. Why is one nation different from the next? Smith writes, "My belief is that the most important of these variations [between nations] are determined by specific historical experiences and by the 'deposit' left by these collective experiences" (1986:ix).

Fixed definitions of national culture are sometimes dangerous. And there are some potential problems with the notion of a deposit left by collective experiences. One might mistakenly believe the collective always existed, with the same outlines and contours it has today. And, within collectives, one often finds divisions and relations of power, through which the contents of the so-called deposit have been shaped and filtered. This is a key theme in chapter 3, in which we will consider the (mostly forgotten) destruction of Vientiane. Smith, however, draws a point to my attention: a particular pre-modern way of life is in some ways uniquely available to the national imagination in Thailand. It is possible to imagine a primary relationship between people and landscape. It is possible, especially in Central Thailand, to imagine that the river has always been there and Thai people have always—or at least for many centuries—lived with it. A sense of

loss goes hand-in-hand with a sense of continuity.

The Chao Phraya is, perhaps, an odd choice for a poetic landscape. One day, standing near the riverbank, a family from the northeast wondered why I did not study the Mekong. "The Chao Phraya is so polluted," they said. "The water is black. The Mekong [by contrast], which runs along the edge of our home province, is still clean." Clearly this is not a study of a pristine object. Sometimes the water stinks and dead things float on the surface. These passages of water have also been cut and modified by humans. One will not find nature uncorrupted. Nor will one find old Bangkok, hidden at some bend in the canal. But the waterways—filthy, reeking, half-abandoned—still speak, and they are among the threads that tie together a collective: "we Thai."

## Collectivity

A culture of memory fills, but also creates, this landscape. Halbwachs argues that all memory is, in some sense, collective. He writes, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 1992:38). Some see Halbwachs presenting society as an inflexible, metaphysical being, wherein individuals are reduced to servitude. Nishii calls it a "static view of memory" in which "individuals seem to accept passively and automatically the collective memory of society" (2002:231). It is worth noting, however, that Halbwachs does acknowledge change in collective memory over time. In his view, the collective memory is shaped by present conditions. But Nishii rightly points out that individuals are not necessarily passive—dominant cultures of memory sometimes come into question. In Thailand, this was especially apparent during the 1970s when the wall of censorship was temporarily breached and reinterpretations of Thailand's past, some of them Marxist, appeared and circulated (see Anderson 1998, จิตร 1998, Winichakul 1995).

Some aspects of collectivity, as established, may be unstable, or even in a state of decay, while other aspects are in the making. The patterns of memory that define collectivity are not eternal. New patterns can emerge. In Thailand, Buddhist teachings often emphasize that, with the exception of the world itself, all beings decay. Life is described in a simple sequence: beings are born, established, and then extinguished [เกิดขึ้น ตั้งอยู่ ดับไป]. This wisdom is taken selectively—few acknowledge the nation as a transitory being. But it is worth pondering: perhaps the collective (and its memory) can be re-made. Perhaps it can even die, giving way to new configurations.

The fashioning and re-fashioning of collective boundaries has broad implications for the culture of memory. Mapping plays a key role in the creation of nations. Black lines and blotches of color on paper change the ways people distinguish self and other (Winichakul 1994). Borders, only recently established, are read backwards into the past. But even still, the boundaries of Thai, of what can and cannot be Thai, are not always self-evident. One finds gradations of inside and outside, as indicated by the obsession in Bangkok with "True Thai." One hears expressions like: Thai, but not True Thai. The edges of collectivity are not always clear or agreed upon. But are clarity and agreement necessary conditions for a sense of the collective? The more crucial point, it seems, is that my informants articulated loss in collective terms: we, us, our. I recall, for instance, something an informant said one afternoon. We we were standing on wooden planks near the edge of a canal. There is a cafe there, recently opened, serving espresso and cakes. Hammers were pounding at the construction site across the water. "It's unfortunate," she said. "We only think of preservation now, when much of our culture has already vanished."

One lives with loss. Collective memory, Halbwachs argues, "retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (1980:80). Sometimes, a cultural logic prevails in Bangkok according to which knowledge comes from direct experience. If one does not have such experience, one must speak to someone who

does. As a Thai proverb puts it: what ten mouths say is not equal to what one eye sees. So it seems that, with death, the past is lost. Yet, in some ways, the past remains close, like an apparition of the departed, even if that water-centered world was eclipsed before one was born. One does not live in that world, yet it persists as part of collective self-definition.

## Floods of Paradox

I conducted fieldwork in the aftermath of the Great Water Disaster. When I flew into Bangkok, the water was still receding. Thai-speaking laborers, returning from Taiwan, pressed their faces against the windows of the plane. Look! A partially-inundated patchwork of rice fields, villages, and semi-urban life passed below. Damage and recovery were their first concerns. When I began my work in Bangkok, floods were an inescapable topic. I said I was studying water. My interlocutors added the word *overflows*—the water overflows (flood, น้ำท่วม). Another recurring pattern was this: people guessed I was studying a "way of life" (วิถีชีวิต). That is, when I said I was doing research on the waterways and the people who live along them, they said, "Oh, you're studying the way of life, right?" Water means flood; water means way of life.

Floods brought an extensive cultural framework to the foreground. Overflow was interpreted through a pre-existing notion of Thai. People in this region—Siam or Central Thailand, but also large swaths of Southeast Asia—have lived with overflow for as long as they have lived with waterways. It is true that floods have taken on a new meaning, especially in Bangkok and other affected urban areas, but this meaning draws from a mass of ready-at-hand memories.

During my first few months of fieldwork, I saw the same TV commercial over and over. It was produced by PTT, the national energy company. The commercial consists of scenes that reflect ways that people in Thailand relate to water. The opening sequence links water with the life cycle, from beginning (birth) to end (death). Water is a symbol of a life that is not only

human, but culturally Thai: “It is the beginning. It is a friend. It is one we rely on. It is hope. It nourishes us. It is livelihood. It is the end.” The screen goes black. “But today . . . [now the scene depicts Bangkok overtaken by floodwater] we see it as a destroyer.” The voice-over then says, “Our lives have been changed, and this may change our feelings toward the waterways. But we believe, that if we stay with nature and support it, the waterways we love and to which we are bound will recover their beauty and remain with us.” Prior to the display of the company's logo, one sees an image of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, a prominent symbol of life with water. The commercial reaches out to the cultural assumptions of Thai viewers in Bangkok. For example, the on-screen text reads “it is the end” and we see ashes released into the water. People understand that this is a Buddhist funeral. But the floods present us with a paradox. On the one hand, Thais are closely bound and adapted to waterways. This is part of being Thai. On the other hand, floods bring massive destruction to Bangkok. Something has gone wrong.

The commercial does not address the transformed relationship to floods as such. This, however, was pertinent during my fieldwork. As the wet season approached, some people in Bangkok were afraid. Mounds of white sandbags began to appear along the river. For those communities unprotected by cement barriers, sand is a primary means of defense. Previously, people said, floods did not bring such destruction. This did not necessarily refer to a time within the scope of their lives. It often referred to a time recently passed, but still prior to the speaker's birth. Informants said the “original” Thai way of life was adapted to floods. The houses were raised. Each household had a small boat. People knew how to paddle. Every child could swim. People could catch fish with their bare hands. The Loi Kratong festival marks the flood season, which used to be a season of leisure. The planting is finished and the overflow is anticipated. It's okay. It will recede. When the water overflows, Thais celebrate. But in November of 2011, less than two months before I began fieldwork, most people in Bangkok chose not to loi kratong. The

city was submerged and the celebration was canceled.

## Along the Waterways

In this section, we will further explore the culture of memory along the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. The reader will be introduced to a small community, located in an alley at the river's edge. As will be discussed in the pages ahead, this long-established community is facing eviction.

Other landscapes, including those that gather around waterways, offer different kinds of poetry. Alley (2002), in her ethnography of the Ganges, finds associations unlike those in Bangkok, despite the fact that much of Thai culture has origins in ancient India (Coedès 1968). Both the Chao Phraya and Ganges are described as mothers and, during the Loi Kratong festival, the Chao Phraya is even referred to as Mother Ganga. But the Chao Phraya is a mother of a different sort. The Ganges, sacred and timeless, is indifferent to urban metastasis and industrial waste. In spite of pollution and disease, the water still cleans the soul, and so the Ganges remains the center of a pilgrimage culture. The Chao Phraya has a spiritual presence and temporal depth, but one does not make pilgrimage to it. Whereas the Ganges is timeless and sacred, the Chao Phraya is central to a way of life—real, recollected, imagined.

Tanabe and Keyes point out that "many in [Thailand] share social memories of a premodern past" (2002:2). In Bangkok, that past took place along waterways. Some imagine those times as perfused with a golden stillness—Thailand was yet untouched by the outside world. Only in recent decades does life flow, as they say in Bangkok, along the "current of society" (กระแสสังคม).[12]

Sometimes informants taught me about antiquated practices. Only later would I learn that no one does these things anymore. One afternoon in Thonburi, aboard a bus, my informant again explains Loi Kratong: "We put nail-clippings, hair, and betel nut into the kratong, then set it

[12] A "current" (กระแส), that is, in the sense of an electrical or river current.

afloat." But really that time has passed. These days a coin will suffice. No hair. No nails. Betel is difficult to obtain. Some seemed to interpret my work as salvage, as if I were gathering fragments of an antiquated, dying world. Such a project would resonate with contemporary obsessions in Thailand's capital city: "Publications on old Siam or old Bangkok flood the market. The faster Bangkok moves into the future, the greater the appeal of neo-antiquarianism. People are conscious about recollecting the past, though they would not live in it. They want to collect it for their spiritual wealth, to make the flow of life comprehensible" (Winichakul 1995:117). The past (specifically, a collective past) is a means to make sense of life's flow. But the experience of life's flow, including the so-called current of society, may depend much on one's place. This self-conscious antiquarianism is most characteristic of Bangkok's middle class. Among the lower classes, many lack the resources to acquire such objects, be they publications or otherwise. For some, even low-quality paperback books are out of reach. But other ways of recollection exist.

Even those living or working near the waterways often emphasized a sense of detachment with water. An informant described a site upstream, then laughed when I asked about the nearest pier. Where do I disembark? "I don't know," he said. "I go everywhere by motorcycle!" Conversations fell into the contours of people's assumptions. If you want to learn about Buddhism, speak only with the very strict monks. Most, they say, are yet to extinguish worldly desires. Similarly, if you want to learn about waterways, you must speak to the old people. Waterways, a vanishing way of life. Only the old possess direct experience. In a narrow alley, just a few steps from the river, a woman said, "If you want to learn about these things, you have to talk to the old people." I asked if there were any old people in the alley. "They are all dead."

Gray clouds arrive, heat recedes, and now a cool wind blows along the tunnel-like pathway. We sit under plastic panels, protection from both sun and rain. My informant was born in this wooden hovel. We are speaking through the window. One of his front teeth is broken. "Thais like

to live like this," he says, "along the waterways. It's cool at night. But we are also exposed to nature, including disasters. One cannot escape; one can only protect." There is an embankment nearby, but water came over it during the flood. Residents carried sandbags and laid these on top of the cement barrier. People worked together, shared resources, and this collective self-defense brought a sense of dignity. One household expressed pride in the acquisition of a case of Pepsi during the disaster. They sold the bottles to their neighbors. No one else had it.

People were aware of the class dimensions of risk and destruction. "The floods didn't affect the rich," said the man with the broken tooth. "This country doesn't develop." His observations reminded me of what I had heard downstream on the opposite bank, at an art gallery, near a number of imposing, top-tier hotels. The owner said, "It won't flood here. You can be sure of it. This is an economic center—it can't flood. These big hotels won't accept it."

A bird cage hangs in front of the crude, wooden structure. Inside there are three calendars, each featuring the king's face. My informant inhales through his nose. He tells me about his youth: "I only went to school for three years. I was mischievous, always getting into trouble. I didn't want to study; I was stuck to my friends. My mother forced me into the monkhood. So I wore the yellow robe, lived in the temple, but when I got out I returned to my mischief. The police arrested me. I was sniffing glue. Do you know about it?" He brings out a brown, glass bottle, shows me. "It's this stuff." Now he works as a messenger for a shipping company. The exports are loaded onto ships at Klong Toey, a port-slum on the bank of the Chao Phraya.

A woman in her mid-30s sits inside on the sunken floor. Her "grandparents" (or ancestors; the expression is ambiguous) came from Ayutthaya, where they worked fields and gardened. They decided to live in Bangkok, left their gardens behind, came down the river by boat, and stopped near a large temple at the river's edge. They became "boat people" (ชาวเรือ; not refugees, but people who live on boats). Their boat was tied, among others, to the bank in front of the temple,

which, in those days, was surrounded by fields. Now those fields lie beneath concrete and tar-sealed roads. Her “grandparents” made a living in Bangkok selling vegetables and fermented fish. No longer cultivators, they became one small knot in a thread of river-based commerce. Their children were raised here at the edge of the Chao Phraya. The woman says her family has been here for a long time. She does not want to leave. But she also notes that her surroundings are in a state of decay: “Nothing changes here. Things just deteriorate—like these houses.”

In the same alley, a man sits next to a pile of wood and a can of paint. He is shirtless and has a large magical seal tattooed on his back. He offers me a cigarette. I remember our first meeting—others in the alley praised his abundance of experience. He makes toy swords, a craft passed on to him from his father. Next month there will be a festival at the temple. His daughter will work in a booth, with the swords among the items out for sale. He is 50 years old, attended school for four years, and can both read and write. We sit across from his open doorway, through which I see a dark, cluttered interior. His grandmother was born in this house. He makes little money from his craft, but emphasizes that not many people make these swords anymore. “I don't want to see them disappear,” he said. His singular craft is an aspect of a small-scale culture of memory. It is a living, connective, generative memory. The craft keeps him and his family—more broadly, even, this small community of which he is an important part—bound to this place and its past. You will not find the swords in any tourist brochure or textbook of Thai culture. Nora, writing about his own country, claims that “true memory […] today subsists only in gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes” (1996:8). The sword-maker's craft is part of this place, it maintains a bond, says quietly that he and his family belong here. It ties a knot, takes hold of this little path in the city, the edges of which are being steadily eroded by the “current of society.”

“Life was easier before, in the time of my grandparents,” he said. “These days we work harder, but it's not enough.” This was the opposite of what I heard from second- and third-generation Chinese, who often noted the struggles of previous generations. They had, in many cases, grown up with the memories—stories of immigration and toil—of stern, disciplinarian parents and grandparents. The sword-maker drew a link between the difficult conditions of the present and the deterioration of personal relations. Competition and the “mouth-stomach” problem (the struggle to fulfill basic needs) had led to social regression. “In the old days, the younger sibling always honored the older sibling. And people helped one another. If they had extra food, they shared it with their neighbors. Today, they won't share, even if the food will otherwise rot.”

The condition of the river has also regressed. “When I was young, the river was still clean,” he said. “It wasn't that long ago. There were large shrimp in the river. Fish were abundant. But now many varieties are gone. The fish you see today don't come from nature; they exist only because of merit-makers at riverside temples who throw bread and pellets into the water. We used to swim in the river. These days, if we swim in the river, we will itch all over. Waste. Chemicals. It's very dirty. If we swim in the river, we will have to wash our skin. It can make us sick.” With the end of a water-centered way of life, comes the decline of the river. Nearly everyone lamented the abandonment of the Chao Phraya, noting its color and uncleanliness. But even in this diminished state, it still serves as a receptacle of collective memory. The alley leads out to a concrete platform. The pier rolls in the sloshing water. A cement path skirts the river's edge. Fishermen gather nearby and prop poles against the rail. Scavengers armed with nets and hooks pass below in waste-laden canoes. At the mouth of the alley, a hand-written sign made of green plastic is fixed to a concrete pillar. It reads: For the kingdom, restore the river! Bring the river back to life!

The sign connects this place with the fate of river and kingdom. It draws in the surrounding landscape; place and landscape are joined. The alley—tunnel-like, with its concrete wall, wooden hovels, plastic panels—fits well enough into a classical definition of place: it is a container, and begins at its boundary (Casey 1997). But it is also open, tied to pathways, including the kingdom-crossing river, the definitive poetic landscape of Central Thailand. The hand-written sign is an assertion of connection, a claim that "we" also belong to this kingdom—this is our river, and its decay is our own. It suggests a time of abundance, a time prior to the water-mother's decline. Someone found that scrap of green plastic, thought of the river, took pen in hand, and then fixed the sign to the pillar. It was one small act of remembering. Such acts of "remembering the present," as Fabian (1996) puts it, can make connections. Casey writes, "[memory] draws the world together, re-membering it and endowing it with a connectiveness and a significance it would otherwise lack" (1987:313). The hand-written sign is another knot, a precarious link between place and waterway. It ties the alley to a large-scale imaginary of landscape.

## Culture of Water

Boomgaard writes, "The role of water in Southeast Asia has changed over the years, and it will no doubt change in the years to come. […] A different 'water culture' is or has been emerging" (2007:20). In this section we will further explore continuity and change in the aquatic landscape.

Water is associated with coolness. Coolness is associated with both comfort and a centered disposition. A person with a hot heart is dangerous; a person with a cool heart is graceful, composed. A Buddhist monk should have a cool heart, and thus the cooling of the heart is a key objective of monastic practice. In Kukrit's *Many Lives* (คึกฤทธิ์ 2010), the death of a well-regarded monk by drowning is not karmic retribution but rather a fitting passage to nirvana. During a rainstorm, a passenger ship sinks in the middle of the Chao Phraya, killing dozens. The monk is

not reborn. His cool heart expires in cool water. The recent floods in Bangkok, by contrast, made people "boil" (เดือดร้อน). In the absence of such destruction, the characteristics of water are the characteristics of an ideal Thai society. So long as society remains cold—void of conflict—happiness prevails. The king, in public appearances, says he wants Thais to be cold and happy.

One cannot speak Thai without speaking of water. Water has long been associated with abundance and goodness, and numerous artifacts of these associations are found in the Thai language. Perhaps these are the contributions of river-dwellers, a reflection of linguistic evolution in the water-bound mesh of Siam, but it is worth noting that similar associations are also to be found in the harsh, arid lands of southern India (Pandian 2009), and cultural ties between these regions certainly exist. In Thailand, "heart-water" (*nam jai*) means "generosity." The distribution of generosity is uneven, curiously mapped onto the rural-urban divide. The people of rural Thailand, they say, have more heart-water than those of the cities. Hearts in Bangkok have dried up, including the hearts of people who have migrated from up-country. New arrivals are derided as stupid, likened to draft animals, with "water buffalo" (ควาย) being an often-heard term of abuse. People from the rice fields, unfamiliar with urban life, are said to be easily deceived. But life in Bangkok—competitive, brutal, corrupt—will change them. Informants noted that migrants to the cities become selfish. Their hearts are desiccated. According to contemporary royal-state ideology, as expressed in the concept of "sufficiency economy," rural people are the nation's backbone. Authentic Thai life is sometimes imagined to reside in rural idyll. Yet the rice farmers remain too vulgar to represent the nation and, for many natives of Bangkok, rural life goes hand-in-hand with liquor, laziness, and coarse manners. High culture belongs to the cities.

The influx of migrants from beyond the Central Region into Bangkok is often associated with the decline of the water-centered way of life. The people working in the water markets are said to be migrants from other regions, and this indicates a recession of authenticity. Now the water

markets are merely tourist attractions, half-dislodged from locality, from "people of the place." Once again, people lamented the decay of culture, the loss of an ancient vitality. Many of the men who command the cross-river ferries are also from up-country. I wanted to meet some of them, but my informants were doubtful. One said, "Those guys don't know anything. They aren't locals —they're from up-country. And mostly they are just drunkards."

I expected that the drivers of long-tail boats would also be hired hands of up-country origin. Some drivers had painted the word *prai* (ไพร่) on their on-board supply boxes—prominent, visible from the river bank. *Prai* is a "feudal" term meaning serf or servant, a low-status commoner. In the past, it designated those subject to annual labor conscription (see จิตร 1998). Today, self-application of the term identifies one as a Red Shirt, most of whom are of up-country origin. One day I saw a man standing at the pier, waving an unmistakable Red Shirt flag, calling a driver back to the dock. I was sure of it: these guys are from up-country, probably Isan. But I was wrong.

The long-tail boat is a Thai icon. One of the panels at the Royal Barge Museum in Bangkok explains that the long-tail is an example of "Thai intelligence," whereby an engine was applied to the rear of the "original raft-boat." The term *long-tail* refers to a steel shaft, at the end of which is the propeller. The driver steers the boat by manipulation of the shaft. It has a wide range of motion. The propeller can even be raised above the water. People said these drivers demonstrate the skill and cleverness of Thais. One informant, an old man who had never driven a long-tail, performed an imitation, taking in his grip an imaginary metal shaft. "People of other nations cannot command the long-tail," he said. Other informants described the long-tail as a feat of distinctly-Thai mechanical skill. These boats use engines adapted from on-road vehicles, an index of national character: Thai people are clever with tools and machines, especially when the matter at hand is adaptation to water.

The long-tail boat drivers are men of Central Thailand, a region long integrated by the Chao Phraya River and its vast pulmonary system of anthropogenic canals. The profession is passed on from generation to generation, from father to son. In Bangkok, the drivers mostly live along canals in Thonburi, where they tie their boats at night. “I always knew that I would drive the long-tail,” one man said. “I will never leave this line of work.” When I told him about my prior assumptions, he said, “All of the drivers are locals—if not people of Bangkok, then people of the Central Region. None of us come from Isan. Outsiders don't come into this line of work.”

Commuter routes persist, but on this particular stretch of the Chao Phraya, not many use the long-tails for day-to-day transportation. The drivers have created a niche in the tourist industry. Bundles of cash are counted on the table at night. This trans-generational trade keeps the drivers tied to place, to waterways. But in another sense, some *are* outsiders: Reds in Yellow Bangkok (or, if not Yellow, generally Red-suspicious). Many observers have highlighted the rural-urban dynamics of the Red-Yellow conflict. Others have pointed out its class dimensions: though concentrated up-country, in rural Thailand and the lesser urban centers, the Red Shirts also count among their number some of Bangkok's urban poor. Red Shirt intellectuals often describe the conflict as one between old capital and new capital (see, for example, สุชา n.d.). The conflict is also over the position of the monarchy in Thai society, and this goes right to the core of what it means to be Thai. The official institutions repeat over and over that Thai identity is based on three pillars: Nation, Religion, King. Now, however, we are at the edge of the river, in the twilight of the Ninth Reign, as “the ideological edifice of Thainess begins to crumble” (Streckfuss 2011:3). The long-tail boat is unambiguously Thai, a reflection even of a uniquely-Thai intelligence. The drivers are regional insiders. The young man waves the red flag. His older sibling, arms covered in tattoos, identifies himself as a serf in feudal Thailand. Many times I heard people say, “The Red Shirts love Thaksin rather than the king.” This is a serious reproach,

essentially an accusation of treachery. It emerges only from the mouth of the accuser. But many are anxious—if not about loss or impending loss, then about an uncertain future, a future that gnaws the edge of a decaying present. Tsing, in her ethnography of an "out-of-the-way place" in Indonesia, describes a spatial imaginary wherein "potency" is concentrated at the center (1993:22). Thailand offers a strong parallel. Now, however, not only power but also uncertainty swirls in Bangkok, spreading steadily, inexorably, out into the provinces. People often reminded me that the current king, Rama IX, is the world's longest reigning monarch. He is clever, they say, when it comes to water management. During my fieldwork, the king spent most of his time on the top floor of a large, riverside hospital. People know the Ninth Reign cannot last forever. Few speak of what comes next.

## Landscape of Loss

The Chao Phraya River in Bangkok is a multivalent poetic landscape. Nostalgia. Bitterness. Progress. Eviction. It is an ailing, but still living presence, vital to the culture of memory. It offers its distances, flow, bends, banks, and even floating waste to constructions of present and past.

Time is mapped onto the landscape. Modernity congeals in hotels, condominiums, shopping complexes, along certain roads that have, as they say, already progressed. The river is also making progress. Downstream, in a more affluent community, I sat on a veranda, overlooking the river, speaking to a wheelchair-bound woman. I asked her about development along the river. Nearby, an abandoned, ghost-haunted rice mill had recently been demolished to make way for a resort hotel. "It makes our country more beautiful," she said. But in the alley the story was quite different. "Look at those hotels along the river. We don't benefit from that. Just across the water, they're renovating the market. The old buildings are being torn down. An underground train station is under construction. The common people [*chao baan*, literally 'people of the

house/village'] gain nothing from it." Progress, as understood locally, has not taken hold in the alley, which is, or appears to be, outside the current of society. But the residents still understood themselves in relation to broader spatial and temporal patterns. And the truth is, they would like to see some progress, so long as it does not demolish their community. But the current of society is voracious, unlike the receptive, nurturing current of the water-mother. In the alley, the implicit question seems to be: how can we keep our place?

Rivers change over time, but also persist. Serres notes that the bottom of a river is its bed, a place of rest—"it moves of course; but stable, it lies in repose in its aptly named bed. It appears to run, but sleeps after a fashion" (2008:289). In Thai, however, the bottom is simply the bottom, and the river persists not so much like a person at rest, but like a maternal figure—the word for river means water-mother. Mulder argues that women, especially mothers, "are at the heart of Thai life" (2000:73). The mother nourishes and her compassion can never be fully repaid. Even young Thais with low-income jobs send money home to their mothers. In spite of society's projects and vicissitudes, the maternal river remains. One is obligated to remember her. At the same time, the river has the characteristic of flow. One informant used this to argue that, contrary to common belief, the river is not polluted. "The water flows," she said. "Waste is carried away." One may doubt, but it reminds us that with flow comes the possibility of renewal. The water is gently carried out to the Gulf of Thailand and new water arrives from the north. Now, at the time of writing, however, it seems that poison accumulates faster than it can be expelled.

Ghosts lurk along the river. Many informants, natives of the city as well as migrants from up-country, suggested that ghosts have a stronger presence in rural Thailand than in Bangkok. A woman from a village in the east, near Cambodia, said you can see them at night, dots of light flickering over the fields. Those are *pii krasue*, a variety of ghost known since ancient times. Close up, the pii krasue appears as a floating, decapitated human head, with guts still dangling. It

eats filth, as well as frogs and snakes. A man in Bangkok explained that the presence of ghosts varies with time and place. Some are region-specific; some are specific to certain eras. “Ghosts have to exist. With people come ghosts. But, in some places, you know for sure, there are no ghosts—like at Central World [a large shopping complex in Bangkok]. Ghosts stay in old places, places where people have lived and died.” One might think of the ghosts that occupy Malaysian factories, decidedly-modern organizations of space, with machines, regulations, and fluorescent lights (Ong 1987). In Bangkok, however, ghosts are evicted from the nodes of progress. To where did the spectral inhabitants of the abandoned rice mill wander? Maybe they went upstream.

Places fit for ghosts still exist along the river. Anderson describes a shift in recent decades, the re-centering of Bangkok: “As late as 1960, Bangkok could still be described as the 'Venice of the East,' a somnolent old-style royal harbour-city dominated by canals, temples, and palaces. Fifteen years later, many of the canals had been filled in to form roads and many of the temples had fallen into decay. The whole center of gravity of the capital had moved eastwards, away from the royal compounds and Chinese ghettos by the Chao Phraya river to a new cosmopolitan zone dominated visually and politically by vast office buildings, banks, hotels, and shopping plazas” (1998:143). The old aquatic artery ties together many old places. Ghosts proliferate there because of accidents and suicides. One informant, a man who works part-time with a rescue unit, said he sometimes has to remove corpses from the river. “The smell is terrible,” he said. “But I'm used to it. Most people can't do this work. It's not just the smell—they're terrified of ghosts. But when I handle the bodies, I'm always respectful. I never step over a corpse. I've been doing this for more than 10 years, and not even once has a ghost come to haunt me.” A woman walked out of the next hovel. She had been listening to our conversation. She asked, “Do you want to go searching for corpses in the river with uncle? Are you scared?”

## Eviction

Weeks passed before anyone in the alley told me about the eviction—not of any one household, but the entire community. A looming danger, it was, not surprisingly, a matter of great concern. “I'm not leaving,” one said. “Let them call the police. Let them arrest me, drag me out of my house.” The community is built on temple property. The monks pass daily, quietly, through the alley, in the early morning. The residents give them food, show their respects, make donations, and receive blessings. The abbot, however, will not come.

One day, one of the men said, “Did you know? This abbot is chasing us out.”

He said, “I've lived here my whole life. This is my temple. My parents and grandparents lived here. Never before did anyone have the right to chase us away. It was never in the constitution.” Rarely did anyone talk about “rights” in Bangkok, except in a negative sense: one does not have the right, or, as in this case, when the right of another strips one of something. I was surprised by his reference to the constitution. Another man had said, “The constitution is not so important. It's just words, written by people.” This resonates with one author's observation that “constitutions [in Thailand] are suspect for they are mere words” (Streckfuss 2011:301). The constitution is not a sacred object; rather—here, at least—it both reflects and enables arbitrary power. Since the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional democracy in 1932, and up to the time of writing, there have been so many military coups (see เกษียร 2007:41). Order is over-turned. Rules are cast into suspension. In most cases of power-seizure, the previous constitution, still young, is nullified; a new one is written. I asked: Was it only this most recent constitution? Do you know the year? “I don't know,” he said. “I only know that they never had the right to chase us.”

“The previous abbot was very close to us.” he said. “But this abbot . . . I've never seen anything like this. Even the monks scorn this abbot! He has power, but no moral authority.”

He lit a cigarette. “This community used to be different. Now at the front of the temple it's quiet.” I didn't understand. Why is it quiet? “Because there's nowhere to sit! The abbot removed the trees and benches.” He went on, “Listen. I'll give you another example. Look at this building.” He points to a structure just visible over the concrete wall that runs along the narrow alley. “Do you know why it's been left to decay? So he [the abbot] can tear it down! Our community used to gather there. We had events, celebrations. Now that door is locked. We haven't gone in there for years.”

“This abbot has no vision,” he said. “We have a good location, a well established community. We have the river. Nearby there are two other communities, one Catholic, one Islamic. My daughter married a Muslim. There are three religions here! It's a very good location. You know what we should build? A water market! Then we, the common people [*chao baan*, people of the house/village], would benefit. Do you see? Let me ask you: would the common people benefit? Right. But this abbot has no vision. He'll demolish our houses and build a parking lot.”

He calls to one of the children: “Bring me the photos from last year's festival!” A moment later, the album appears. “Every year we bring the sacred statues out of the temple.” The statues are loaded onto pickup trucks and carried through the streets around the temple. The people honor the statues by splashing them with water. “It's similar to New Year's [*songkran*]—but this is not New Year's. This is a local, community festival.” I am reminded of Jan Assmann, who argues that “festivals and rituals ensure the communication and continuance of the knowledge that gives the group its identity. Ritual repetition also consolidates the coherence of the group in time and space” (2011:42). The album includes many photos of three particular statues. One is a Buddha image, the other two are cast in the likenesses of previous abbots. One, he says, was the student of the other, a master of mediation and magical arts (เกจิอาจารย์). “This is our previous abbot, who we all loved very much. The current abbot will not participate in our festivals. He

will not come seeking alms. He thinks he's big. He thinks he's royalty." Pages flip. A child leans over, intrigued. "We're going very deeply into things now," the man says. I see photos of performances, various displays of power. Here is a man with strings of firecrackers around his neck—popping, engulfing him in smoke. I gasp, much to the delight of the man and children. Here is another photo, a child rolling in broken glass. And here is a picture of the man himself, kneeling. His palms are pressed together. He honors the statues—the Buddha, and the previous abbots—and incants. In the next photo he takes a large knife in his hand, raises it. He presses the blade into his tongue. Streams of blood run.

He repeated his observation of the abbot: he has power, but no moral authority. The festival also entails displays of power, but of a different sort, unlike the power to chase and demolish. It is a power associated with place. In the photo album, the power-performances are intermixed with images of the sacred statues. He honors the statues prior to cutting his tongue. These power-filled objects—living beings of a sort, entities of spirit inhabiting material—cannot be separated from this place. One photo depicts the three statues side-by-side. Pages stop turning. "These," he says, "are the heart of the common people [*chao baan*]." He means the people of this specific, river-side community, on the property of this temple, in this particular place. In the annual festival, the people reassert their bond to the statues. The statues bind the people to this place.

## Conclusion

This chapter began with an informant's rueful observation that Thais had turned away from the waterways. This brings us to the theme of loss. Loss is more than a plain, empirically-verifiable fact. It is an abundant, overflowing, cultural reality. Loss may be lamentable, but it is also terrain worth exploring. Benda challenged scholars to consider "the balance between continuity and change in contemporary Southeast Asia" (1969:40). My intention, however, is not so much to

comment on the balance-in-fact, but to shift perspective and ask: where do people see (or, more broadly, sense) continuity and change? What meanings are assigned to continuity and change?

The waterways of Bangkok provide a landscape rich with meaning, multivalence. In this chapter, I have tried to lead the reader into this landscape, with an emphasis on its melancholy side: death, decay, betrayal, eviction. But this landscape of loss is strangely vibrant—the theme of loss leads us back to life. It is for this reason that I have avoided Freud's (1997) model of "mourning and melancholia," in which melancholia is a condition of persistent, pathological attachment to a lost object. Rebecca Solnit writes, "Memory itself fades, and so memory is always ultimately about loss, a map of the interior border of a continually eroding territory" (2001:194). It is an intriguing metaphor, with map and territory alike in states of decay. But the Chao Phraya, as a poetic landscape, is more than a metaphor of memory—it is a terrain full of memories, wherein absence suggests presence. Solnit seems to say that memories, if followed, will lead us to some limit, a frayed edge beyond which lies the unrecoverable. Here, however, loss lies not beyond the landscape, but within it. Loss is not simply separation. Loss is a powerful, haunting presence. And it seems that there are many, an ever-accumulating number of ghosts, wandering the waterways, dwelling in shadows, depths, places old and resilient.

All landscapes change over time. The Chao Phraya River in Bangkok has changed its course. An older informant, a man with a gray beard and bandaged foot, told me that the Temple of Dawn used to be on the opposite bank. Sometime, not so long ago, the river re-routed itself, overtaking a canal, which was originally cut to facilitate travel away from the mainstream. Landscapes change, but not all changes are marked as loss. What counts as loss? Although my informant lamented a collective turning-away from waterways, one finds that the aquatic landscape is full of associations, stories, and fragments. And loss is an important part of what is remembered. The waterways are strongly linked to images of a way of life, some of which might

be fantasies or distortions, but nonetheless persist as memories. Few of those distant from that way of life would return to it, but it remains central to the imaginary of true or original Thai. Even my friend from the northeast, whose ancestors may have never set eyes on the Chao Phraya, said, "In the old days, the Chao Phraya River was the heart of Thai people." One easily forgets that in 19th century Bangkok most of the population was Chinese; the waterways were brought to life by Chinese commerce (see chapter 1). The Chao Phraya is ever-flowing and, sometimes, flowing over. Loss lies not beyond but within the territory. And so, perhaps, we might look more closely at the sense of loss, at how loss lives in the collective memories of peoples.

To say that "we" have already turned away, or that parts of "our" culture have already vanished, still suggests a relationship. In spite of claims to the contrary, there is an ongoing engagement with the landscape. One lives with loss. Not only one, but many. Alan Klima notes the popular expression "We Thai are forgetful," and suggests that, contrary to the surface meaning, it points to a deep preoccupation with memory, "an extraordinarily strong consciousness of the importance of remembering" (2002:160). There is something similar here, in the case of waterways, in the tendencies to underline detachment. Ferguson argues that "disconnection, like connection, implies a relation and not the absence of a relation" (1999:238). People declare and lament detachment from the waterways because the present is easily compared to an extensive, affectively-charged collection of stories and images of an aquatic past.

This chapter is also about a particular place and its particular impending loss. This is not so much a turning-away as a forceful eviction. The sword-maker told me about a more abundant past, when society was less corrupt and the river was full of fish. It set a stark contrast with the present. In addition to pollution and corruption, the community's future is being violated by the abbot of their own temple, which, as others observed, is supposed to be the center of the community. The current of society seems to go against them. The statues in the temple are the

heart of the people, which are bound to this place. This place is not simply located in the landscape; the people in the alley engage the landscape in word and practice. The river offers mnemonic resources, in it they find a past that suggests other possibilities. As one man said, “Do you know what we should build? A water market!” An old mode of commerce could be appropriated, adapted to the present. And, crucially, the common people, the people of the community, would benefit. The current situation, however, was seen more as abandonment and betrayal, an especially bitter sort of loss. Nonetheless, the memory practices of those in the alley suggest an existential need to act, rather than merely wait for their houses to be demolished. People were committed to local crafts: swords, hand-made offerings. The people insisted on an ongoing commitment to the temple, even though the institution's leadership will drive them out. “This,” the man said, “is my temple.” These are memory practices, as were the voiced linkages between this place and the kingdom—the river can connect them to a broader story. This connection is not simply given, it is not only by virtue of living by water that one sees its fate and one's own as intertwined. Rather, this is part of what memory can do. One does not only recall passively and automatically; one may also search the contents and therefrom build. Some have few other resources for self-defense, and they know the danger of being forgotten.

# 3. FORGETTING

Upstream lies Ayutthaya, which was destroyed by the Burmese. Why did so many people bring this fact to my attention? It was, it seems, the first thing I should know. I was in Bangkok, doing research on the Chao Phraya River. Ayutthaya, an ancient city-kingdom, was destroyed over two hundred years prior to my fieldwork. In contemporary Thailand, Ayutthaya is often remembered as "the old city," the previous center of the Thai past and the predecessor to Bangkok. Since the beginning (late 18th century) of what is now called the Age of Bangkok, the Siamese/Thai rulers have emphasized continuity with the traditions and royal institutions Ayutthaya. Today, this story of continuity, with Bangkok as rightful successor to Ayutthaya, has become central to the national imagination. Bangkok, according to Srisak Vallibhotama, a leading Thai scholar, is really a "reconstruction" of Ayutthaya (ศรีศักร 2010:117). This descent or reconstruction, however, is also tragic because the destruction of Ayutthaya—described, dramatized, and drilled, over and over, in a wide variety of media—was carried out by foreign invaders. Burma, an ancient enemy, brought the Age of Ayutthaya to a violent close. Today, this national tragedy is central to the remembered, collective past of the Chao Phraya River. Upstream lies Ayutthaya . . .

In this chapter, I again consider the relationship between landscape and memory, now with an emphasis on both remembering and forgetting. Here the Chao Phraya river is considered as a particular landscape, very much real and immediate, but also defined by collective memory. I draw a contrast between two past events: the destruction of Ayutthaya (by Burma) and the destruction of Vientiane (by Siam). Vientiane, in my usage here, refers primarily to a Lao city-kingdom that was once in a particular kind of subordinate, colonial relationship with Siam. It was, as described below, destroyed by Siamese troops in the early 19th century. What does Vientiane have to do with the Chao Phraya River? Although it is located quite far away, there is a

crucial, often forgotten connection: after each invasion of Vientiane, and especially after its destruction, much of the city-kingdom's population was transferred to and re-settled in the Chao Phraya River basin. This ethnically-Lao population became a part of the riverine landscape of Siam. They were among the builders of Bangkok, and surely participated in the shaping of its rural hinterland. But, unlike the destruction of Ayutthaya, the destruction of Vientiane has little place in the collective memory of the Chao Phraya River. Everyone seems to remember the destruction of Ayutthaya. The destruction of Vientiane, however, has been mostly forgotten—as have the stories of the Lao captives who were forcibly transferred to this same river basin.

In the decades following the destruction of Ayutthaya, Vientiane was invaded at least three times by Siam. On each occasion it was defeated and depopulated. These events took place before the emergence of the nation-state of Laos, of which a reconstructed Vientiane is today the capital. In the aftermath of each Siamese victory, people of Vientiane, ethnically Lao, were removed from their homes and resettled west of the Mekong in territory that now belongs to Thailand. The first invasion was on the orders of Thaksin, king of Thonburi, who is credited by official history with re-consolidating the Thai nation after the defeat of Ayutthaya. Vientiane was crushed and "thoroughly looted. Its most sacred images, including the Emerald Buddha, were carried off to Bangkok, along with members of the royal family as hostages" (Stuart-Fox 1997:14). The removal of the Emerald Buddha is of great significance; we will return to it in the pages ahead. At the end of Thaksin's campaign, many of the war captives—"hundreds of Lao families"—were resettled in the Basin of the Chao Phraya River (ibid). Several decades later, during the Bangkok-centered reign of Rama III, Lao discontent rose in response to Siamese practices of tribute collection and labor conscription (ศรีศักร 1990:268). In accordance with standard Siamese practice, each conscripted body was tattooed (see จิตร 1998:163). King Anuvong of Vientiane invaded the Korat plateau (now in northeastern Thailand) with intention to repatriate

ethnic Lao. The campaign was unsuccessful and Vientiane was punished: in May of 1827, it was sacked, razed, and depopulated—Lao were forcibly transferred to Siam (Stuart-Fox 1997:15). But King Anuvong survived, fleeing briefly to Vietnam. In 1828, still sovereign, he returned to Vientiane. In retaliation, Siam again invaded. Keyes summarizes the outcome: "When the Lao were finally defeated, Rama III ordered the complete destruction of the city of Vientiane, the deportation of its population to the Central Plains [i.e. along the Chao Phraya River], and the public ridiculing of Cao Anu [King Anuvong] and his family in Bangkok" (1967:11). Approximately 100,000 Lao were transferred to Siam (องค์ 2010:170). Vientiane was obliterated. According to the royal Siamese chronicles, the invading troops permitted nothing but "grass, water and the savage beasts to remain" (Ivarsson 2008:28).

It was, by all accounts, a massive population transfer. It may even have been, as Sujane Kanparit suggests, "the largest migration in the history of Southeast Asia" (สุเจน 2012:163).

Today there are more Lao in Thailand than in Laos. Most of them were born in Thailand. Many are descended from war captives. But who remembers the destruction of Vientiane? As Charnvit Kasetsiri, an elder statesman of Siamese scholarship, has put it: "Most of us really don't know. We only know about the loss of Ayutthaya. We don't know about the loss […] of Vientiane [i.e., amongst other city-kingdoms attacked and defeated by the Siamese]" (ชาญวิทย์ 2008a:84).

## Framework & Argument

Memory is an important part of how one sees landscape. Memory is not just a record of events. It is part of culture, and the power dynamics of culture impact what is and is not remembered. I use the term memory to refer to two things: (1) what people remember from their own lifetimes and (2) what people remember about a collective past. Memory, in my usage, may include events that one did not experience directly. Memories of this sort belong to a group, so it is not "my" past,

but “our” past, i.e., the past of the group. Shared tragedies or triumphs, real or imagined, are sometimes an important part of how a group is defined. The destruction of Ayutthaya is one example. No one alive today was there to experience it first-hand, but, in contemporary Thailand, it is central to the collective past—a national tragedy. This tragedy also carries a moral message. School children in Thailand are taught that Ayutthaya was lost not only because of external aggression, but also because of a lack of internal harmony. This memory, I argue, also reflects patterns of domination in society. It reflects only one of many possible national imaginaries.

Memory is shaped by nation-building, but nation-building is also an ongoing process. Today, the destruction of Ayutthaya, to a great degree, defines the past of the Chao Phraya River. The destruction of Vientiane, by contrast, including the forced resettlement of its people, has left little trace. There is no institutional support for it. But there is an increasing need in Thailand for a more inclusive culture of memory. It is not a matter of re-imagining Siam as perpetrator. Rather, the comparison between these two events, one remembered, one forgotten, suggests that the nation could be imagined in new, more inclusive, ways. The landscape of the Chao Phraya River, the center of Siam and birthplace of the Thai nation, has been shaped by many different peoples.

The royal barge procession in Bangkok forms a key part of this chapter's ethnographic content. This cyclical event, a royal-state ceremony, maintains (as one mechanism among others) the connection between Bangkok and Ayutthaya. I observed two of these processions: one practice run, and then the official procession. I describe the the processions here in considerable detail, but it should be emphasized that I interpret these events through a much broader context, including about 16 months of fieldwork. The royal barge procession is not just an event; it is part of a culture of memory. The barges, said to be copies of vessels from the Age of Ayutthaya, sparkling gold, serve as a reminder of a connection between the present and a particular past. That past belongs—officially, at least—to the entire nation, as well as to this landscape, the Chao

Phraya River. My use of the term landscape is inclusive of culture.[13] In part, I follow J.B. Jackson, who writes, "landscape […] is simply the by-product of people working and living" (1984:12). But landscape is also a product of memory—of both remembering and forgetting. Basso argues that "Geographical landscapes are never culturally vacant. The ethnographic challenge is to fathom what it is that a particular landscape, filled to brimming with past and present significance, can be called upon to 'say,' and what, through saying, it can be called upon to 'do'" (1996:75). In the royal barge procession, the landscape speaks, but also remains silent. One sees the barges moving across the water, hears the unfolding and repetitive melody. It has a powerful immediacy, one that dramatizes the descent claims of the royal lineage and, more broadly, a national continuity between Bangkok and Ayutthaya.

I use this ethnographic material to reconsider discussions of landscape. The crux of the essay is on divisions and potential meeting points between two approaches in landscape studies. The first approach we might call experience-near. In an experience-near approach, one describes the landscape from within. One describes movement, what one sees and hears, the sensory aspects of the landscape (see Basso 1996, Desjarlais 1997, Feld 2005, Jackson 1995, Tilley 2008, Tuan 1977). Tim Ingold, an anthropologists who draws from continental philosophy, provides a powerful model for thinking about the direct experience of landscape; he refers to it as a "dwelling perspective" (1993, 2000). Ingold sets his approach in strong opposition to approaches that center on representation. This brings us to the second kind of approach to landscape that I want to consider here, what we might call representation-centered. In a representation-centered approach (see Cosgrove 1998, Duncan 1990, Kabir 2009, Mitchell 1994), one focuses on images of landscape. One might ask: how is landscape depicted? Does the depiction reflect social inequalities? Does it conceal violence? How? Ingold, however, argues that representation-

[13] Some landscapes may be imagined as devoid of culture—itself a cultural phenomenon (see Schama 1995).

centered approaches are basically flawed. He is opposed to any interpretive strategy that begins with “an initial separation between human persons, as meaning-makers, and the physical environment as raw material for construction” (Ingold 2000:55). What I propose here is not so much a preference for one approach or the other, but to try to build a bridge between them. I try to incorporate a descriptive, experience-near approach, with an approach that is also critical of representation, including the ways that collective memory is shaped by images. Standing by the river's edge, nearly anyone can tell you: upstream lies Ayutthaya, which was destroyed by the Burmese. But the destruction of Vientiane, the capture and resettlement of its people, the lives and labor of ethnic Lao in Central Siam, have mostly vanished from memory.

Look at the landscape. Consider not only what appears, but also what can no longer be seen. Desjarlais writes, “Many 'experience-near' approaches [in Anthropology] are bereft of serious analyses of the political and economic forces that contribute to the apparent reality or nearness of experience. Anthropology is in dire need of theoretical frames that link the phenomenal and political” (1997:25). The destruction of “our Ayutthaya,” as a Vallibhotama (ศรีศักร 2010) calls it, is one of those apparent realities. Here I consider both—the apparent and non-apparent, as well as the ways that relations of power contribute to both nearness and distance. The annihilation of Vientiane by Siam has little or no place within the bounds of collective memory. This is not simply because too much time has passed. The destruction of Ayutthaya came first, decades earlier. Nor is it because of the city's physical location. The people of Vientiane, as well as the Emerald Buddha, were transferred to this same landscape. It is because this story did not fit within the narrow, state-supported, now out-dated, national imaginary created in Bangkok.

## Lao as Internal Other

The contrast between the two events, one remembered, one forgotten, is striking if one considers ethnic composition in modern Thailand. Not only are there more Lao in Thailand than in Laos, but ethnic Lao may outnumber ethnic Thai in Thailand itself (Streckfuss 2012:312). The people of Central Thailand provide a simple, though imperfect, way to define Lao as an ethnic group: "Natives of Central Thailand use the word *Lao* to describe anyone who eats sticky rice," i.e., the staple food of the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand (องค์ 2010:357).

The destruction of Vientiane is a dramatic moment in a centuries-long pattern of ethnic inequality, one in which the Lao have often been in a subordinate position. The Lao are among the "others within" (Winichakul 2000) and Isan remains the poorest region of Thailand (Kermel-Torrès 2004:175). In the 19th century, "[King Mongkut] claimed that it was not suitable for Thais to play the *khaen* (a Lao instrument) because 'the Lao are the slave to the Thai'" (Streckfuss 2012:305). Decades later, with the nation-building project underway, efforts were made to re-signify the Lao of the north and northeast, to make them Thai. The government issued a mandate, essentially: Henceforth we will call them Thai. But if one watches contemporary Thai TV dramas, one observes time and time again: the character from Isan is the servant. Notably, when I asked migrants from Isan directly whether or not they considered themselves Thai, the answers were always affirmative. But, in everyday life, people from Isan also make explicit comparisons between Thai and themselves. For instance, one day while sitting in the park with northeastern friends, one of them noted that "the fermented fish (*bpla raa*) that Isan people eat is different from the fermented fish that Thai people eat." Informants sometimes self-applied the term Lao. On that same day in the park, while walking across the grass, one of them said, jokingly, "The Lao is migrating!" Note that the word translated here as migrating (อพยพ) carries an implication of hardship, more so than the English expression—i.e, migrating under harsh circumstances. One

might be tempted to think of forced transfer from Vientiane. At the very least, this simple, playful interjection reflects an enduring theme of hardship in the lives of Lao peoples in Thailand. Note also that some Thais use the word Lao abusively, to "disparage" (เหยียดหยาม), as one informant put it, people of the north and northeast. Sitting at a McDonald's in Bangkok, a Thai informant from Thonburi (now part of Bangkok) exclaimed, "Don't act like a Lao!" I asked what she meant. It refers, she said, to stupid, rural people.

Let us return for a moment to Ayutthaya and Vientiane. Is it a matter of contested memory? Yes and no. In some quarters, the memory of Ayutthaya is contested. In the case of Vientiane, however, there seems to be little or nothing to contest. It is more of an absence, with hardly any space available for contestation to take place. Here I want to introduce the concepts of canon and archive, as formulated by Aleida Assmann, a leading theorist of memory: "I […] refer to the actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the *canon* and the passively stored memory that preserves the past past as the *archive*" (2011:335). Here is the key point: some parts of the past are kept present. In contemporary Thailand, the destruction of Ayutthaya by Burma is a powerful example of this—a past event that has been kept present, that is actively circulated, that has been canonized as tragedy at the national level. Every schoolchild learns about it. It is a story repeated over and over in a wide variety of media. When I told people that I was doing research on the river, Ayutthaya and its destruction often came immediately to mind. I needed to know; people wanted to tell me. Nobody recalled Vientiane or the Lao war captives or their descendents. Canonization, in the sense that Assmann uses this term, surely happens in all cultures. I emphasize that this is a political process, shaped by power dynamics in society, and that such processes of canonization shape the way one sees landscape.

This pattern of collective memory crosses ethnic lines. Children of all regions are taught about the great city of Ayutthaya and its destruction by Burma. It reflects a Thai nation imagined from

Bangkok. But it is also clear, and increasingly so, that many among Thailand's Lao population are aware of, and fed up with, Bangkok's scorn and neglect.

Consider recent socio-political upheavals in Thailand. In the run-up to the 2006 military coup, a pro-Thaksin,[14] anti-coup movement emerged known as the Red Shirts. Most Red Shirts are from outside Central Thailand, especially from the north and northeast. Migrants to Bangkok, mostly from Isan—still, in most cases, very much connected to their places of origin—often told me the same story: when Thaksin was in power, life in the village improved. It was tangible. New roads. Vehicles. Sturdier houses. Satellite dishes. Change was visible in the landscape. Many said, "Back home, everyone is a Red Shirt." The spatial dimensions of the conflict are well-recognized: the Red Shirts draw membership primarily from a rural base. But perhaps we should also consider its ethnic dimensions—most Red Shirts are Lao. The Red shirts refer to themselves as *prai*, a word which used to mean those subject to annual labor conscription. It has a strong "feudal" taint, suggesting the days of absolute monarchy. It implies systematic exploitation, and the persistence of an antiquated system of power. The Red Shirts emerged in opposition to the Yellow Shirts, a Bangkok-centered, anti-Thaksin, and outspokenly-royalist movement. The latter often speak in the name of the "Thai people" or "Thai nation." Sombat Boonngamanong, an activist and intellectual, has described this tactic as "cruel" (อำมหิต) because it suggests that the Red Shirt opposition is non- or anti-national, an alien element in "Thai" society.

## Remembering the Enemy

The past of the Lao, an internal other—the slave of the Thai—has been erased. But the external other, destroyer of Ayutthaya,[15] must always be remembered: Burma. Once, sitting in a friend's

[14] Thaksin is the former prime minister, not to be confused with King Thaksin of Thonburi. The names appear alike when rendered in roman characters, but this is not the case in Thai. They are also pronounced differently.

[15] One may doubt that Ayutthaya was altogether destroyed by Burma (see Peleggi 2007:179). Much of the destruction was actually carried out by the people of Siam. Bangkok was originally built, in large part, with materials plundered from Ayutthaya, including "thousands of boatloads of bricks" (Wyatt 2003:129).

living room, I used the expression "Thai history." A woman in her mid-twenties, a graduate from the University of Fine Arts in Bangkok, asked, "Do you mean the wars with Burma?" She added, "Usually when people talk about history, they talk about the wars with Burma." These wars, the centerpiece of history as taught in public schools, culminate in the destruction of Ayutthaya. Burma burns the city and scatters its people, now imagined as homogeneously Thai. The story carries a key message: Ayutthaya was lost because Thai fell into internal conflict. The call for internal harmony is packaged with contempt for the external other. This problem is gaining recognition. A panel in the Museum Siam, for instance, encourages visitors to see the wars between "Thai and Burmese" as between kings, not peoples. Some of my university-educated interlocutors expressed concern over this issue. One informant, a graduate from Thammasat, complained about a serialized drama currently playing on TV about King Naresuan. "This is very bad," she said. "When Thai people watch this, they will hate the Burmese." Ayutthaya was lost to Burma twice. Following the first loss, King Naresuan, a national hero, is said to have declared (Thai) independence, driven the Burmese out of Ayutthaya, and killed the king of Burma.

This drama aired during a massive government and media campaign to prepare Thai for the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The campaign appears to entail an increasing acknowledgment of Thai prejudice against neighboring countries. Programs air daily, including documentaries about the cultures of other ASEAN countries. This, I was told, is new. It will be interesting to see how the formation of the AEC will impact perceptions of neighboring countries in the years ahead. But during my fieldwork, opinions regarding Burmese were overwhelmingly negative. Interlocutors mocked the accents of Burmese migrants, their failure to "speak clearly." Burmese migrants were derided for failure to understand what is said to them. A Thai-born Chinese teacher at an international school in Bangkok told me that Burmese students are bullied by Thai. Stereotypes prevail. A small-business owner said, "The Burmese are vicious!

I would never work with a Burmese." Some said that media coverage made them and others ill-disposed to Burmese: the Burmese are drug traffickers; the Burmese come to work as servants in Thailand, kill their masters, rob them, and return to Burma. The destruction of Ayutthaya, framed as core national tragedy, sets the stage for these prejudices. Books for children depict anger as the natural and legitimate response of a Thai child who learns about the destruction of Ayutthaya. As one historian explains, "Thais have been instilled with hatred for the Burmese, who are seen as invaders. When Burma is spoken of, Thais imagine men in sarongs with turbans and swords, chasing and killing Thais" (สุเนตร 2004:27).

How do politically-charged memory and imagination shape perceptions of landscape? Here the connectivity of landscape glows and crackles like a wire, surging with national ideologies. To look at the Chao Phraya and feel the wind blowing from the north easily summons references to enmity. But few think of the Lao war captives who were transplanted to this same river basin.

## Royal Barges

In the year prior to my fieldwork, the royal barge procession was canceled due to flooding. It is, however, regarded as an annual event. It goes hand-in-hand with the annual distribution of robes to Buddhist monasteries, a form of merit-making. As such, it is an expression of the center's potency, a potency expressed not through extraction, but provision—the center gives. It is an example of a process observed by Van Esterik: "In most areas of Thailand today, rituals stressing hierarchical relations of centre over periphery are replacing the communal emphasis on incurring reciprocal obligations" (1996:33). What appears as timeless core and essential truth of Thai culture may be an effect of ongoing processes of power consolidation. When not in use, the vessels are stored and maintained in dry docks at the Royal Barge Museum, a warehouse-like structure located on the edge of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. To approach on foot in the

early afternoon leads one through a dense residential area. Winding alleys. Foot paths over canals. Slouching, shirtless old men. Small children. Clothes drying on the lines. Then the river and warehouse appear. Over and over people reminded me: the barges are copied from Ayutthaya-era originals. Any fruit vendor can tell you. Each barge features an elaborately carved prow in the form of a Brahmanic deity, an index of the ancient court culture of Ayutthaya.

The royal barge is a material instantiation of a broader claim to power, a claim that hinges on connection, descent from Ayutthaya. The words of the current king of Thailand, Rama IX, are apposite: "With no Sukhothai, Ayudhya, and Bangkok, *prathetthai* [Thailand] is meaningless" (quoted in Winichakul 1994:140). This emphasis on centers and linkage between centers is found across the lowlands of Southeast Asia (Wolters 1982). Anderson, for instance, observes that "in the historical tradition [of Java] the names of empires and kingdoms are those of the capital cities" (1990:41). This is also the case today in Thailand, where history is officially periodized in terms of a succession of capital cities. The current era is the era of Bangkok (*samai krungthep*). Anderson points out that Javanese rulers have often sought to make connections to the "residues of previous centers" of power (1990:39). Parallels are evident in the relocation of power to Bangkok in the late 18th century. The era of Thonburi ended with the king in a velvet sack. His accusers beat him to death with a sandalwood club. The new king, Rama I, then organized the construction of a new capital, just across the river: Bangkok, the rightful successor of Ayutthaya.

Rama I, formerly the top general of Thaksin, had led a campaign against Vientiane. The city was defeated and sacked. The Emerald Buddha was taken, as were thousands of Lao captives. Many of the captives became prai, annually conscripted workers; they were among the builders of Bangkok. In the process of establishing this center of power, Rama I revived state ceremonies from Ayutthaya. He sponsored the public performance of "the conceptions of community, hierarchy, and identity" on which Ayutthaya had been based (Wyatt 2003:130). This linkage, so

immediate and obvious today, was actively constructed, the result of a struggle for power. But it is not enough to make the linkage once—it must be re-made again and again and again.

Prior to the official procession of the royal barges, there are practice runs. Crowds gather at the banks to observe. A middle-aged man from the Thai navy said that when people hear the melody that accompanies the barges, rolling over the water and banks, their hair stands on end. He added, “They feel at peace, calm and quiet.” Citizens are encouraged to go to the river to observe. Two northeastern informants, self-described Lao, wanted to watch the procession. And so I went to meet them. Most who observe this event must find a passage through the city. There is a powerful contrast between the barge procession and ordinary, frenetic city-life.

I wait in a bus shelter on a busy road in the noise-filled core of Bangkok. I am fortunate to find an available seat on the 25. We pass a kaleidoscope of commerce and urban infrastructure. Starbucks. Indian and Halal Foods. Bangkok Health Spa. We approach railroad tracks. Clouds gather in the sky. Pools of rainwater rest between the trestles. The bus stops in traffic under the shade of a bridge. Traffic lurches forward. Above, on a footpath to my right, people pass. The skytrain station is nearby. Drivers stab the horns. A construction site appears. The clouds clear and the sky returns to blue. Sunlight reflects from the glassy surface of a skyscraper. A two-stroke motorcycle roars and slices through traffic. We approach the Erawan shrine, with its mounds of marigolds and veils of incense smoke. And now: Siam Square, the pinnacle of modern shopping and high-society youth culture. The bus rattles. Its hydraulic doors flap open, then heave shut. The driver cranks the wheel, shade falls away, and the sun begins to bake my arms. Bright light reflects from the page. Noise. Everything is loud. A pink and blue three-wheeled vehicle—the *tuk-tuk*, an icon of Bangkok—speeds unwitting tourists to a jewelry shop. Again, a construction site: an embryonic inner-city train station. We turn into Chinatown and are confronted by a massive arch, a monument to the king's completion of six twelve-year cycles. Yellow banners

hang overhead announcing the vegetarian festival. Shops advertise shark-fin soup, popular among affluent Chinese for its medicinal properties. Pawn shops. Gold. Porcelain. Fortune cats. Hardware stores. Air-conditioning units, wires, gray concrete, and chipped white paint. Black plastic bags, stuffed to capacity, are strapped to motorcycles with elastic cables. We hear saw blades, jackhammers, and the river is almost in sight. White walls rise on both sides, enclosing the Grand Palace and the sanctuary of the Emerald Buddha. The man in front of me removes his hat, presses his hands together, lowers his head in both directions, honoring palace and sanctuary.

I get off the bus by a small, river-side park. It has a green lawn in the center, some trees, but mostly it is concrete with minimal refuge from the sun. The Temple of Dawn, with its iconic gray spires, lies in view across the river. Others are waiting, but the crowd is not oppressive. This is a practice run. No royal figures will appear. Two informants, now friends, women from the northeast, mother and daughter, ethnic Lao, have already arrived and sit by a tree under a hand-held purple umbrella. I sit with them on the concrete bench. The younger one, Fon, is in her late-20s, a university graduate who works as a nurse. Her mother, more at ease speaking Isan, a variant of Lao, rarely says more than a few words in Thai. Their home province lies on the border between Thailand and Laos, along the Mekong. They live in Bangkok, but Isan is home. Fon lives in a building behind the hospital, sharing a room with three other nurses. Her mother lives near a bridge that crosses the Chao Phraya. Today is a day off, and on such days mother and daughter are almost always together. They exchange some words in Lao.

The crowds are thickening. People line both banks of the Chao Phraya. The river is calm, its surface barely disrupted. Usually one sees express boats, waste collectors, long-tails, lumbering black barges full of sand and soil. Now only a navy patrol boat passes.

Will the king participate next month in the real, full-scale procession? The women from Isan wonder. Rumors circulate. For many in Thailand, the king is a semi-divine being, an effect of a

recent process of “redivinization” (Jackson 2010:32). To see the king is highly auspicious. I better understood this after a chance sighting in Thonburi. I was on foot. A police officer instructed me to sit on the ground. The king's ivory-colored vehicle passed. A small group of elderly men and women waved yellow flags and cried out, “Long live the king!” In the following weeks, I told this story to many people. I was surprised by the magnetism of this story, the intense attention it drew. It had nothing to do with me as storyteller. It is easy to forget the extent to which the monarchy was curtailed in the decades before 1957, when Field Marshal Sarit seized power in a military coup. Absolute monarchy ended in 1932 through the conspiracy of a small group of foreign-educated Siamese. The royal institution was not dissolved, but it was dramatically scaled back. Under the rule of military strongman Pibul Songkram, the king was stripped of his assets—the state appropriated all property of the crown (Numnonda 1978:244). Display of the king's image was forbidden (ibid), a reality unimaginable in contemporary Thailand, where royal images lie in every direction. Rama VII died in exile in London. The monarchy was waning, as portrayed in *Four Reigns*, now Thailand's most exalted (but rarely read) royalist novel. During the reign of Rama VIII (a child, who later died of a gunshot wound to the head, an event still mysterious), Ploy, the main character, visits a friend in the palace compound and finds it in a state of rot: “Every place in the compound spoke of and revealed an absence of life—decay and death. Royal power and magnificence had ended, were no longer to be seen” (คึกฤทธิ์ 2011:920).

In the late 1950s, the regime of Field Marshal Sarit (notably, a man of the northeast) began to rehabilitate the monarchy. Sarit and his fellow generals “believed the monarchy would serve as a focus of unity, and a force for stability, while remaining susceptible to […] control” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009:175). Many royal rituals were reconstructed, including the royal barge procession. In 1962, for the first time in decades, the barges appeared on the Chao Phraya, with

the king occupying the throne of the primary vessel (Tambiah 1976:229). Past curtailment of the monarchy has largely vanished from collective memory.

Rama IX, the world's longest-reigning monarch, crowned in 1947, was hospitalized for the entire course of my fieldwork. He made occasional brief public appearances, as on that afternoon in Thonburi. The hospital is on the bank of the Chao Phraya, visible from the water. Newspapers frequently reported that the king had cast his "royal eyes" on the river, inspecting its condition.

Sarit's project was very successful. For many in contemporary Thailand, nation and monarchy are inseparable. Even modest calls for reform of the monarchy are met with contempt and aspersions. Note also that it is no accident that the rowers of the royal barges are soldiers. As one informant put it, "Soldiers are servants of the king." I asked: Are power seizures by the military justified? He did not answer directly. "Most of the soldiers are loyal to the king," he said. "But there are also some Red Shirts." Power seizures are justified, it seems, so long as the soldiers are royalist. Not all, however, share this view. Some want the military to stay out of politics. I observed the royal barge procession in the company of two Lao informants, both good royalists. Not Red Shirts. But please remember that one does not speak freely about the monarchy. Speech is curtailed by law (see Ivarsson and Isager 2010, Streckfuss 2011, ปวิน 2012). An informant from up-country picked up a magazine, flipped through it, showed me pictures of various royal figures. She mused, "We do not have the right to speak. If we speak, our heads will be cut off."

## Procession

We hear the procession before we see it. The barges are approaching from upstream. A slow, repetitive melody emits from a speaker. It is a male voice, soft but powerful; its quality amplifies the procession's ceremonial aura. It suggests an ancient vocal tradition—profound, dignified, almost supernatural. The crowds move closer to the banks. Conversation quiets. The boats begin

to appear. The royal barges, with their dramatic gold-painted prows, are escorted by long black canoes. The rowers are soldiers. The crews are outfitted in one of three colors: blue, pink, brown. The rhythmic rise and fall of oars shows military discipline. The vessels have different rowing patterns: 1-1-1, 3-3-3, 1-1-3. These cycles, with the oars striking the water, set a textural contrast to the melody. We are at the edge of the river now, by the rail. Observers take pictures with cameras and cellphones. Clouds and sunlight alternate. Fon gives me a cloth to wrap my head. "Can you figure it out?" she asks. She tells me the name of the most important vessel, which has a prow shaped like a swan's head. When the king participates in the procession, he sits on the throne of this swan-headed barge. An orderly distribution of vessels, black and gold, now fill this panoramic expanse of the Chao Phraya. The melody repeats over and over, with pauses between cycles. The rhythmic clacking of oars proceeds. Near the center of each vessel are the pole-bearers. In intervals, the men lift the poles, pause briefly, then strike the planks. The resonant impact signals the beginning of a new rowing cycle. Horns emerge and retreat, adding yet another layer of sound. People on the banks speak little. The melange—voice, poles, oars, horns—is punctuated with brief moments of semi-silence.

The procession ends when the vessels reach the Temple of Dawn. The melody stops. Bodies begin to pull away from the banks. We return to normal conversation. Earlier that morning, Fon and her mother had visited and honored the Emerald Buddha. Its shrine is very close, within walking distance. The Emerald Buddha is "Thailand's […] most revered Buddha image. […] It is the palladium of the kingdom of Thailand" (Tambiah 1984:214). It is "patron and guardian, at one and the same time, of the Cakkri dynasty and the country over which it rules" (ibid). Few remember, however, that the Emerald Buddha was among the war spoils from Vientiane.[16] It now

[16] Many believe the Emerald Buddha originated in Sri Lanka. Sujane Kanparit puts this in doubt, pointing out that it may well have been, as Rama IV believed, a product of Lao craftsmanship (สุเจน 2012:63-65). Rama IV: ดูเหมือนว่าจะเป็นฝีมือช่างลาวเหนือโบราณข้างเมืองเชียงแสน เห็นคล้ายคลึงมากกว่าฝีมือช่างเมืองอื่น... เป็นช่างดีเอกทีเดียวมิใช่เลวทราม (quoted in สุเจน 2012:65).

signifies the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty, including the legitimacy of its descent claims. The foundation of the current dynasty goes hand-in-hand with the foundation of Bangkok. Bangkok is said to be Ayutthaya resurrected, a claim fortified by acquisition of the Emerald Buddha. The juxtaposition is striking. When the Emerald Buddha was taken from Vientiane, the Lao captives went with it. Captives and object alike were transferred to the basin of the Chao Phraya. Those captives not transferred to the Chao Phraya, were resettled on the west side of the Mekong basin (องค์ 2010:170)—right around the place that Fon and her family call home.

One month later, I observed the real procession. As the day approached, many people reminded me that the royal barges are hundreds of years old, based on originals from Ayutthaya. "Do you know about Ayutthaya? It was destroyed by the Burmese." One boasted that the swan-headed barge is even more beautiful than the royal vessel of Queen Elizabeth. "Everybody in the world loves our king," she said. "It's true, right?" The barges are often described as *boran*, which can be translated as "ancient." Crucially, the word boran suggests the dignity of age. People in Thailand often express feelings of reverence in the presence of boran objects. Not only objects, but words may be categorized as boran. One informant said that boran words, when spoken or heard, put one at peace. Perhaps this is a reflection of what one author calls "the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality" (Huyssen 1995:9). But one should note that, in this case, the extended structure of temporality belongs to a particular nation. The barges sustain an imaginary of national depth. The dignity of age belongs to the nation. What began as a claim to power—descent from Ayutthaya—a claim that preceded the nation-building project, has been absorbed into the dominant narrative of nation: royal continuity is national continuity.

Traffic is heavy; the bus is slow. Police are swarming. A rumor circulates that police are looking for Burmese illegals, especially in Chinatown. I recall an interview with a Chinese woman in a warehouse by a large riverside market. "We used to hire the Lao," she said. "But now

they want to be big. Do you notice it? These days the merchants in Chinatown are from Isan [i.e., are ethnic Lao]. They don't want to be workers; they want to be the boss. So we hire Burmese and Cambodians." Whistles blow. Vehicles are stopped, papers checked.

Vendors surround the park. Many sell royal-yellow flags as well as tricolor national flags with the words "Long Live the King!" added to the middle stripe. A woman hollers,"Flags to receive the royal visit!" People warned me that there would be a large crowd at the park, including people from up-country. A man with thick hands and sun-baked skin, a farm laborer, sits next to a water-and-lotus-filled concrete basin, waiting. The barges will come in the mid-afternoon. People arrive in the morning and wait for hours. Many carry open umbrellas to guard against the sun. A few people sit on the grass, forming little circles. Knowledge spreads through the crowd. There are 52 vessels, mostly escorts. The rowers are carefully selected and must train for 8 months. The king will not appear. His son, the crown prince, will take his place. Facing the river stands a large royal photograph, framed in gold—it shows the king aboard the swan-headed barge.

Umbrellas and flags accumulate as the crowd grows. The surface of the river is calm. Patrol vehicles pass periodically. Dark clouds are coming. A man passes, his cell phone pressed to his ear, encouraging a reluctant other to come to the park. He describes the auspicious circumstances, "It's not raining. Nor is the sun shining." Across the river, one sees a large, rectangular building, very official-looking, draped with both royal yellow and the national flag. Thunder cracks and a roar of excitement spreads across the crowd. But no rain falls. A girl with a red toy monkey throws a tantrum, a minor ripple in the otherwise patient mass. Patient, but not unoccupied. They chatter, fidget with phones and cameras. Some school children eat ice cream. One woman, speaking to Dutch tourists, notes that the king completed the 7$^{th}$ cycle (turned 84) last year, but the royal barge procession was not held. She says it was because the king was sick, then corrects herself, "No, it was because of the flood!" The crowd shifts as the sound of the procession draws

near. The melody returns, punctuated by oar cycles and the strike of poles. With the appearance of the first vessel, arms and phones shoot into the air, obscuring much of the view. A woman behind me says she already watched the procession upstream, then came here by motorcycle to watch it again. Observers express concern over the swan-headed barge, which now carries the crown prince. Has it come yet? Others provide assurance: "It's coming!"

## Landscape & Erasure

The barge procession is a dramatization of royal power and royal descent claims. One also sees how the military positions itself: soldiers are guardians of the old order, and above politics. The landscape of the Chao Phraya becomes an aquatic stage for a particular national imaginary.

National myths speak through earth and water. Ingold writes, "To perceive the landscape is […] to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (1993:152-3). In this view, memory belongs not to insulated, autonomous subjects; memory lives in the landscape. But does memory really emerge directly and spontaneously from the landscape? It is important to note that the royal barge procession was resurrected under the Sarit dictatorship, and that it was part of a broader project of consolidating military power and re-imagining the nation. It was one in a series of interventions, part of an effort to shape the collective memory. When one perceives the landscape, the past does not simply present itself. Some parts of the past have faded, or even been erased. Other parts of the past have been promoted, elevated, made obvious. In the model advanced by Ingold, however, nothing stands between subject and landscape. There is little or no room for frames, lenses, or representation—the environment itself is pregnant with the past, and, in engaging perceptually with the environment, the past is remembered. Power is de-emphasized, especially in contrast to

other, more representation-centered approaches in landscape studies.

Most people in Thailand remember the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese. As an event, moment, canonical tragedy, it is still present in the riverine landscape of Central Thailand. This is due to the mediating power of national pedagogy, of institutions—not to mention that the monarchy, which claims descent from Ayutthaya, is protected by the military and courts. People have learned to see, and to remember. Jan Assmann writes, "Remembering the past is not the result of instinct, of some innate interest, but of a duty that is part of culture's impact on man" (2011:233). But I want to emphasize that, in this case, the landscape has also been shaped by injunctions to forget. Traces have been erased, and not only by the steady, natural erosion of time.

Cosgrove describes landscape as "a way of seeing the world" (1998:13), and he argues that this way of seeing is shaped by historical conditions and relations of power. Landscape, he says, is "a controlling composition of the land" (Cosgrove 1998:270). Such compositions are the work of powerful "outsiders," not those who live and work in the landscape. Some controlling compositions, however, shape the experiences of insiders. Cosgrove focuses on works of representation at a remove from the landscape, such as landscape painting, but we might also see, on reflection, that representation is sometimes at work in the landscape itself. The royal barge procession is part of a broader narrative, and the Chao Phraya River is its stage.

Ethnography can be a way of exploring the experience of landscape. In a criticism of his own work, Cosgrove writes, "The viewers of landscape [in the book] appear and communicate to us as *eyes*, largely disconnected from any other corporeal or sensual aspects of their being" (1998:xviii). In short, they are disembodied outsiders, not quite in the landscape. Ingold, by contrast, takes us from an outside to an inside view, bringing us closer to an insiders experience of the landscape. In one essay, for instance, he guides the reader into a 16$^{th}$ century painting by Bruegel. First, we are merely looking at the painting. Then, suddenly, we are inside, embodied,

with a sense of expanse and direction, on paths, under trees, seeing the cornfields, the members of our community, the church on the hill; we smell freshly cut wheat (Ingold 1993:164-171).

Perhaps a bridge can be built. Representation is part of the direct experience of landscape. Can we get an insider's point of view, but also incorporate a critical analysis of the insider's ways of seeing and not seeing, of remembering and forgetting? In the royal barge procession, the landscape is simultaneously concrete, dreamlike, and ideological. Schama argues that perceptions of landscape are often shaped by "a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions" (Schama 1995:14). Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, insists that, "to perceive is not to remember" (1962:26). But what this really means is that the landscape is not an ever-malleable substance, sculpted in the first instance by memory. It must already have a visible structure before memory can interact with it. For Merleau-Ponty, sensory engagement comes first and the body has a primitive enmeshment with the landscape. Similarly, for Ingold, the embodied subject is always already in the landscape, not looking out at it or spreading a blanket of meaning over it. In his criticism of Myers, he writes, "Astonishingly, we find a complete inversion, such that meanings that the people claim to discover *in* the landscape are attributed to the minds of the people themselves, and are said to be mapped *onto* the landscape" (Ingold 2000:54). Ingold is careful with prepositions. What is still needed, however, is an approach that incorporates the experience of landscape—being in it, living with and through it—with a critical analysis of what appears.

Maps, for instance, are a representational technology through which people engage and experience landscape. Ingold, however, writes, "People, once familiar with a country, have no need of maps, and get their bearings from attending to the landscape itself rather than from some inner representation of the same" (2000:56). But one should remember that we live on an earth carved into nations; maps, even when they do not help us find our way, may frame that which appears. As noted by Geertz, "the suffusive mists of cartographic identity—even the sheep seem

Moroccan, even the volcanoes seem Indonesian—make it difficult to remember that places are accidents and their names ideas" (1995:22). What is discovered in the landscape, as well as what is hidden, may have much to do with maps and the conditions of their production, even for insiders who already know how to get from here to there. Winichakul (1994) has shown that mapping played a vital role in the construction of the Thai nation: a national "geo-body" emerged from ink on paper—the map of Siam, with its solid mass and clearly-etched borders. Prior to the late 19th century, no such map had ever existed. The geo-body, brought to life by the map, has been, and continues to be, as Winichakul puts it, "diabolically generative" (1994:135). It created new collective boundaries, new notions of inside and outside, new notions of temporal continuity. It also, I argue, shapes the experience of landscape. The Chao Phraya River is a narrative line within the geo-body, a spatio-temporal thread that links capital cities and eras. As Teeraparb Lohitkun, an award-winning author and documentary filmmaker, puts it, the Chao Phraya River is the "nation's bloodline" (ธีรภาพ 1993:145). It is, in short, a primary artery in the geo-body. But the geo-body, a product of technologies of representation, of mapping, is the frame and condition by which this is possible. The river cannot be the nation's bloodline without a nation.

Memories do, in a sense, precede perception. One already remembers many things before one perceives. When Serematakis (1994) bites into a peach, memories rise to the surface. This does not mean the taste of the peach is a product of memory, but that memories, or, more broadly, a sense of the past, may be accessed through perception. Seeing the river, feeling the cool wind, hearing the melody of the barge procession, may both summon and reinforce well-rehearsed national narratives. Once one has perceived an object, place, or landscape, memories may shape one's interpretation of it. Basso points out that "what is remembered about a particular place—including, prominently, verbal and visual accounts of what has transpired there—guides and constrains how it will be imagined" (1996:5). I would like add landscape and erasure: what is

remembered about a particular place or landscape—accounts of what has transpired there, including the erasures in those accounts—guide and constrain how it will be imagined.

## Memories in Quarantine

The memories that reside in the landscape—how the landscape speaks, with its silences and ellipses—have much to do with power and violence. In 1939, the nation of Siam was renamed, thereby becoming the land of Thai. An ethnic designation was grafted to the land, a matter with long-reaching consequences. This was the official end of multi-ethnic Siam. It created an ethno-national ranking, according to which only some are True Thai, only some have full access to national belonging. To this day the concepts of nation and ethnicity are frequently confused in Thailand. This is an artifact of top-down nation-building, especially the attempt to fuse nation and ethnicity in an ethnically heterogeneous land. Charnvit Kasetsiri, a leading historian, has long argued for a return to Siam (i.e., changing the name of the country), and for the creation of a more-inclusive national concept: "Given the historical evidence, academic principles, and given the importance of identity, we really should separate that which concerns peoples from the name of the country. […] There is a great diversity of peoples in Siam—and they can come together. When we solve this problem, we will understand many things" (ชาญวิทย์ 2008b:40).

The Thai nation-building process has entailed both inscription and erasure. And, as in all nations, it has incorporated landscape (see Smith 1986). Thais are said to be river dwellers, clever in every aspect of life with waterways. It is notable, however, that the northeast, where the bulk of Thailand's Lao population resides, lacks an aquatic link to the capital. Central Thailand has been integrated by water for centuries, with the Chao Phraya River as its main artery. Roads came late, beginning near the end of the 19th century, and it was many decades before they stretched into the northeast. No river ever flowed from the northeast to Bangkok. This absence of

connective infrastructure maintained a cultural gap between the two regions and slowed the integration of the northeast into the Bangkok-dominated nation-state. The first rail line reached Korat (in the south of Isan) in 1900. Even then, the journey from village to railhead took weeks —an arduous, overland trip, on foot, carrying provisions on one's back, as depicted in *Child of Isan*, an ethnographic novel written by a native of the northeast (คำพูน 1993:3).

Regional identity as the "Northeast" (Isan) developed slowly. Northeast in relation too what? Bangkok. In the late 1960s, Keyes observed that such an identity was emerging, adding, "It must be stressed that this sense of Isan identity is of very recent origin" (1967:3). Lao arrived in Bangkok in large numbers after World War II when migration from abroad—especially the steady, massive influx from China—was cut off by the central government. Many took jobs driving three-wheel bicycle cabs. An American ethnographer, with the help of Thai students, conducted research with some of these drivers in the 1950s. The drivers self-identified as Lao, and residents of Bangkok hated them. The Lao migrant, having newly arrived in the city, "soon develops a fear—not without some justification—that the Bangkokians are looking down on him as a rustic bumpkin who cannot even speak 'proper' Thai" (Textor 1961:17). Social interactions were often tense: "Rough fights break out with fair frequency because a Northeasterner senses an ethnic insult from a Bangkokian, or a Bangkokian perceives a Northeasterner as an economic throat-cutter" (ibid:19). But the capital city was becoming a center in the world of the newly-dubbed Northeasterner. Meanwhile, the memories of Vientiane's destruction were, and mostly remain, on the other side of the Mekong, quarantined in Laos, restrained by the Thai borderline.

Traces of earlier connections do persist. A few, at least. The Mekong River was not always a borderline. This came up on the day that Fon received her nursing degree in Bangkok. We were sitting on a bamboo mat on a knoll of grass near the Rama V equestrian statue. After a round of photographs, Fon went into the auditorium to receive her degree, a tightly managed event. Her

sister, Fa began to talk about their village, near the Mekong. “People used to cross the river all the time. One could go in the morning, come back in the afternoon, just go back and forth.” Well, I said, you can still cross, but I guess you'll have to show your passport. It will be easier when the AEC opens. “It's not the same,” she said. “Now, if we cross the Mekong, we'll be a foreigners.” It's true. Once upon a time, one could cross without being a foreigner. The people of both banks were bound to one another. Fa was born in a world of borders and border police. In the old days, Bangkok was far away. Today, however, we are all sitting in Bangkok, and her older sister is receiving a degree, straight from the hand of a royal figure from the Chakri dynasty.

The northeastern dialect of Lao has become the second language of Bangkok. There are now more Lao, more sticky-rice eaters, in Bangkok than ever before.

A few weeks after the royal barge procession, I invited the Fon and Fa to visit the Museum Siam, which is within walking distance from the river. I arrived by express boat and we met again in the park. The Museum Siam is an impressive project, with beautiful displays and arrangement. It is designed to push back against narrow definitions of Thai. The message of ethnic variety and mixture is emphasized in every room. I wondered what my Lao friends from the northeast would think of it. The layout is temporal and follows the official progression-of-centers narrative—Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, Bangkok—but attacks it from inside, making each center a point of confluence. One panel asks: “Who built Bangkok?” Among the ethnic groups identified are Malays, Cambodians, Russians, Chinese Muslims, Indians, Burmese, Dutch, and 5000 Lao from Vientiane. Fon and Fa were not much interested in these panels, but they did enjoy themselves. Later that afternoon, after we had separated, I received a text message in Thai: “Today we had much happiness.” One of the highlights of the museum is a panel of five buttons that provides a glimpse into the linguistic diversity of Siam. Each button offers a greeting in a different language, including Mon, Hmong, Karen, Semang, and Lao. Push a button, hear the

greeting. Little groups hover over this display, clicking and giggling. Fon and Fa were no different, clicking the button that says “Lao” five or six times before turning away.

I have never heard any Lao informants talk about separation from Thailand. But the old order and its national imaginary are under pressure and the loudest demands for reform and inclusion come from the north and northeast. Someday one will see this “Central Thai” landscape in a new way. During my fieldwork, a new book by a brilliant young scholar was published in Thai. The author, Sujane Kanparit, writes about Vientiane's destruction, the transfer of its population to Central Thailand, and the erasure of these events from memory. The book is full of startling observations. Near the end, clearly with a Thai audience in mind, he writes, “In the current age, we find many ethnically-Lao people in Bangkok. Even you, the reader, may not know yourself. If you could go back into the past, you might find that your bloodline includes Lao—people who were driven, herded [into Siam] during the wars with Chao Anu [of Vientiane]” (สุเจน 2012:169).

Perceptions of landscape are shaped by collective memory. And, in the modern world, collective memory is often shaped by institutionalized imaginaries of the nation. I have tried to take an experience-near approach, to lead the reader into the landscape, but I have also emphasized the need to consider the power of representation, which so often orients and shapes experience. Certain parts of the past can become present, other parts of the past are difficult to see. The royal barge procession is an expression of a Bangkok-centered, royalist, national imaginary. Unlike the destruction of Ayutthaya, the destruction of Vientiane—and the capture, forced transfer, and exploitation of its people—has no place in the nation as figured by image-makers in Bangkok. Here I offer an alternate image, a reminder or intervention: Upstream lies Ayutthaya, but the landscape of the Chao Phraya basin was, and continues to be, shaped by Lao.

# 4. TRAJECTORIES

I was sitting on a crate next to the wall in the alley. Uncle took the brush in his thick, calloused hand and spread red paint along a wooden sword. We were talking about changes in the way of life along the Chao Phraya River and the consequent transformations of the landscape. The wooden ferries, for instance, were replaced by iron vessels. Factories had proliferated upstream. Downstream, a large shopping complex had recently opened, its "warehouses" as well as statues of Chinese laborers were invocations of an antiquated river-scene. There is a pier near the mouth of the alley, where one can wait for the iron ferry. Just across the river is a shiny, new cafe, where one can enjoy a slice of cake or cup of espresso, if only one has the cash or plastic. I offered a casual observation: "This country is developing rapidly." But he did not entirely agree. He turned his tired face toward me and said, "We've developed materially, but not in terms of heart-spirit."

I had heard this expression before, but previously paid little attention. Now it remained with me and, in the days ahead, I began to ask people about it. When I began the quote, nearly all of my interlocutors finished the sentence for me. And everyone had something to say.

This chapter is about trajectories. How do people imagine collective movement, materially and spiritually, through time? Up to now, I have discussed several themes—origins, loss, forgetting—each of which involves connections across space and time. Now we will look at another kind of connection, one that has a tendency, direction, and points into the future. In this chapter, we return to the question of continuity and change (which also figures prominently in chapter 2), but with a different emphasis. How do people imagine the trajectory of society? This, I suggest, is an important part of the culture of memory—in Bangkok, and surely in many other places as well. "What would we be without memory?" asks the German novelist W. G. Sebald. "We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would

lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past" (Sebald 1998:255). Memory allows for the formation of meaningful chains, lines, trajectories—it enables us to integrate past and present, and also to imagine the future. My informants in Bangkok could talk about how society had changed, as well as where it was headed, as if there were a line, and they could see themselves and others moving along that line—either as a collective, or within one.[17]

Here I offer a brief series of case studies. I try to attend to the situated specificity of my interlocutors' viewpoints, as well as prominent patterns in how the trajectory is imagined.

We have developed materially, but not in terms of heart-spirit. This chapter is built around this expression. Malinowski once described culture in a three-part scheme consisting of skeleton, flesh and blood, and spirit (1922:22). According to Malinowski, to get at the spirit, which includes the "views" and "opinions" that characterize a culture (ibid), one needs to collect "ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances" (1922:23). Is this lament concerning the backwardness of heart-spirit a part of the spirit's self-expression? There are, of course, problems with reifying society or culture as an organic being. But the expression above, this habit of contrasting two kinds of development, material and heart-spirit, is an intriguing comment on the trajectory—real, imagined, or desired—of society. And it, or some variation on it, is quite common in Bangkok.[18] One might also think of the Thai *suphasit*, proverbs of antiquity, but, though knowledge of the latter is valued, most people in Bangkok remember only a small number of them. Some *suphasit* speak to present circumstances more than others. The most commonly heard is probably this: In the water there are fish, in the paddy there is rice.

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[17] Such an imagination is by no means universal. Geertz, describing the Balinese, writes, "Their life, as they arrange it and perceive it, is less a flow, a directional movement out of the past, through the present, toward the future than an on-off pulsation of meaning and vacuity" (1973:445).

[18] An example from email correspondence: "A lot has changed [in Thailand], probably because there's been so much material progress, but it's at cross-purposes [สวนทาง] with the progress of heart-spirit. People have become more selfish. They're willing to do bad things, and they even see this as normal."

Many people in Bangkok know this expression comes from the Age of Sukhothai. The words were carved into a pillar and they are attributed to a king. The condition of abundance, as declared by the king in the ancient kingdom of Sukhothai, is often generalized to present-day Thailand. A land that is plentiful. The expression is elevated, both officially and in everyday life. Every child in a Thai public school must, it seems, learn and remember: In the water there are fish, in the paddy there is rice. It is an image of Amazing Thailand. The primary expression that I concern myself with in this chapter, however, will not be taught in schools. It lives in non-official circuits, and yet it is remarkably standardized. It can be worded in a variety of ways, but the basic structure is always the same: a contrast between two kinds of development, that of material (วัตถุ), and that of heart-spirit (จิตใจ). I asked dozens of people, from a wide variety of positions and occupations, and they all recognized the expression—well enough to finish the sentence for me.

There is an element here of what Herzfeld calls "rueful self-recognition" (1997:6), but with a slight difference. Herzfeld emphasizes the tensions that manifests between the presentation of the individual self and official notions of national character (1997:x). In this chapter, however, I am more concerned with the projections of the national self, i.e., individual views of the collective—what is ruefully recognized is a collective, national self and its trajectory.

I use the expression "heart-spirit" to translate the compound *jit-jai*. The word *jai* ("heart" or "mind"), one of the most common Thai words, is often paired with other words to describe emotional states and personal dispositions. The word *jit* is similar in that it also relates to the human interior. A mentally-ill person, for instance, is *rok-jit*, i.e., a person with a sick spirit. I translate jit as "spirit," in part, because this aspect of one's being is said to persist beyond death. Heart-spirit can also connect the individual to the collective. Consider, for instance, the first public announcement by the generals following the military coup in 2014. The last line reads as follows: "The National Council for Peace and Order [i.e., the coup leaders] will maintain loyalty,

protect, uphold, and preserve the monarchy, the center that unites the heart-spirit of the Thai people, and which is above all conflicts" (ไทยรัฐออนไลน์ 2014).

## Culture, Nation, & Linearity

The trajectory is collective. Kluckhohn once noted that "the most interesting claims people make are those they make about themselves" (Basso 1996:37). But this is a little ambiguous—is the claim about a singular being, a family, a village, a nation? This chapter is about claims of national scale; one draws from memory to imagine a nation in motion. Malinowski's three-part scheme of culture is arguably flawed in that it presents culture as a fully-integrated, organic being. But we might still consider senses of collectivity, and collective claims. The trajectory in question is enabled by an institution, namely the nation. The nation, as Anderson points out, is among the most salient social realities of the modern world: "Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (2006:3). The question of material and heart-spirit brings the nation down to an immediate, personal level. We get a glimpse of how individuals see the nation. We also see a kind of human creativity. People appropriate from an available discourse to situate themselves, make sense of the present, put forth criticism of the collective, and also to express a view of the future. The line may not be straight, but it does point.

Culture and nation are not easily separated in Thailand. The Thai approximation of *culture* did not exist prior to the self-conscious process of nation-building. Barmé points out that "the word *wathanatham* (culture) was a recent addition to the Thai lexicon, having been coined some time in the early 1930s" (1993:160). "Culture," or wathanatham, usually has a positive valence in Bangkok—people take pride in their inheritance of culture. One informant explained that culture consists only of "good things" passed on from one generation to the next. But people may disagree on what constitutes "good things," and not all would insist on this good-only notion of

culture. Corruption, at least for some informants, could also be culture. One informant taught me about police bribes. She explained, “We keep some bills aside for encounters with the police, and this can alleviate many small problems. Sometimes people just attach the bill to their driver's license. We call it tea money.” She laughed. “It's corruption, but everyone does it. It's culture!”

Students of anthropology are familiar with arguments against linear models of evolution. The worst of all is the universal, unilinear model—and the effort (especially by Franz Boas) to obliterate it is often remembered as a foundational struggle in American anthropology. But some see that same old unilinear, evolutionist logic in still-popular models of economic development. In response, some have proposed alternative or multiple modernities. But, according to Ferguson, these latter formulations, good intentions notwithstanding, fail to attend to a global hierarchy of status. The unilinear model of development, in spite of its flaws, provided a time-line of hope—people could aspire to move upwards. The problem is not only theoretical. Ferguson emphasizes that many have lost faith in development, including the possibility of attaining higher status. He writes, “As people lose faith in developmental time, the global status hierarchy comes to be understood in new and disturbing ways” (Ferguson 2006:189). With the unilinear model shattered, there may be no visible escape route from a low position in the global hierarchy.

Along what lines do people live? Ingold points out that anthropologists have grown suspicious of all forms of linearity: “Alterity, we are told, is non-linear” (2007:2). Perhaps this follows from a limited imagination concerning lines, especially the assumption that they are straight. But Ingold argues that “there is no reason, intrinsic to the line itself, why it *should* be straight” (2007:152). Furthermore, it seems that no one particular line need be universal. In the pages ahead one will find senses of both universality and particularity. In one case, my informant thought the expression itself—we have developed materially, but not terms of heart-spirit—was universal. An analysis of implicit notions of trajectory can help us understand how people see

their place in the world. Maybe that place is going somewhere.

As we turn to the next section, I want to raise, briefly, a long-standing issue in Thai and Southeast Asian Studies, and also in Thailand's internal politics: the notion that Thailand is an exception among Southeast Asian nations and much of the Third World because it escaped colonization. This idea is deeply ingrained in everyday life in Thailand. Children are taught to be proud that the country was not colonized and, crucially, to be ever-grateful for the goodwill, wisdom, and foresight of the Chakri monarchs, who are said to have saved Thailand from colonization. This is a key part of the culture and politics of memory in Thailand. Such collective memories shape notions of time, momentum, and possibility.

Given this absence of a colonial experience, one might wonder: is then Thailand's trajectory altogether unlike, and incomparable to, that of its neighbors? Benda (1969) raised the question of continuity and change at a time when the colonial regimes in Southeast Asia were being broken and nations were emerging. The notion of Thailand-as-exception, though prevalent in day-to-day life in Bangkok, has been heavily criticized by scholars. A number of leading scholars have argued that Thailand is better understood as a semi-colonial case (Anderson 1978, Herzfeld 2002, Jackson 2007). Often, much of the argument hinges on the degree of subordination to the French and British imperialists. But it must be emphasized that Siam's rulers drew inspiration from the colonial regimes and tried to create comparable institutions in Siam. If anything, what makes Thailand an exception among Southeast Asian nations is the absence of a *de*-colonization experience. Thailand has no independence day. The end of absolute monarchy and establishment of Siam's first constitution, carried out by force in 1932 by a circle of foreign-educated conspirators, is now remembered as a gift to the people from the king, a staggering distortion of the past (see Peleggi 2007:134 and Barmé 1993:73). In comparison to its formerly-colonized neighbors, a unique sense of continuity and change, even if deceptive, may prevail in Thailand.

## Power & Illusion

I wanted to see the cadaver of the Chinese cannibal (ซีอุย). An informant, one of my friends in the alley, had recommended it. The corpse is in a museum in a riverside hospital complex. The exhibit also includes, as she noted with much enthusiasm, "fermented children" (เด็กดอง) in jars. Why were these things of such interest? I wanted to find out, so one day I disembarked from the express boat by the hospital. A busy market is there; one can buy magazines, clothes, strawberries. And coffee. I already had an informant there, a coffee vendor in the market. Today is a Tuesday in December. His booth is within sight of the dock and I often stop to visit him during my trips to Thonburi. A soft wind blows in from the river. "It comes down from the north," he says. "It's cold in the morning. The cold season arrives in the north first, then gradually makes its way into Bangkok." Boats of many descriptions pass. Tug-boats drag massive, sand-filled barges. Uniformed students shuttle to and from the universities aboard iron ferries.

The coffee vendor, around 60 years old, with his eye glasses, weight-lifter calves, and seemingly endless reserves of energy, commands this space. I ask him about the museum and he tells me exactly where to go. "Listen," he says. "I want to tell you a story. Our country didn't used to be like this." His hand sweeps the built-up skyline of the river. "It was forested, dark at night, especially up-country. Even in Bangkok, we didn't have all these artificial lights. The city had many obscure and frightening places. I was a child when I heard about the Chinese cannibal. He came up from the south. He killed people, ate their liver! I was terrified, afraid even to leave the house. That man had a sickness of the spirit [*rok jit*]—just like a *farang*!"

The exhibit was perfectly horrible. Deformed fetuses in jars. Cancerous limbs. Gruesome photographs. The place had a distinctive smell, difficult now to describe or recollect. Two school girls hovered near a wood-and-glass case, in which the cannibal's black, withered corpse was displayed upright. A newspaper article in Thai, attached to the case, explained that he had

deserted the Chinese military and entered Thailand through the south. His execution was approved under the anti-crime ordinance of Field Marshal Sarit, a military dictator still prominent in collective memory. Known for his drinking, brutality, and commitment to public order, Sarit, who died in 1963, is admired by many Thais today. Thak's observation in the late 1970s remains current: "It is still common […] to hear remarks that political uncertainty in Thailand could be stabilized by a leader like Sarit" (Chaloemtiarana 1978:410). Nidhi Eoseewong refers to it as "a yearning for Sarit" (นิธิ 2010:130). It has, he adds, "afflicted a large number of people—in part, because they believe that under a dictatorship, in which there is only one absolute power-holder (no matter whether it be a military officer or the king), politics will not be political" (ibid).

I noted the otherness of the cannibal's spirit disease. It was distinctly non-Thai. Such sickness is to be found in Europe, Africa, the Americas, but should not occur in Thailand. He came up from the south. By Sarit's hand, the disorder of spirit was contained. A nostalgia for power above politics is not hard to find in Bangkok, nor is it confined to the right wing (see นิธิ 2010:128-132). This nostalgia is based on an imaginary past, a time not so long ago, widespread in collective memory (and also bitterly contested in some quarters), a past preserved, passed on, and circulated, according to which politics is only a recent development in Thai society. Some yearn for a time before politics, an atavistic return, or even the realization of a latent power that could transcend and contain the divisions and conflicts of the present, a power that could put Thailand on the right path. According to Kukrit Pramoj—a prominent writer, intellectual, politician, and royalist—politics had never existed in Siam/Thailand until the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932 (นิธิ 2010:128; see also คึกฤทธิ์ 2011:671-3). Some, however, might say that what "never existed" was that pre- or non-political Thai society. Rebecca Solnit, an American author, writes, "Our culture is pervaded by nostalgia for things that may never have existed. If we seek to make a future in the image of an ideal past, the particulars of that past matter immensely" (2001:1).

Images of a collective past are, in many places, a crucial part of present life, especially when people have strong affective attachments to such images. Such images are also crucial to efforts to create the future. What kind of future does one want? So often I heard the same diagnosis of Thailand's problem: an absence of stillness. The coffee vendor was of this opinion. “The political situation fails to stabilize. We argue with one another. It's disgraceful—we could sell our faces!” The cannibal was executed under article 17, a provision that gave Sarit absolute power over life and death. This provision was necessary to eliminate otherness, both cannibal and communist. Others can bring turmoil, dangerous waves of ideology, crisis, and threats to the viability of collective life. Dictatorship creates stillness. The black cadaver stands motionless in the case.

Late in the afternoons, the vendor and I sometimes sat by the pier. He had previously run a retail business at the airport, and in those days he was considerably more affluent than he is now. He was nostalgic. He once had an expensive, riverside condominium with a panoramic view of Bangkok and the Chao Phraya River. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 took this away. The shop closed and he lost his house. The years following the massacre of 1992 saw exuberant growth, with the battlefields re-made into markets. Capital was confident. But the Asian Financial Crisis—often referred to in Thai as Shrimp Soup (*tom yum gung*)—left Bangkok with a grim skyline of half-finished skyscrapers. This man re-created himself as a coffee vendor. He was also a newspaper reader, using the low-traffic moments to keep up-to-date on the economy.

He watched the river. He could see that the heart-spirit was in poor condition. Without the cultivation of heart-spirit, material progress has little basis; it will be crippled and vulnerable to breakdown, to crisis, perhaps even on the scale of Shrimp Soup. He provided an example: “Thai people have a flaw, namely poor waste-water management. They dump garbage into the water. They use the river as a toilet. It's disgusting. They throw their deceased pets into the canals. The entire family loved that animal, but when it dies they just toss it into the water.” This is an old

problem. As early as the mid-19th century, Rama IV condemned such practices. An ordinance was put in place according to which anyone caught throwing a dead animal into a canal would be arrested and publicly humiliated (Warren 2002:49-50). The king stated in his proclamation:

"Under no circumstances whatsoever should any person allow himself to throw a dead dog, a dead cat, or the carcass of any other species of animal into any river or canal, whether big or small . . . By the exercise of a little thoughtfulness it should not be too difficult to perceive that other people using the water along the waterway do object to such exhibitions. Were provincial priests from the Lao country and other northern districts or other country gentry to pay a visit to the Divine City[19] and find the said objectionable custom still in practice, they would undoubtedly carry away the impression that conditions inside the City are not as healthy as outside it, the water supply in the City being so unclean as to breed in the dwellers thereof a number of unhappy ailments. The same or similar impression would be given to Englishmen, Chinese, and all foreign Orientals who come to do business in the Divine City" (Warren 2002:49-50).

Foreigners in Bangkok, especially those who do business, are central to the line of reasoning. It is notable that, by this time, all of Siam's neighbors were under colonial domination. It is likely that the king's concern was also, in part, over how foreigners, especially those with steamships and cannons, would perceive his ability to manage the kingdom. Such concerns were amplified in the subsequent reign. Rama V visited Dutch Java as well as British Burma and India, carefully investigating colonial administration and infrastructure (Peleggi 2007:14). Subsequent reforms in Thailand, initiated by the monarchy, were largely based on these colonial models. Concern with reception of foreign practices and values has persisted. It is a matter of managing otherness. The dangers presented by others have, of course, changed with the progression of time. The current king probably does not worry that he will be removed by colony-hunting foreigners. In the 1960s

[19] The "Divine City" is Bangkok.

and 70s one of the most widely despised forms of otherness was communism. In fact, the fear of communism still exists. One informant said, “If Thailand must change, I only ask that it not become communist.” But this fear has subsided in recent decades. Today, the question, especially for many development-minded people, is: who will invest in Thailand? And: how will we sustain the investor's faith?

Outsiders' negative perceptions are seen by insiders as threatening. The Shrimp Soup crisis of 1997, which impacted all of Southeast Asia, began with a sudden collapse of faith in Thai currency. Perhaps this was reflected in concerns, sometimes declared openly, about how I would represent Thailand. A housekeeper, for instance, baulked when I mentioned the expression concerning material and heart-spirit. “It sounds pessimistic,” she said. She then told me about a documentary made by Korean directors in which “everything [about Thailand] was negative.” She did not see the documentary, but heard it reported that a film aired in Korea with negative depictions of Thailand. She went on to express her criticisms of Thai society anyway, but that does not necessarily detract from the significance of concerns over outsiders' perceptions. On another occasion, a woman who I had just met bought snacks for me, then said, “You won't say anything bad about Thailand now, right?” She repeated this, and some 30 minutes later, as she was climbing into a taxi, she yelled, “Say only good things about Thailand, OK?”

In our conversations, the river could not be dissociated from the political situation in Thailand. If I asked the coffee vendor about his childhood home on the riverbank, he would soon be telling me about the former prime minister. “Look,” he said, “Thaksin [the former prime minister, ousted by military coup in 2006] was the very worst. Populism can't be sustained. Don't you agree? We can't feed greed and laziness.” During my fieldwork, it was widely believed by people on both sides of the Red-Yellow divide that Thaksin, in exile in Dubai, continued to run Thailand by video conference. In Bangkok, there were two primary criticisms of Thaksin. First, many said he

“ate the country,” that is, used his position for profit (at the expense of the population). Second, many believed he posed a threat to the monarchy, the super-electrified third rail of Thai politics. The coffee vendor's criticism of populism went hand-in-hand with the position that Thaksin abused his power as public official. He saw populism as a form of deception, a vast illusion. And, in his view, Thaksin deployed such illusions in order to expand his own power and profit.

We have developed in materially, but not in terms of heart-spirit. I asked the coffee vendor what he thought about this expression. “Oh!” he said, “I definitely agree. That's exactly right! Look at our railways and the central station. When these were built, we were at the leading edge of this region. But we're using the same old trains. Everything is decayed.” Notably, his interpretation was not anti-materialist. It was a pro-development case, according to which development was crippled by the backwardness of heart-spirit. Thaksin, he argued, was an apt example: the material progress under Thaksin's rule was hollow, short-sighted—populism appeases the myopic. They see roads, satellite dishes, credit, and, for them, this means progress. The coffee vender is a disbeliever. The truth about Thaksin and the Red Shirts, he says, is that they are “clever image-makers” (เขาสร้างภาพเก่ง). In his view, these illusions, and the greed and blindness of those persuaded by them, have left the country backward. These illusions create internal turmoil, conditions that drain the investors' faith in Thailand. Cultivation of the heart-spirit, on the other hand, would bring material progress. It would bring trains and train stations.

The condition of heart-spirit is within sight, but one needs the right kind of eyes. We were sitting on a concrete bench and the embankment was under construction and I could feel the heat of the welding torch on my neck. “Look at those yellow boats,” he says. “You want to know about government incompetence? They scoop trash and water hyacinth out of the river with fishing nets. Those are for fishing! These people are idiots, mentally handicapped. We should use machines and start upstream. The water hyacinth floats down from the north, but they don't go to

the source. This is all just for looks. It only appears that the government is doing something."

## Songs for Life

I went upstream. I was sitting with a friend in Thonburi, a graduate from Bangkok's University of Fine Arts. He is a painter, originally from a rice-growing village in the north. That place, he once told me, is the inspiration for all his work. I told him what I had heard from the sword-maker: we've developed materially, but not in terms heart-spirit. He said, "People say this often, and I agree. Nowadays people do not build material things—material things build people!"

I spent many afternoons in this room. The front doors would be open. Pedestrians, mostly neighbors, would pass. The walls are decorated with nineteenth-century photos of Native Americans. Here we once watched a Thai-dubbed version of *Soldier Blue*, an American film about the massacre of the Cheyenne at Sand Creek. Now we listen to music, a rare live recording of Caravan, interspersed with documentary-style commentary that explains the concept of "Songs for Life," an art movement that began in Thailand in the 1960s. The frontman, Nga Caravan, begins to sing, a gentle applause swells, then the music fades and the narrator speaks: "Art has always been connected to people's lives. Long ago, people began to develop words and melodies; these reflected feelings that arose in different situations. Folk songs or *luk tung* [child of the fields] are songs that reflect the life, the state of being, of people in society. These are the roots of Songs for Life. These songs are 'for life' because they aim for the betterment of life—the life of the people. They draw from the problems of the people: problems of economics, politics, society, and culture. And they encourage people to rise up, struggle, call for justice in society."

He spent part of his childhood in a temple. When I told him about the alley, where the residents are being driven out by the abbot, his face became tense. "That lizard!" He was quiet for a moment and took a drag from his cigarette. "I don't like monks," he said. "Some are good.

But a monk like that abbot is worse than an ordinary person." This comment surprised me. One of the basic characteristics of Thai people, it is often said, is that they *wai pra*, which means honoring monks with the *wai*, a gesture made with hands and head. His comment cuts against the grain of common sense in Bangkok, according to which monks are above ordinary people. This view persists in spite of monastic corruption, a widely known and remarked phenomenon, featured daily in the newspapers. Everyone has heard: monks played cards, took amphetamines, drank booze. Uproar ensues when a monk is filmed tattooing a blond woman. The situation here, however, is even worse—a violation of community. He said, "Ask: why is the temple there? Why is the community there? The temple is supposed to be the center of the community." It exemplifies the backwardness of heart-spirit—a community is betrayed by its own temple.

"It's like those people across the bridge. You know the bridge, right? All those houses behind the temple [i.e., here in their own community]. It's the same situation. They've been trying to drive those people out. Our country ['our house'] is like this. Thailand only!" The latter expression, "Thailand only," comes from a skit from the popular Thai comedian Note Udom, in which he talks about certain aspects of everyday culture in Thailand—American fried rice, *khaek* bananas, etc.—all of which are perceived as being of foreign origin. But one cannot find khaek bananas in India and Americans have never heard of American fried rice. Thailand only.

But here it was a matter of frustration, of Thailand as negative exception, a country outside the international current. The exception manifests as violation by one of the most exalted institutions. Why is the temple there? It's supposed to be the center of the community. He added, "This is culture that walks and breathes. Culture isn't just what you see in the museum." This, it later occurred to me, is related to the basic idea of Songs for Life—or, more generally, Art for Life—i.e., that art should have a primary relationship with the day-to-day existence and struggles of the people. This point was reinforced when I asked about the word *culture* (wathanatham). What do

you mean by that? His response was incisive: “I don't think about that word. I don't want to fall victim to that word!” Culture, it seems, is suspended within dangerous relations of power. This was one of my most well-educated informants, not only did he have a degree from the University of Fine Arts, but he also had a large book collection, including Thai translations of Garcia-Marquez, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, even a collection of essays by the anthropologist Colin Turnbull.

“Culture,” he warned, is a “discourse” (วาทกรรม). He was born in the northern periphery of Thailand, in a village, where most people, and especially the older generations, prefer to speak the local, “northern” language; when they speak Thai, most speak with heavy provincial accents. Furthermore, as an artist, he saw himself as outside the current of society, and was very much committed to creating an alternative path, his own trajectory. “I can't just go work for some company,” he said. “I've never even submitted an application. I know I can't do it.” He was wary of the power to define, to limit or circumscribe culture, and he knew that culture could be used as a weapon. He also knew that culture is not always what it appears to be—it is not just what you see in the museum. Culture walks and breathes, and perhaps does not need to be defined; it is a living thing or process, neither ossified nor pre-packaged. It is that living-and-breathing reality that matters most. I think he was troubled by tendencies within Thailand to put “Thai” into a neat package, and thereby limit it. Van Esterik, reflecting on fieldwork and writing, observes, “It was a constant struggle to resist reifying 'Thai culture'. It is easily objectified by outside analysts because it is so completely objectified by insiders and delivered, thinglike, prepackaged with shiny surfaces that attract for both theoretical and aesthetic reasons” (2000:239). It is also important to see, however, that some insiders refuse such objectification.

Others in Bangkok, by contrast, lamented a lack of interest in culture. A elderly woman said, “This country elevates culture very little.” A gallery owner said, “Young people aren't interested in culture. They don't understand it.” This is not, however, culture of the living, breathing sort.

Two reasons were given for this often-remarked failure to elevate or take interest in culture. First, people highlighted the ascendancy of "popular values," the counterpoint to culture. Second, people said: Thais don't think about culture because they have the mouth-stomach problem, i.e. the problem of satisfying basic needs. The crucial point about Art for Life, however, is that a creative space is opened for engaging those problems—work, hunger, exploitation, the attenuated development of the heart-spirit.

He offered a solution. "People must be educated. That is the way to develop the heart-spirit. I think it's the only way. We also have to erase the old system." Here the expression "old system" implies antiquated relations of power. It implies certain kinds of institutions and hierarchy. His comment seems to resonate with the Red Shirt outcries against feudalism. A characteristic observation from the Red camp is that "the old hierarchy [and/or system] no longer works." But he put distance between himself and shirts of all colors. For him the significant moment or time period hovered around October 14, 1973, when a popular movement rose up against dictatorship. It was the generation of Caravan. "In those days," he said, "people *knew* that society needed to change." By contrast, the shirts—Red and Yellow alike—are, in his view, just followers, mobs, products not of awareness, but incitement. The Caravan generation, by contrast, was aware and committed, ready to go into the forest when further anti-communist purges were looming in the aftermath of the October 6, 1976 massacre at Thammasat University in Bangkok.

During my fieldwork, there was an ample amount of pessimism in Bangkok, and a lot of uncertainty about the future. But my informant had an idea of where the collective should go. Educate people, he said. Eliminate the old system. The 1973 generation, for some at least, still represents a promising trajectory. The line may be faded, but it is still visible (for some) and remains (again, for some) a source of identity and hope. On October 14, 1973, began a brief period—three years or so—of openness and optimism, and also a sustained flood of creativity.

“Flood,” in this case, is an emic metaphor. I recall a book dealer, who had been a university student during those years, describing it that way—a flood of creativity. It was unprecedented. Benedict Anderson, at that time barred from Suharto's Indonesia and recreating himself as a Thai specialist, writes, “In 1974 and most of 1975, Siam was an extraordinarily free and exhilarating place, full of student demonstrations, workers' strikes, peasant mobilizations, and the sharpest political debates. In the spring of 1975 the country's first-ever genuinely free election took place, and for the first—and last—time a substantial number of left-wing people were elected to parliament” (1998:22). This period of freedom was brought to a painful, horrifying close by the October 6, 1976 massacre at Thammasat University in Bangkok, described in detail by Klima: “Both girls and boys were made to strip to the waist and lie still while police rained down rifle-butts or boot heels on their heads and backs. The right-wing mobs sat in the football bleachers cheering wildly, waving national flags, and singing their ghoulish killing songs while the boys and girls were brutalized on the field” (79:2002). Thongchai Winichakul, now a historian, was among the student activists rounded-up and imprisoned after the massacre. He has written about state-orchestrated efforts to erase October 6 from public memory (see Winichakul 2002).

October 14, 1973 is also being forgotten. I recall the arrival of the anniversary. It went unmentioned on the front page of *Siam Rath*, a daily newspaper. The main headline reported National Police Day, next to a photograph of uniformed officers in formation. There was not a word about it on the evening news—the first popular, successful, pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship uprising in Thai history. Nothing. No one that I met that morning recognized the date. I must have asked a dozen people. One said, “Today? No, today is not important. Tomorrow! Tomorrow is a Buddhist holy day [วันพระ].” But don't you remember? There were big student demonstrations. The dictators were chased away . . . The newspaper vendor was bewildered: “That has nothing to do with me.” I later talked to some university-educated friends

who did recognize the date, but even among them it was not necessarily held in any special regard. One said, “It's only important to people in that circle, people of that generation. It's not so important really—they [i.e. the state] didn't even make it into a holiday.”

I took the boat along the Canal of a Thousand Stings that morning, making my way to the Democracy Monument, the center of the October 14 events. A gathering of Red Shirts was there. Signs were posted denouncing feudalism and monopoly and dictatorship. A man stood on a platform, speaking into a microphone. The vendors were all dressed in red. Posters and shirts depicted the faces of Thaksin and Yingluck, often with the memorable slogan “Thaksin thinks, Yingluck does” (i.e. acts according to the designs of Thaksin). I spoke to a woman from up-country. I noted the significance of October 14, anticipating recognition. “It has nothing to do with that,” she said. “This is just to say that we are free.”

I recall the first time I met my informant in Thonburi. He was reserved, just listening as I talked to someone else about the recent floods. Upstream deforestation, which has reduced the capacity for absorption, is among the factors that increases the threat of devastation by water. Perhaps, I suggested, the recent disaster would increase awareness of this problem. He interrupted: “Thai people think only for a moment, and then forget!”

That was the first thing he ever said to me.

In the months ahead, we got to know each other. He had little interest in what is called politics, from elections and parties to the ongoing conflict between Red and Yellow. But he was very much committed to creating a world of his own, a world centered, it seemed to me, on art and friendship. People would stop by throughout the day, some just to chat or relax. Some young folks brought sketch pads, pens and pencils, seeking advice. Guitars came out in the evenings.

He had a nostalgia for a time when people “knew things needed to change.” Songs for life are also, in a sense, songs of another trajectory—a certain past, a certain future, a time of possibility.

Caravan's songs for life have kept that past, including its promise and optimism, alive, which is not to say merely preserved, like an object in a museum. Alive: still living, breathing. Erll, a theorist of memory, writes, "Due to its capacity to relate past, present, and future – envisioning alternative trajectories through a recourse to the past, activating forgotten knowledge in the present, making sense of the new by comparing it to the old – memory is the very apparatus that enables change" (2011:174). It is an intriguing idea. Futures can take shape through creative relations to the past. One wants to be optimistic. But, undoubtedly, the question of change is a question of scale, and some futures will exist only in certain places, in small, temporary pockets.

Sunset in Thonburi. A friend, a young artist, checks the time, pours beer into my glass, and informs me, with feigned disappointment, that I have already missed the last express boat.

"Caravan," he said, "is close to my heart." One day he observed that Nga Caravan, the band's front man, "hasn't changed." But not everyone would agree. Nga has, in fact, been quite caught up in the Red-Yellow conflict. He has performed onstage at at least one Yellow Shirt rally, and he has been denounced by many leftists for his support of the 2006 military coup. Many see it as a betrayal. In a collection of short, biographical essays, Nga writes about his recent involvement with the Yellow Shirts, as well as the days when he—as a young idealist, armed with a rifle—lived "in the forest" with the communists. One might note the title: *Tang Sen Gao* (สุรชัย 2010), which can be translated as "by way of the old line." It suggests reminiscence. My informant never mentioned Nga's involvement with the Yellow shirts. Perhaps he could look past it. Nga, in so far as he "hasn't changed," keeps alive a certain temporal moment when people—especially young people, students and artists—wanted to create a new world for the right reasons.

## Temples

In a thin volume, a book about happiness, written for a popular audience and illustrated with bright, colorful images, Phra Paisal Visalo, a Buddhist monk and former student activist, writes, "Pain, hardship, and suffering are of benefit—not only to the body, but also to the heart-spirit. Pain, hardship, and suffering will teach us patience and give rise to wisdom" (พระไพศาล 2011:21).

She invited me to the temple in the morning. Rain began pouring as I left my building. I arrived at the temple with an umbrella borrowed from a generous street vendor. It is a curious sanctuary, a quiet place tucked between two shopping malls. The concrete wall extends along a heavily trafficked road. This is arguably the center of Bangkok. Just outside the temple grounds one finds the central hub of the city's skytrain system: Siam Square. She was waiting in the temple's parking lot. We walked along an asphalt path, lined with trees. The air grew cooler, and then the rain softened to a light patter. She comes here to meditate. It is in part a matter of convenience; the temple's central location accommodates her business well. She is a language teacher and often meets students in the shopping malls over coffee or donuts or fries. She lives on the other side of the river, in a narrow, multistory house in Thonburi. She is Bangkok-born, ethnic Chinese, thirty-something, and studies part-time for a master's degree.

We removed our shoes and sat in the meditation hall. A few others were already seated on the vast red carpet. Images of the king and queen were prominently displayed, material reminders of the official triad, the ever-repeated inseparability of Nation, Religion, and Monarch. A monk, slightly elevated on a platform, was speaking quietly, droning into a microphone. She warned me that the monks here, with their deep, monotonous voices, are difficult to understand, even for her. The sound of automobile traffic had receded, but the rain returned, striking the ground heavily around the pavilion. The monk reminded us that this was an opportunity to practice awareness and calm our hearts. The rain seems like an inconvenience, he said, but it encourages us to slow

down. And this is good because our minds, like urban life, are constantly in motion, running here and there, rarely settling. In the absence of clocks, we sat for an uncertain amount of time. Rain-filled, wordless spaces of time alternated with chanting in Pali. She brought two plastic-laminated pages, Pali rendered in Thai characters, so that we could follow the chants. A few more bodies arrived and sat. We had left, it seemed, the crowds and noisy streets of Siam Square.

One day she told me that she suffers from stress and depression. Our friendship was sometimes difficult, and our conversations sometimes descended into argument. "You make me so angry," she once said, then added (bitterly), "but I have to forgive you." Her family is poor, she says, and some people see her as "low-society." Some friends, however, accuse her of wealth —she owns a car, laptop computer, and an iPhone. She says in defense that she uses the car and laptop for work, and the iPhone to talk to her sister, who works in Japan. One day she tells me that she thinks of killing herself, but she does not tell me why. How did the pieces of her life fit together? A few years ago, her father left them, a mother and two daughters—probably for another woman. She shares a bed with her mother, who she describes as "pitiable." Once, during a non-serious conversation, I commented on the prevalence of *jao chu* (เจ้าชู้, "lord(s) of illicit partners") in Thai culture. The jao chu—usually, but not always male—is celebrated in songs, TV dramas, and everyday life. High-status men are often assumed to be jao chu. This, it seems, is the nature of things. But she became defensive: "It's not Thai culture—it's the culture of men!"

She often reads dharma books, a popular genre of Buddhist literature. These books teach one how to remain calm and aware, "cold" in the Thai sense. "But some people," she says, "will look at you funny if you read these books. They'll think something is wrong with you."

One morning we met early, downstairs at a large office building. We had planned a trip to Amphawa, a town southwest of Bangkok, famous for its waterways. She drove. We went around the edge of Klong Toey, a congested, drug-washed, port-slum. We crossed the railroad tracks and

soon we were crossing the Chao Phraya. I looked down at the river. Oh, look! I said. There's a large stream that splits off from the river here. She was amused. “You are like a child, looking and pointing at everything.” Outside of Bangkok, the scene remained urban, but the lack of adequate road signs was a source of frustration. After two or so hours of driving and a couple stops for directions, we arrived at the Gulf of Thailand. The streets were lined with vendors selling fresh fish. We parked. This site is committed to the conservation of a tube-shaped fish. We sat on a stone wall, eating noodles. There were small boats out in the expanse of water and sky.

We then drove the remaining distance to Amphawa, stopping at a national park built in honor of King Rama II. We bought bags of pellets and fed the fish in one of the canals. In the park there was an air-conditioned exhibit in a large, wooden stilt-house that described local, traditional life, especially the importance of waterways. In the center of the room was a topographic model: land surrounded, crisscrossed, and held together by water. Panels celebrated artists of nationwide reputation born in Amphawa, thereby linking locality and nation, amplifying the national importance of this place. Panels described the fate of floating houses, which began to disappear from here as elsewhere in the era of Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram (c. 1930s-1950s). The pretense was that these materials were needed for other, land-based structures. It probably had more to do with changing the face of Thailand. It was the time of the Cultural Mandates, a series of top-down measures imposed to civilize the population—coercing people to wear hats, change habits of speech, self-identify as Thai, and so on. Today, a big part of what makes this place, Amphawa, is a sense that the old way of life has been, with much effort, partially preserved. At the same time, it is a place where one is reminded how easy it is to forget. So little of what can be remembered is passed on from generation to generation. Prior to walking to the famous canal-side market, we stopped at another exhibit, featuring dozens of small, wooden boat replicas. Line drawings of the same vessels were stacked on a table, along with boxes of crayons. Two children

were there, coloring furiously. A panel explained the motive behind the exhibit, essentially: we want people to remember a way of life that is vanishing.

The canals by the market were very attractive. My friend suggested that we take a boat trip—we could visit five temples. The driver told us the trip would last an hour, a big underestimate. We later wondered: why didn't he just tell us the truth? Soon we were in the middle of an idyllic water-filled landscape. The river was wide, with few boats other than ours. We entered a canal and passed some impressive houses with manicured lawns. A woman was washing a noodle pot at the edge of the canal. It was all very nice, aside from the crushing volume of the engine.

This is recreation, a day off for a self-described "Bangkok girl," a short trip up-country with a strange friend. We applied gold to the Buddha images at the temples. At one temple, we drew fortune sticks. I was impressed by the individuality of each temple. Each had its own charm and gimmicks. At one of the temples, we fed cows. At another, we were blessed and sprinkled with water by one of the monks. At yet another, we took turns hitting a big, metal gong, which was hanging next to a sign that ensured fortunate futures: the louder the sound, the richer you'll be. One temple had a captive six-legged turtle, and a camel. Sometimes the strange is auspicious, she noted. It shows that one is in a special or powerful place. One of the shrines featured a replica of one of the Buddha's teeth, copied from an original in Sri Lanka. The boat then took us to another complex, where we saw statues arranged in hand-to-hand combat, some with hands broken off and wires sticking out of the stumps. One of the temples was concrete, overgrown with tree roots.

The sun was setting by the time we returned to the market. "Do you prefer sunset or sunrise?" she asked. She prefers sunset: "The day is over, things good and bad have passed. Tomorrow is a new day." This view reflects a practice recommended in every dharma book: letting go.

We visited five temples that day. I noted two, perhaps complimentary, aspects of these Buddhist institutions. The temple is a place of meditation, where the heart-spirit can be

cultivated. The temple is also oriented to the material world. The temple itself is material, not only as a built structure, but as a place where one finds money trees, strings of cash, and invocations of prosperity, as well as cows, six-legged turtles, and an endless proliferation of gimmicks and weird objects. Some academic texts emphasize the nirvana-orientation of Theravada Buddhism, i.e. the goal of exiting the world of karma. But, it seems to me, that this is not usually the focus of popular dharma books, found on the promotion racks at nearly any bookstore in Bangkok. Nirvana (which, in Thai, is a verb rather than a state) is, for most people, far beyond the scope of expectation. As Kirsch points out, "Most Thai do not aspire to such an abstract religious goal as *nirvana*" (1977:247). It takes someone exceptional in the extreme. Even the king, sometimes referred to as a divinity-to-be (สมมติเทพ), to whom one cannot speak directly (non-nobility, including the Prime Minister, speak only to "dust beneath the royal foot"), is still in the world of karma. But one can "make merit." What people aim for is material progress, good health, and improved status, for themselves and their families, in this life as well as the next.

Months later, during an interview, I asked her about material and heart-spirit. I told her what the sword-maker had said in response to my observation of Thailand's rapid development: we've developed materially, but not in terms of heart-spirit. She turned the question on me: "Do you have this kind of expression in America? I don't think it's just Thailand. It's the whole world. But we have to separate these two things—material and heart-spirit. What? You don't want material? What about the BTS [skytrain] station? What about technology?" She picked up her iPhone phone. "This is material too! No one can refuse material. Everyone wants it. We need material development. But I don't believe it's one or the other. Just consider the abundance of dharma books—more and more people are reading about dharma. This shows that the heart-spirit is developing. More people are practicing meditation these days. It wasn't like this before. Fewer dharma books were available. Now people are attending to the heart-spirit." But do you hear

people say it? “Yes,” she said. “People say that, but I don't agree. Both are developing, and we need both. We have to separate them. The fact that one develops doesn't mean the other doesn't.”

Her response was unusual. Most informants agreed that the heart-spirit was underdeveloped. But read in the broader context of Bangkok's discursive ecology, her comment might not be utterly strange. Many people, for instance, noted an inexorability of material development. Many said things like, “we must change with the times; we must accept change.” Such comments were often made during discussions about specific instances of material development along the river. A middle-aged Chinese woman in a riverside warehouse, for instance, expressed this view. We could hear workers, just outside, tearing down the old buildings, the infrastructure of the old flower-and-spice market, making way for the new. She said, “We have to accept change, right?”

Laments about development are not universal. Nor, when and where they occur, are such laments always expressed in the same idiom. But my friend's recognition of (or insistence on) worldliness is intriguing. “It's not just Thailand,” she said, “it's the whole world.” It goes against myths of unique continuity and exceptional otherness—at least insofar as material is concerned.

## River of Kings

We sat in front of a church, on the bank of the Chao Phraya River. It was still morning and we waited for the Sunday service to begin. My new friends, Thais, all older than me, waited as believers, whereas I waited with my notebook. The church is the center of the community. Some people already knew me, but I was still new to the place. After every Sunday service, the churchgoers gather at benches for lunch, and I had joined them a couple times before. I had also come on other days to interview some of the older members of the community. But I had never gone inside the church. Now, as we waited, a couple people asked about my research. I was doing research for a dissertation on waterways in Bangkok; it was the river that brought me to their

community. One of the men, a guitar player and singer in the church band, nodded and smiled, and then said, “Our great king has allowed Mon, Muslims, and Christians to live along the river.”

The interior of the church was austere, with wooden pews, white walls, a few chandeliers, and, along the back, behind the podiums, purple curtains. During the service there were many songs. Singers stood at microphones, often smiling, accompanied by guitar and piano. The man next to me had been sitting outside earlier. He knew I was a non-believer. I soon realized that he wanted to introduce me to God. He brought out his bible. I recalled a scene from *The Mosquito Coast*, an American film featuring Harrison Ford—it was indeed a blue-jean bible. He placed his hand on my arm. I tried not to recoil. This church, seeming (to my eyes, at least) to have been transplanted from the American Midwest to Bangkok, was, for me, a disconcertingly alien place.

But I was intrigued by the pastor. He now sat quietly in front of the purple curtains. I had spoken to him before. He was calm and generous. Others had described him as “down to earth.”

Another man, a guest, spoke before the congregation, describing the hardship of missionary work. He told a story about a Christian missionary in Africa. He did not go into geographical or cultural specifics, but, apparently, the rate of conversion was slow. It was very difficult, he said. One needs patience. He tried to illustrate the missionary's resolve. Faced with native resistance to the word of God, the missionary said to himself, “If not today, then tomorrow. If not in this age, then in the next age.” It was a patience based on certainty, on events sure to come, a trajectory defined by faith. But one must be reminded. One must remind oneself. And now, here, at a church in Bangkok, on the bank of the Chao Phraya River, the congregation was told about missionaries in Fiji and Borneo. “Can you imagine it?” He asked. “The natives were cannibals!” He then read from Hebrews 11, a passage about persecution, and added this commentary: “Now, here in Thailand—now they say we have freedom, but who knows about the future?” I noted the movement from one topic to the next, from missionaries to persecution, and then from the

persecution of the ancient Hebrews to a specter of persecution, to an undesirable place in the future, arrived at, presumably, by movement in the wrong direction, a dangerous trajectory.

The pastor came to the podium. He spoke, not of persecution, but of North Korea and nuclear weapons. Perhaps he had been troubled by an article in the morning paper. “Let us pray,” he said, “that God will instill the North Korean leader with wisdom, and that peace will prevail.”

When the service ended, we filed out through the doorway, which faces the Chao Phraya River. As we exited, the river, its ripples glimmering in the late morning sunshine, greeted us.

I later had opportunities to speak to the pastor in depth. He was in his mid-70s and referred to himself as a life-long servant of God. He had been a teacher of religion for most of his life. More recently, some four or five years prior to our meeting, he had been established as a pastor.

He was not a native of Bangkok. He was born in the north, in a place where waterways were a vital part of day-to-day life. As a child, he lived in a floating house—a “raft house,” as they call it—on the Nan River, one of the four primary streams that flow into the Chao Phraya.

He recalled Bangkok's waterways, as seen decades ago: “When I first came to Bangkok, there were still many canals. We would row through the canals. We'd go fishing, and we could eat the fish. The water was clean. The water used to be clear. Even 30 years ago, it wasn't this bad. After that, many new buildings were built, and so there are pipes that drain into the canals. The water has been spoiled, corrupted (น้ำก็เน่า). Now, it's very murky. The river is no longer a river.” He then panned out, painting a bigger picture: “This started during the Fifth Reign [i.e., late 19$^{th}$ century]. Up till then . . . Let's say one wanted to go to Chachoengsao [ฉะเชิงเทรา, east of Bangkok]. Well, they dug a canal, and they'd row. Better to take a boat than walk. Then people didn't want to row anymore, and so the canals were filled and became roads. But our country never made plans.”

One might wonder how it happened. How, in this Buddhist country, did he become a Christian? His father was a convert. His father had ordained as a Buddhist monk when he was 15

years old. In Thailand, it is (or at least used to be) standard practice for young males to enter the monkhood, usually on a temporary basis—for, say, one rainy season. One who does so earns merit for his parents, and also makes a lifelong transition from "raw" to "cooked." The pastor told me that his father, whom he often referred to with the ultra-respectful pronoun *tan*, ordained a second time at age 21, and remained a monk until the age of 38. He then decided to get married and start a family. It was only after his father left the monastery that he developed a faith in God. He emphasized that his father had studied Buddhism. His father was, after all, a monk for many years. He tried to explain: "Put simply, Buddhism teaches: Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil.[20] That is, if one does good, one goes to heaven. If one does evil, one goes to hell. But it's temporary. So, if one does good, one might go to heaven for 10 years. But then, say, one does evil—one goes to hell for 10 years. It's not permanent. It's called the application of karma, or paying for one's misdeeds. Let's say you kill a cow. Well, you'll be reborn as a cow. And so my father began to feel disconcerted, and he began to wonder: is there another religion, a religion in which one—if one has done good—will not have to go to hell? And he found it."

"But, at first," he said, "my father didn't accept it. He met an American missionary. I still remember—his name was Stewart. When my father left the Buddhist monastery, he was out of work. Then he got a job driving a private motorboat for the missionary on the Nan River. They called it a '*tok* boat' (เรือตือก) because of the sound of the engine: *Tok! Tok! Tok!* They'd go along the waterways, from house to house, and the missionary would distribute pamphlets and bibles. He would also read the scripture for people. You see, in those days, very few people could read. It was mainly just the monks who could read. So this American missionary was teaching Thai people how to read Thai. But my father could read because he had studied in the monastery."

[20] ทำดีได้ดี ทำชั่วได้ชั่ว. This is also among the most prominent suphasit (ancient proverbs) in Thailand.

He said, “My father let his first daughter, my older sister, live with the missionary, and the missionary taught her about Christianity. My father realized: this is the right way. He began taking his wife and children to the church. Ever since then, I've been a servant of God.”

And yet, some people might say that Christianity is not Thai culture. Thailand, most would agree, is a Buddhist country. I asked him about this, quite directly. Note, however, that I did not ask him about the king or royal family. He replied, “You see, Thai people love the king and the Chakri royal family very much. Christians also love the king and the royal family. And Christians also follow the biblical teaching that one must be loyal to the rulers [or 'guardians,' ผู้ปกครอง] of one's country. Every Sunday we pray for the king and royal family. As Thai Christians love the king, Thai Christians also respect (นับถือ) Buddhism. Some people, however, think that if one is not a Buddhist, then one is not loyal to the king. I might get into an argument with someone. And so I ask them: You're loyal to the king, right? And, of course, they say yes. And so I ask: Do you do anything to put the king's heart at ease? Anger, envy, all this grabbing, snatching, and fighting —is this how you show your love for the king? Ah, decide for yourself. But I hold that I'm under the protection of the king, and so I need to conduct my life properly. I need to help develop the country, take care of my family, look after society. This is how we show our loyalty to the king. The important thing is this: God created the sky, heaven, and earth—that, at least, is what I believe. And so religion must be separated from loyalty to the king. I am loyal to the king. I am also a Christian, and so I try to conduct myself properly, and thereby show loyalty to the king.”

“We don't say that Buddhism or any other religion is bad,” he said. “One has to study first. If people come here to study with me, I'll teach them. But what if I go teach somewhere else? Some people might not like it, and they might say that it's defamation. If someone accuses you of defamation, you can be sent to jail. So we have to show our faith to God, and also serve society. Still, many people hold that since the king is Buddhist, they must also be Buddhist. And so if one

knocks on a door, with the intention to distribute bibles, one can be accused of defamation. One can distribute bibles along the street. If they accept, OK. If not, we don't say anything—we can't coerce them. But we can't knock on doors. It's difficult. It's more difficult [here in Thailand] than in Lao, Cambodia, Burma, or China. There are some things I cannot say, not because they are defamatory, but because it is not appropriate to say them to others. Some things cannot be said."

One day, I told him what I had heard: we've developed materially, but not in terms . . . Before I finished, he pointed to his heart. "That's right," he said. His response was firm. He paused, then elaborated, "Heart-spirit is of the utmost importance. It is the most important thing of all. The schools set up by the government neglect the heart-spirit. Let me give you an example, a very simple example. People throw garbage into the river. People don't have discipline. Don't throw trash into the river—take it to the basket! But it's easier to throw it into the river. And, if one isn't taught from a young age, when one grows up one can't be taught anymore. To this day, people buy snacks in plastic bags, then throw the bags into the water. It has become a habit. They've been saying for tens of years that they'll put this in the school curriculum. But it's still not in the curriculum. This habit, it's what Thai people call freedom, or democracy, *Thai-style*. 'Thai-style' means not like the rest of the world (สากล). The rest of the world does it right, but Thai people say, 'We don't want it. We want it Thai-style.' So we haven't progressed as much as other nations."

He explained, "Thai-style is like this: I'm in my group, and so I want to administer matters this way. Others aren't involved. If you go up-country, you'll see that the houses have no fences. One can just go from house to house. Now, in the rural areas, up-country, they can develop more easily than in Bangkok. Progress has gone up-country! They've got wide roads. But in Bangkok, the roads are narrow. It's because of all these big buildings. This is Thai-style. People say, I don't want this or that. How can progress come into the country? The government wanted to build a dam, so that it wouldn't flood, and so that there would be enough water for agriculture in the dry

season. But the people said, 'We don't want it!' And then what? They went out in a big protest and obstructed the project. The government couldn't build it. And now? We have a flood because there's no dam. This is Thai-style democracy, and so we don't progress. What we need is international-style democracy. Here's how it works in Thailand: if one isn't satisfied with the government, one tells the military, 'Please carry out a coup.' And then the soldiers bring their guns. If you don't like it, you get shot. I don't have a gun, so I have to accept it. And so the military takes control. Now we're trying to keep the military under the law. But they can still declare martial law. And, when that happens, they'll control the country. Why do the people have to accept it? Because the military has tanks and every variety of weapon. This is the difficulty."

Notice that Thai-style is identified with Bangkok. As I have emphasized previously, cultural standards are often set by the capital city. It has a powerful position in the national imaginary. Here, however, we find a curious twist in that progress is said to have gone up-country. Moreover, it has gone up-country because people are conducting their affairs in a different way, not Thai-style. Thai-style is associated with fences and borders. Borders may or may not be materialized in the landscape, but fences are, in most cases, a tangible presence. Fences reflect the character of society, or community. An absence of fences is a condition of development. Why? If I interpret his line of reasoning correctly, an absence of fences means a less exclusionary mindset. Notice how he moves quickly from fences to "people say, I don't want this or that." The themes are linked: obstruction and refusal. One builds a fence in order to exclude, and this, he argues, means the exclusion of development, or progress. Thai-style—which, above all, is the style of Bangkok—means exclusion. It is a collective mentality that isolates. Crucially, Thai-style also means exceptionalism. Not only fences, but borders. Thai-style, he said, "means not like the rest of the world." Clearly he wanted to see the country proceed along a less exceptionalist line.

Exceptionalism is a key feature of Thai politics. Unlike its neighbors, Thailand was never officially colonized, nor did Thais experience the sort of socio-temporal break implied by decolonization. Out of this has grown a myth that Thailand is an exception. This can, and often is, a point of pride. It is also a powerful political weapon. I interviewed the pastor in 2013. In the following year, crowds mobilized in Bangkok to condemn and chase out the democratically-elected government, to oppose—by force and fear-tactics—new elections, and to replace the elected body with an appointed one. One of the mobilizers, a well-known politician, reminded audiences to be proud and thankful that Thailand had never been colonized. Tanks drove through Bangkok's streets in spring 2014, Thai-style, and the military again took control of the country.

# 5. BELONGING

They call it Saen Saeb, the Canal of a Hundred Thousand Stings (แสนแสบ). It branches off from the Chao Phraya River, cuts through Bangkok, goes east toward Cambodia. Dug during the Third Reign (early 19th century) under orders from the king, the Saen Saeb canal was originally used to move troops and military equipment (see สังคีต 2011:105-7). Siam's neighbors had not yet been pacified by Britain and France. The possibility of war remained. Today the canal has an insalubrious reputation. One immediately makes associations with sewage, poverty, and rot. The stench is notorious. Outsiders—those who do not live along the canal, Bangkok-born as well as from up-country—expressed predictable opinions. In addition to associations with stench and low-society, the canal is seen as a magnet for foreigners: labor migrants or refugees from Cambodia, Burma, Bangladesh; merchants from India or Pakistan. Outsiders refer to the filth with derision and amusement. Once, while driving across a road-bridge over the canal, my informant said, “If you fall in Saen Saeb, you will die for sure, even if you can swim.” In a popular comedy skit, Note Udom (a Thai comedian) uses Saen Saeb to describe the Ganges River: as wide as the Chao Phraya, as filthy as Saen Saeb. The canal is a good example of what happens in Bangkok when water is abandoned. It turns black. Garbage floats on the surface.

But from another perspective Saen Saeb is intensely alive. Passenger boats ply the canal, no doubt contributing to its polluted state. Pollution, though one deplores it, is a sign of life. This includes noise pollution. The boats, engines screaming, pass the hovels in intervals, rattling the doors. As a passenger, one's senses are pummeled. Heat. Heaviness. Nearly all other sound is drowned out by the engine's roar. Sometimes I covered my ears, but most seemed resigned to the noise. Passengers fill the boats during peak hours. As bodies line up and squeeze together on the wooden benches, the vessel dips deeper into the canal. We pull the ropes, raising the blue tarps on

both sides to avoid being splashed by the fetid, foul-smelling water. Packed together on planks, almost no one talks except to state one's destination to one of the fare collectors. Coins are exchanged for soft, paper tickets. The fare collectors, referred to in Thai as “bags,” cover their faces with masks and make rounds on the edges, supported by ropes, moving hand over hand, stepping carefully so as not to fall into the canal. Saen Saeb is not only dirty, but dangerous. An old couple from up-country expressed concern when I told them I had been making use of the passenger boats: “Sometimes the boats catch fire. People are burned to death!”

The landscape of canal-hugging hovels is set against a background of high-rises. When the tarpaulin goes up, our surroundings are partly concealed, drawing us inward, away from the concrete, plaster, scraps, and passing forms of life. One is partially isolated, unable to speak to one's neighbor. Some passengers bring a cloth to cover their mouths and noses, attempting to protect themselves from the noxious fumes. Once, when I was sick, an informant said, “It's because of Saen Saeb for sure.” The passing landscape, even when not blotted out by the tarp, is not, for most, something to look at, much less contemplate. Ramshackle houses. Caged heaps of waste. A woman from southern Thailand, who uses the canal for her daily commute, had seen some foreigners on the boat, taking pictures. She found this strange and confusing: “What are they taking pictures of?” But, occasionally, a space opens, some breach in the stitching, and a temple appears in the distance, golden spires against a gray sky. Looking carefully, one might notice an occasional crescent, or a sign in Arabic. Sometimes one hears an Islamic call to prayer.

In this chapter I have several aims. My ethnographic focus is on a mosque built by Saen Saeb, an old and often reviled waterway in Bangkok. This chapter is about Islam in Thailand, a faith usually associated with the far south, the provinces and borderlands just north of Malaysia. Here, however, I consider Islam at the center, a community of Muslims in Bangkok. Thailand, as Keyes (1987) describes it, is both a Buddhist kingdom and a modern nation-state. Muslims born in

Thailand, sometimes called Thai Muslims, are thus in a curious position. This position is social as well as spatial. Speaking more broadly, this chapter is about belonging—especially about how belonging takes place. The mosque and its community form a kind of place, with the mosque as a powerful, sustaining center, drawing the community in around it. But, as I will show, this place can be better understood by also examining how it is situated within a multiplicity of landscapes.

## Muslims in the Center

Most studies of Islamic communities in Thailand have focused on the south (see W. Anderson 2010, Gilquin 2005, Satha-Anand 2005). There is a good reason for this, as such communities are concentrated in that region, especially in the three southernmost provinces, where, according to one author, "Muslim Thais of Malaysian origin make up almost 80% of the population" (Kermel-Torrès 2004:38). During my fieldwork, the south was in conflict, as it had been for years. Thousands have died. Yi-Fu Tuan points out that "countries have their factual and their mythical geographies. It is not always easy to tell them apart, nor even to say which is more important, because the way people act depends on their comprehension of reality, and that comprehension, since it can never be complete, is necessarily imbued with myths" (1977:98). From Bangkok, the southern region, and especially its southernmost part, which borders Malaysia, appears dangerous, untamed. If not shootings, then drug traffickers. If not drug-traffickers, then some terrible accident, some unsuspecting person attacked and disfigured by a tiger. Children are kidnapped, sold, and enslaved. It is also the land of rubber plantations. But, above all, it is the land of Islam and car bombs. Headlines appeared on a regular basis in Bangkok announcing to readers and passers-by that another bomb had exploded. The media coverage, both in print and on television, is remarkable for its absence of narrative—there is often little or no story. Bomb. Exclamation point. Conflict. The three southernmost provinces. One learns the details of when

and where, the names of the victims, the names of the police officers who arrived at the scene. Photographs of the wreckage are obligatory. One is reminded that there is a conflict, and of where it takes place. But there is a remarkable absence of discussion, background, or analysis. There is no sense of *why*, no context. In Bangkok, this void is filled with fear of the south; Muslims are often imagined as violent.

I sometimes wrote up my notes at a Lebanese restaurant, not far from the Saen Saeb canal. Guests were almost exclusively Arabic-speaking foreigners, Muslims mostly, from the Middle East or North Africa. Many were long-term residents of Bangkok. One day, while traveling along the Chao Phraya in the late afternoon, I met a roti vendor from Bangladesh. He had set up his cart near one of the piers. He spoke Thai with a thick accent and one of the first things he said to me was: "I am a Muslim. I do not eat pork." But—in the early months of fieldwork, at least—I encountered few Muslims who were born in Thailand. I began to wonder. What does Thailand look like from the perspective of Thai-born Muslims? One day I inquired about a dilapidated mosque near my apartment, just a couple minutes walk from the Chao Phraya. A descriptive panel, posted outside, explained—intriguingly, I thought—that the mosque had once been the center of a community of Javanese. My curiosity about the mosque, however, was met with confusion, and also some concern, in my largely Thai-Chinese neighborhood. People expressed ignorance, saying they were not aware of the mosque's existence. But it's just across the street, a short walk down that alley! One woman said dismissively, "This only interests you because you are a foreigner." A man from southern Thailand, an ethnic Chinese who recycles metal, said, "You should not be concerned with the Muslims. You are in Thailand, so you should study the Thais." What, I asked, about Thais who practice Islam? "Thais," he said, "do not practice Islam. Thais are Buddhist." But what, I asked, if a Thai had a change of faith? What if a Thai converts to Islam? He reiterated his basic position, without saying whether someone could become or

cease to be Thai. “Thais are Buddhist,” he said. “Muslims are not Thai.”

In contemporary Thailand, according to Keyes, “Malay-speaking Muslims in Pattani in southern Thailand, upland-dwelling Karen in northern Thailand, not to mention the Lao of northeastern Thailand and the Luk Cin [ethnic Chinese, born in Thailand], are as much Thai as are the Siamese of Central Thailand” (2002:1193). But he also points out that this is a very new idea, and that older, contrary views persist (ibid). I want to emphasize that, in Thailand, even those who verbally accept the first position—i.e., that everyone born in Thailand, regardless of ethnicity, faith, region, or native language, is Thai, with no ranking, no gradations of being more or less so—may still hold other, contradictory views. It is true that a we-are-all-equally-Thai view is sometimes promoted by the state. One can certainly find examples. But messages from the state do not necessarily form a coherent whole. Some are contradictory and the notion that everyone born in Thailand is equally Thai is often drowned out by other notions, popular and also state-promoted, that establish standards of ethno-national authenticity and narrowly circumscribe the possibilities of being Thai. As Ong Bunjoon points out, Thailand's up-country cultures, even those that are Buddhist, are marked as “not up to Thai standards [ไม่ได้มาตรฐานไทย]” (องค์ 2009: n.p.). This reflects the concentration of power in Bangkok, and Thailand's Bangkok-centered, Bangkok-directed culture of nation. But Bangkok itself—in part because of its power and extreme urban primacy (London 1980, Rigg 1991:138)—is also multiple, full of variety and mixtures (see บรรจุน 2010). Many peoples live in the city, and many of them are “non-standard.” As the words of the metal-recycler indicate, Muslims, even if they are born in Bangkok, loyal to the king, and speak Thai as their only language, are not necessarily regarded as Thai.

Muslims in Thailand are seen as an ethnic or racial group, as seen in the term *cheua chat islam*, which means ethnically or racially Islamic. Muslims are also commonly referred to as *khaek*, which literally means “guest.” The term implies foreignness—a guest is not a member of

one's house or country. Note also that such so-called guests are not always welcome or hospitably received. Khaek is also a culturally-specific racial designation, which lumps together Malays, North Africans, Indonesians, Arabs, and Indians (usually including Hindus), amongst others. Some readers might think that Javanese and North Africans look rather dissimilar. Thai informants assure me that the faces look very much the same. This perception of otherness, in the way that it packages ethnicity and religion as fundamentally linked, says much more about the ethno-national cultural imaginary of Thailand than it does about North Africans. In Thailand (as in some other places) nation, ethnicity, and religion are bound together. Such reifications create a lot of problems, including problems for those who write about Thailand. Van Esterik observes that so-called Thai culture "is easily objectified by outside analysts because it is so completely objectified by insiders and delivered, thinglike, prepackaged with shiny surfaces that attract for both theoretical and aesthetic reasons" (2000:239). One evening, in a working-class karaoke bar on Rama IV Road, a woman sings, "Thai people love their nation and religion." Images of golden temples pass on the TV screen. Could the same words be accompanied by an image of Mecca?

I made a few attempts to meet people living near the old Javanese mosque, but did not establish long-term relations. One evening, I asked a small group of people who lived next to the mosque if there were still any Javanese in the community. "No, there are no Javanese," they said, "just us Thai Muslims." It was around this time that I found the mosque at Saen Saeb, which then absorbed my attention. The term Thai Muslim is worth considering. From the perspective of the metal recycler, it is self-contradictory—one cannot be both. Self-application, on the other hand—referring to oneself as a Thai Muslim—might, in this context, be a counter-claim, or at least a claim of non-contradiction. The matter is complicated. The ethnic associations of "Thai" have still not dissolved. Charnvit Kasetsiri, in a thin volume titled *Siam or Thai* (ชาญวิทย์ 2008b), makes the case for changing the name of Thailand back to Siam. Near the end of the book, he turns to

the conflict in the south. What we see in the south, he suggests, is really happening all over the country, only at lower intensity. It is a crisis of identity and belonging. The expression "Thai Muslim," he says, is an imposition, especially in the south: "Most of the people of the three southernmost provinces are 'Malay,' not 'Thai Muslims' as we have branded them" (ชาญวิท 2008b:40). The expression "Thai Muslim" sounds inclusive, but it is also exclusionary; it denies alternate kinds of ethnic identification. One question is: are the people of the far south Thai? But perhaps the question should really be: is there a place in the nation for those who do not see themselves as Thai or Buddhist, but as Malay and Muslim? Could a national concept be built and instated in which such people could feel at home?

The matter of Islam in Thailand reminds us that a fissure remains. There is, on the one hand, "Thai" as an ethnic designation. There is, on the other hand, "Thai" as a national designation. But the latter is encrusted with ethnic (and religious) associations. It is true that meaning has shifted. After the change of the country's name from Siam to Thailand in 1939, the state ran aggressive campaigns to change the identities of non-Thai peoples within the borders (see Barmé 1993). Many people started to, for the first time, call themselves Thai. Since that time, many previously non-Thai ethnic groups have both recognized themselves as Thai and attained some (though not total) recognition by others as Thai. I have not conducted research in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand, and thus do not have first-hand knowledge of how the expression "Thai Muslim" is there received. My understanding of the term, however, is complicated by this: Muslims in Bangkok often self-identified as Thai. This does not obviate the matter of imposed labels—such imposition is a fact. Yet, in Bangkok, to say, "They are not really Thai, but Muslims of another ethnic group" is problematic. Being non-Thai is problematic in Thailand, and Thailand may be the only nation to which one can belong. We live in a world in which one must belong to a nation. It is complicated by claims of belonging, and not only claims, but a deep sense that one

does belong, even if that sense of belonging sometimes comes under attack.

To clarify, there are basically five positions. According to the first (exemplified by the metal recycler), Muslims are not Thai, cannot be, and Thailand is not their country. This position is strictly exclusionary. It is the position of the Buddhist who sees Muslims as a non-national other. It is promoted both directly and indirectly by the state. The second position is that some Thais are, in fact, Muslims, and a special term is needed for them, i.e., so that they can be included in the nation: Thai Muslims. This view is also state-promoted. The third position is that the label "Thai Muslim" is really an artifact of an exclusionary national concept. Rather than let people self-identify, rather than open space for multiple ethnic groups, faiths, and so on, the state has imposed this label on Thailand's Islamic population. The fourth position is that of Muslims who see themselves as non-Thai and encircled by a hostile, Buddhist nation-state. This is the position of the southern separatist. The fifth position is that of those who self-apply the term Thai Muslim. In their view, one who is born in Thailand is Thai, regardless of faith or ethnic background.

## Water & Faith

The metal recycler calls to his wife: "Bring one of the prayer books." The two had made donations at an up-country temple so that these books could be printed. She brings out the book. It is thin, held together by staples at the spine. The prayers, or chants, are in Pali, rendered in Thai script. Thai Buddhists are likely to recognize some of the chants, the syllables and rhythm, but Pali is mostly unintelligible to most of the laity as well as monks. He flips pages, turns to where their names are printed, recognition in ink of their merit-earning donation. The book now stands on my bookshelf. "Study this," he says. "Read it little by little. You need to learn about Thai culture—not just the Muslims." Notably, he sometimes emphasized his Chinese ethnic background. He was only a single generation removed from China, but seemed secure in his

identification with Thai culture. He and his wife sometimes speak Chinese at home. Our meetings always took place in more or less the same spot, on wooden stools on the sidewalk, just across from a hospital. He narrated his memories of life on a southern rubber plantation. During the dry season, he said, one works very hard. The region receives a lot of rain, and when it rains one cannot collect rubber. The plantation, which had belonged to his Chinese father, was lost, and so he found his way to Bangkok. “The Chinese are not like the Muslims,” he said. “The Chinese can go anywhere, work anywhere. Do you notice it? The Chinese create no problems. But wherever the Muslims go, there is a problem. Do you notice it? They are very violent people.”

Saen Saeb—the Canal of a Hundred Thousand Stings—flows from the Chao Phraya, but I had not initially thought of it as a research site. I used the canal for travel. One day, while passing through on a passenger boat, I heard an Islamic call to prayer resonating over the canal.

It caught my attention. I decided to find the mosque.

I disembarked at the market on the bank of the Saen Saeb canal. The boat tilts as passengers rise from the planks, move toward the edge, and step up onto the pier. Without care, one's foot might slip into the canal. The market is oriented to clothing retail. I once sheltered there during a rainstorm. The mosque is on the opposite side of the canal, in an alley, set back just slightly from the water. It was not difficult to find. I did not, of course, expect much during my first visit. But I kept going back. The community is small, comprised of a few hundred people. Arriving for the first time, I only talked to a couple vendors. People in the community, they said, are locals—not people from the south. On subsequent visits, more people got to know about my project, that I was studying waterways in Bangkok. People were kind. I was surprised by the warmth with which I was received. Many people, meeting me for the first time, inquired about my religious beliefs. Some were surprised that a non-Muslim would be interested in an Islamic community. It seems that such communities are often regarded with apprehension by non-Muslims in Bangkok.

The mosque is the center of the community. And a sense of community, here, anchored in this place, was quite immediate. Not only was it present in words, but it appeared in people's movements, gestures, in the ways that bodies gathered and separated. This is also, still, a canal-side community, and people have not forgotten about the water. This particular stretch of the canal is often called Maha Nak—and that is also the name of the mosque. Thus, in speaking of the mosque, one cannot avoid reference to the waterway. Maha Nak means Great Naga, a serpent king and king of serpents. Maha Nak is protector of the Buddha. And so the name does two things: it binds the mosque to the canal; it also alludes to a position in a Buddhist city and nation-state, wherein the landscape is marked by names from a Buddhist cannon. A university professor, an outsider, had told me that Saen Saeb was an open sewer. The people, he said, have abandoned the water. But I observed that people around the mosque were quite aware of the canal, its presence, condition, and reputation. It was one of the defining features of this place and the immediate urban landscape. It said something about their situation, spatial as well as social.

So it is Maha Nak, but still, essentially, Saen Saeb, the most notoriously foul canal in Bangkok. It is often said in Bangkok that Saen Saeb was once clean. Some who live and work near the mosque even said they could remember the canal's better days. Older people had swam in the canal. Vendors used to pass through in canoes, paddling, calling out the names of their goods, drawing residents to the edge of the canal. The cries of the vendors have vanished, so to speak, from the landscape, persisting only as memories. Such canoes would surely be capsized by the rough wake of the engine-equipped passenger boats. The vendors were part of the cultural life of the canal; when the old people recollected the old days, the vendors were a prominent feature. All landscapes change with the passing of time. Most are composed of some combination of durable and transitory elements. And, in a way, the vendors were both simultaneously—their coming and going was predictable, part of daily life. The disappearance of the vendors is part of

the story of the canal's ruin. Also gone are the fish and fishermen. Although there is much life along the waterway, not much life remains in the water itself, which used to be (amazingly, if one considers its present state) full of fish. The bookshop by the mosque used to sell fishing nets.

A community on the bank of Saen Saeb is a slum by definition. Negative perceptions of the canal often go hand-in-hand with negative perceptions of its people. Pandian describes how outsiders see the harsh, arid terrain of southern India expressed in the harsh, arid dispositions of the Kallars (2009:205). It is, of course, a culturally-specific case, but it raises a broader question: how do perceptions of landscape relate to how those who live in the landscape are perceived? At another site, near a church on the other side of the Chao Phraya River, I sat on a veranda, telling an informant about the mosque by Saen Saeb. She made a comparison. "We Christians," she said, "will not tolerate uncleanliness." It was an expression of pride in her community and religious commitments, but it also suggests a linkage of matter and morality. The poor condition of the canal was thought to reflect the inferior ethical standards its people. We can also approach this question from another direction, from inside. In one of his talks, Suzuki says, "In Buddhist scripture there is a famous passage that explains that water is not just water. For human beings water is water, but for celestial beings it is a jewel. For fish it is their home, and for people in hell or hungry ghosts it is blood, or maybe fire. If they want to drink it, water changes into fire, and they cannot drink it. The same water looks very different to various beings" (2003:95). The water may also look different in accordance with one's position, social and/or spatial, in the landscape.

## Slum Community

Friday. In the alley, across from the mosque. The boy is on the bench; he prays, rocks back and forth. Green cap. His lips are moving. Kids are climbing on the bench. One of them pushes open a small gate. A woman scoops him up like a sack of potatoes. A noisy motorcycle comes through

the narrow lane. Rumbles. Electric saws, somewhere, out of sight, cut and scrape. The beggar women are out, seated on the ground, just across from the entrance of the mosque. It's Friday for sure. Each woman has a small bowl. Kids run out of the school. Bits of chicken are roasting on a grill. The vendor sits, barely moves. A body trained to sit. A metal bowl of lettuce is by her side. Smoke rises from the grill. Men smoke cigarettes in front of the mosque. Sarongs and caps. Legs bounce and swing. Look up, through the upstairs window of the mosque: overhead fans spin. My friend, the teacher, says I cannot go into the mosque during prayers. Near the entrance, men shake hands and tap their hearts. Speakers are set up overhead. A male voice resonates through the alley, spreads over the canal and even into the market. The voice slows down, stops. He clears his throat. The voice returns. A teenager or twenty-something rides by on a black bicycle, with a pink shirt, a gold watch, and an Islamic cap. A man stoops down to talk to a boy with down syndrome: “Hello! Peace be upon you!” At the school, the buzzer goes off, the door opens, a loud, thick droning sound pours out into the alley, followed by the footsteps of children. Two girls in white headscarves run out of the school, feet clopping, then disappear into the back of the alley. A man in a collared shirt, perhaps Pakistani, surely a resident merchant, approaches the mosque, checks his watch, then sits to chat with the others on the bench. The imam arrives. He stops briefly, greets people, keeps his momentum. Bells now approach, a delicate tinkle: the ice-cream vendor. A man sits on the concrete steps and smokes a cigarette. He is not a Muslim. He has terrible lumps on his exposed skin. It is past noon now, prayer time approaches, the collection of bodies thickens. Clean, well-groomed and well-dressed. More and more people enter the mosque. Some still sit in front, chatting. Others pick up their feet and hurry inside. A man limps through the alley, but his movement is strangely powerful, brisk. He commands attention for a few moments, speaks to a few people in passing, then vanishes inside the mosque. The men on the bench take their last cigarette puffs.

The teachers at the Islamic school, amongst others, described this community as a slum. But it was a slum of a particular sort. No one spoke of poverty. The word *slum* (a transliteration, presumably from English) seemed to indicate certain social problems, such as a proliferation of narcotics and addiction. In Bangkok, narcotics are often front-page news. Traffickers, if caught, are transformed into media spectacles. The format is standardized: young men sit at a table, side-by-side, with the dope neatly packaged and arranged before them in still-life. Officers in black uniforms, self-satisfied, stand in an arc, forming the backdrop and flanks of the scene. The officers pass around a microphone and narrate the case. The young men sit motionless, heads lowered—meek, resigned, shamed. In the city, I often saw signs, especially at sites of employment, but also on the glass door to my apartment building, that read: work gives life; narcotics destroy the nation. The problem, or challenge, of narcotics was part of what made the canal-side community into a slum. But, in spite of the shameful associations, there was no effort to conceal this problem. To the contrary, such matters were immediate, rapidly exposed. One day, as I was sitting at a table at the school with two teachers, a man walked in and said, “Are you doing research on narcotics? We have a big problem with narcotics.” Perhaps this was one of the distinctive feature of the community: its members' ready recognition of internal challenges, coupled with steadfast, collective efforts to find solutions.

During my months of intermittent research in this canal-side community, local leaders and local police were carrying out an anti-narcotics campaign. I recall one of the events. I arrived early to meet the school teacher and we walked from the school to the graveyard. She is a native of the community, with a small house on the bank of the canal. A few years ago, she traveled to Saudi Arabia and completed the haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. After that, she said, she became more strict in the arrangement of her headscarf, sure to cover her hair. We are walking. She stops to talk to people. She inquires about the merchant's children. Soon we arrive at the graveyard. An

old man rests on a bench. She asks about his pain-afflicted leg and reminds him to take care of it. One hears roosters. Grave markers include names as well as the year of pilgrimage. This is a Buddhist country, in which the king must, by law, be Buddhist. Most bodies are not buried, but burned. This place of death and remembrance indicates a cohesion of community. It marks time, its imprecision notwithstanding; the Muslims of Maha Nak have been here for generations. But, if one could take in the national landscape of Thailand at a glance, and somehow still see the landscapes of particular communities, this Islamic imprint, an enclosure of earth and markers, might appear rather peculiar. It shows the temporal integrity of place and people, but also difference. We soon leave the graveyard. Backstreets, paved. Arrangements are being made: tents for shade, neat rows of folding, metal chairs. School children in matching colors are herded into groups. A man from the government will appear, along with local police, teachers, and the imam.

Many photos are taken. The theme is simple: local addicts are encouraged to report themselves, in return for which they will receive treatment. Several men take the microphone, all repeating the same line: "We will not press charges." But the promise needs a demonstration. Onlookers are presented with a voluntary, exemplary addict. He is dressed in oversized clothing and his hair is perfectly disheveled. With his awkward smile, creased face, and lurching gait, the audience knows immediately why he is present. There is no need for him to speak. The police officer announces, "Many have registered already. Let me remind you: we will not press charges." Pamphlets, which summarize the campaign, are distributed to the audience. A guide to identifying addicts is included. We sit under the tent, shaded. Water and iced coffee are also distributed. Cameras snap and roll, creating a record of the event, but also, in a way, creating the event itself. The camera contributes to the official atmosphere, shows that it is worth recording. Leaders line up for photographs. The event amounts to an hour-long announcement. As it comes to an end, children are recruited, lined up, and sent back into the alley. They pass the graveyard,

then pass under the eaves of houses, chanting all along: “Don't mess with narcotics!”

## People of the Place

People belonged to this place and to each other. The sense of community was cultivated by committed, visible leaders. One of my closest informants was Kru Ratri, a teacher at an Islamic school. She often spoke of her long-term role as a leader in the community. She also spoke frequently of the previous imam. His passing was a turning point in her life. On the day we first met, she said, “Our new imam is still, unfortunately, a youth [วัยรุ่น].” He was perhaps 50 years old. She repeated this observation from time to time. “He's no match for the old imam,” she would say. When we sat down to talk, she would show me photos of the previous imam, mostly of events in which he had received awards. “In Islam,” she noted, “a man must be a leader.” But perhaps this notion had also complicated her own position. She never mentioned any conflict with the new imam, but she did emphasize support received from the old imam, whereby she developed a rather prominent role and stature in the community. She not only led, but also self-identified as one who leads. One day, I stopped to visit her at the school, but she was not to be found. Others told me she was out on errands. It was a quiet day by the mosque. After chatting with a couple people, I went to sit by the canal. Passenger boats buzzed by as usual. Waves of green-black water sloshed against the banks. Men were under the bridge with welding torches. Then Kru Ratri appeared, on foot, crossing the bridge; she saw me and waved her hand. We met at the bottom of the stairs. As we walked back to the school, she stopped to talk to people in the alley, just keeping up to date with life and relations. Inside, she said, “A leader must be like this, don't you think? I talk to many people. I need to know what's going on in the community.”

The link here between place and faith cannot be overstated. Above all, the mosque itself is the enduring center of this place. Leaders will come and go—the community will produce and

replace leaders. The mosque, however, can be expected to persist. Its temporality exceeds that of any human life cycle. I often sat in the front room of the school, where meetings are held and guests received. If not Kru Ratri, then one of the other teachers would instruct the servant to bring me coffee. I was waiting, writing in my notebook. A man came in, quietly. He did not look at me. He sat, raised his hands and began to murmur into his palms. It was rhythmic, punctuated by breaths. He did this for about 10 minutes. The breaths gradually became quicker, more pronounced. Then he stood up, again quietly, and walked out of the school. I saw him do this many times, usually while sitting on the bench in front of the mosque. But several weeks passed before he said anything to me. One day he came into the school while I was speaking with Kru Ratri. He had no errand, but simply sat down and said, "This is the best—to be born a human." I was intrigued. Kru Ratri said, "Yes, if you are born a tree, you could be chopped down. I sometimes even pity the birds—they can be shot out of the sky." Then the man said, "But the very best is to be born a Muslim." Kru Ratri said, "Oh, Michael is not a Muslim." He seemed puzzled. "But I have seen him here many times," he said. "I was sure he was a Muslim!" This suggests a high degree of identity between place and faith, the expectation that one who comes into this place is a Muslim. It also suggests a sense of social distance, the common reticence of non-Muslims to enter the community. A mostly Buddhist social world is just beyond the alley.

From the first day, I wondered about the origins of this community. There are different ways to consider origins: how did it originate? Why did it originate? And so on. My focus here is on the geography of origins—the question of where and the character, real or imagined, of the landscape. I had suspected from the beginning that the community might be made up of people from the south, ethnic Malays. But people usually emphasized their local identity, that they were "people of the place." Here I use the word *place* to approximate the term *peun-ti* (พื้นที่). *Peun* suggests ground or surface—it draws our attention to the earth or pavement, surfaces on which

people walk, build, sit, reside, or prostrate. *Ti* suggests a location or site. Thus one viable translation of peun-ti would be “surface-site.” The mosque is the center around which this surface-site takes shape. In Casey's (1997) examination of place, he shows that in Mediterranean antiquity, place was a container—place was understood to begin at its outer edge or boundary. Similarly, J. B. Jackson highlights the power of boundaries in landscapes: boundaries bind, hold groups together, create and maintain collectives (1980:115). Here, however, in this canal-side Islamic community, place seems to begin at its center. There is, of course, a meaningful edge or boundary, but it is the mosque, the center, which pulls the community inwards around it. It is the mosque that sustains the boundary.

The expression “people of the place” implies local birth. But being a person of the place also depends on that place's stability and the cohesion of community. One informant had, decades previously, left her childhood home, which was built on the bank of Saen Saeb. In addition to a vibrant canal culture, she also recalled a landscape of orchards. Now the orchards, like the itinerant canoe-paddling merchants, are gone. “I would not be able to find that place,” she said. “Now everything has changed.” The canal is still there, and it is clear that her home was located somewhere along its length, but the community of her birth has dissolved and dispersed. That place exists only in memory. Thus, when people self-identify as people of the place, one might observe that not everyone has such a place. While discussing the mosque and its community, two informants, sisters, both middle-aged, Bangkok-born Chinese, drew (rather surprisingly) a favorable contrast to their own experience: “That is very good,” they said, “to have the mosque as center of the community. We go to the *saan jao* (Chinese shrine), but we are outsiders. We don't know the other people at the shrine. We are surrounded by strangers.” Around the mosque, some noted the presence of outsiders in the community. If I asked, people would say, “Yes, there are some Burmese, all of whom are Buddhists. They rent rooms here—they are renters, not

owners." The number, however, was said to be small, and their presence was rather discrete. I never met any Burmese there. Most of the people I met and interacted with were, as they say, "people of the place." Migrant Burmese, without local birth or attachment to the mosque, are in a somewhat awkward position: physically within the boundaries of the community, but still, it seems, social outsiders, with minimal claims to place and no affective attachment to the mosque.

Many years ago, the original mosque caught fire and burned to the ground. No one was old enough to have experienced this, but it was central to the local collective memory. The old mosque was made of wood, thus quick to burn. The prominence of this memory, often repeated, passed on from generation to generation, might suggest the scale of devastation, a collective trauma. It was also the primary feature of the current mosque's biography. The new mosque will always, it seems, be a replacement for the old mosque. People frequently reminded me of this event—the destruction of the old mosque—and this shows a deep attachment to place. To be people of the place is to remember, to partake in collective, even trans-generational memories.

## Topographies of Memory

The mosque is a center that generates place. But this place also exists within broader geographies, within not one but multiple landscapes. The Saen Saeb canal is part of the story of this place. As Ingold notes, "Life is lived […] along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort" (2007:2). Indeed, the canal is a line of urban infrastructure; it connects this place to others in a specific configuration. It is also, as I have emphasized, a landscape laden with meaning, full of associations: decay, abandonment, poverty, crime, Cambodian refugees, and so on. These associations, the meanings that inhere in the immediate landscape, are among the factors that give shape to this place. This holds true for insiders as well as outsiders. Those who live near the canal-side mosque are well aware of the canal's reputation, the "imaginative

geography" (Said 1978:1954) in which the community is situated. Those who live in the community, of course, have their own associations with the canal. It is not simply that insiders view it in a positive light whereas outsiders view it with disdain and apprehension. Even the negative associations may look rather different through the eyes of people of the place. On the one hand, there is the stigma of being a drug-washed slum community; on the other, there is the momentum of collective effort to grapple with narcotics. For the insider, the latter may be an index of vitality. It shows that the community is strong, capable of organizing, fortified by faith.

The mosque, Maha Nak, as previously noted, is named after a particular stretch of the Saen Saeb canal. Every utterance of the mosque's name is, at the same time, a reference to the canal. The canal is multivalent. It has both a present and a past—or, to put it another way, a limited multiplicity of pasts and presents. It has a temporality, one that connects it to old Bangkok. As Basso (1996) has demonstrated, it is crucial to consider the memories that inhere in places. Such memories are sometimes marked, as Basso also emphasizes, by place-names. Maha Nak is a serpent king, a being from a Buddhist canon, but what can we make of Saen Saeb? *Saen* means "a hundred thousand." It is also sometimes used as an intensifier, something on the order of "ever so." *Saeb* means sting, burn—basically, pain of a certain sort. So it is "a hundred thousand stings," or, perhaps, "ever so stinging." Why has the canal received this name? The most common explanation was that, in the old days, the canal and its environs were terribly infested with mosquitoes. As such, the name suggests an earlier phase of urban development. Mosquito swarms of such scale have been driven out of Bangkok and are associated now with rural areas, where mosquito nets are still a necessity of life. Another explanation, less common, is that the name alludes to the suffering of the people who dug the canal. It was dug, they say, by forced labor. One woman added: "In those days, they had few tools, so the diggers had to dig with their bare hands. They were digging and crying at the same time." This explanation, though less

common, resonates with other kinds of memories that persist in Thailand's capital city: memories of coerced labor and violent punishment (such as decapitation) said to be common practice in the not-so-distant past. Such memories, passed on, received, and quite widespread in Bangkok—i.e., not altogether particular to this community—are parallel to memories of an idyllic past, part of a broader culture of memory. As this community is located within multiple landscapes, so it also partakes in multiple, overlapping collectives and bodies of memory.

The name Maha Nak also suggests a still wider landscape, that of a Buddhist nation-state, a landscape in which Islam is identified with the far south and often seen as a source of violence as well as a threat to territorial integrity.

People usually emphasized local origin, being people of the place. Some, if asked, directly denied southern origin. Others expressed uncertainty—they were sure of being people of the place, but were not quite sure, if asked, of the origins of the people who created this place. Was it, after all the south, or even the Malay peninsula? There were Malay-Thai dictionaries at the local Islamic bookstore, and some expressed an interest in learning Malay. Why learn Malay? One informant said that it might be useful for the study of Islam. Thus, in this case, it was not necessarily about origins or identity; it was more about a world of knowledge into which language could provide access. Everyone was, of course, aware of the concentration of Islam in the south, as well as the southern conflict, and that these realities, somehow, had something to do with them. Some noted, for instance, the prejudice, common in Bangkok, that Muslims are given to violence—i.e., people with "violent heads." The ongoing violence in the south, and also ignorance, such as absence of knowledge of Islam or relations with Muslims, were sometimes cited as causes of prejudice. Others noted these prejudices but did not explicitly seek causes. And some said that, in recent years, the conflict had gotten worse, grown more violent, and thereby amplified negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. People insisted that they have no conflicts

with Buddhism or Buddhists. Perhaps it was necessary to disconnect themselves from the south, to affirm that the conflict does not reflect the character of their community. If we talked about the relations between Buddhists and Muslims, people almost always said, "We can enter one another," which is to say: get along, talk to one another, form harmonious relations.

The matter of belonging here is local, but also coordinated by, or within, the landscape of the nation-state. The people of the Maha Nak mosque have a community with a strong center, a surface-site of their own. In addition to being people of the place, however, they are also self-described Thai Muslims, a label which, it is said, many Muslims in the far south cannot accept. The people of Maha Nak recognize themselves within a contemporary vocabulary, one complicated and compromised by a conflicted national landscape. In the southernmost provinces of peninsular Thailand, matters of place, nation, and identity are set to burn. But the friction is not strictly local. It sends tremors though the national body. It is also, as noted earlier, related to a still-exclusionary national concept. No doubt, specific political acts have exacerbated the conflict. For example, a very painful wound was inflicted in 2004, when a group of southern protesters were rounded up by the military and crammed into trucks. "Like pigs," as one informant put it. 78 died of suffocation (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009:230). But these matters overflow the specificities of place, perpetrators, and victims.

The people of Maha Nak and the people of the far south not only share faith, but also live within the same borders, and may even share origins. The cultural realities and ongoing conflict in the south are part of a broader set of coordinates, a partially shared imaginary, an internally variegated landscape of nation in which belonging is established, negotiated, denied, felt.

In nation-states around the world, the question of belonging is often tied to the question of origins. Does local origin confer belonging? Arriving at the mosque for the first time, after months of immersion in Bangkok, one might wonder about ties to the southern provinces.

Outside the community, the link between Islam and the south is often automatic. The south: land of conflict, shooting, and car bombs. But within the community there were several interpretations of origin. I say interpretations, in part, to emphasize that there were multiple stories, and these were not necessarily commensurable. Furthermore, there may be doubts, desires, or exigencies, ghost-like presences gnawing at the edges of any given story of origin. Some people, if asked about origins, voiced uncertainty and said, "One needs to talk to the big people," meaning older, higher-status members of the community. This reflects an uneven distribution of knowledge, as well as a system of value in which the big people have greater power to know and interpret. Still, the interpretations did not converge on one version, rather there seemed to be a limited pattern. Many claimed local origin. Others expressed uncertainty, or even ignorance of origins. Some claimed origins in the south—in the southernmost part of Thailand, or even Malaysia. And some claimed regional origin (Central Thailand), with emphasis on origins in Ayutthaya.

This last response was the least common. It was, however, voiced by the imam, one of the most prominent members of the community. And so it occupies a very interesting place in the scheme. Although few voiced this interpretation directly, many, if asked, would defer to the imam. Note the strong resonance with the dominant narrative of the Thai nation, according to which Bangkok is the true successor to Ayutthaya. With the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, power moved downstream and established new centers, first at Thonburi, then across the river at Bangkok. Many of the people of Ayutthaya, however, had been captured and carted off to Burma, never to return. This latter part of the story is often forgotten, with the emphasis put rather on the destruction of the city, on pillage and the desecration of temples. One of the urgent needs of subsequent Siamese rulers and kingdoms was to repopulate the Chao Phraya basin. This was accomplished by drawing outsiders, especially Chinese, but also many other ethnic groups to the new capital cities. It was also accomplished by the old strategy of

capture, to which we will turn in a moment. But to claim origin, upstream, in Ayutthaya is also to claim a place for Islam in the reigning narrative of Thai history. Indeed, it is clear that there were Islamic communities in the ancient city-kingdom of Ayutthaya. And so, perhaps, this canal-side community in Bangkok is a successor to one or more of old Siam's Islamic communities.

Contrary to myths of pure origins, Ayutthaya was a city of many peoples and faiths. It was among the biggest and "most cosmopolitan" cities of Southeast Asia (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009:13). Regardless of whether or not the imam's interpretation of origins is accurate, it is still crucial to emphasize that there is a history here of Islam at the center, in Ayutthaya as well as in Bangkok. It is not only at the violence-ridden fringe of modern Thailand that one finds Islam.

Some of the big people, however, did indicate the south as the source, the space of origin. They said this community of self-described Thai Muslims had origins in the Malay peninsula, that the people were originally, ethnically and culturally, Malay. One day, a man described this to me. We stood by a metal rail, gazing at Saen Saeb, the Canal of a Hundred Thousand Stings. He was in his 50s, well read, well established and respected in the community. "I think we came from the south," he said. "In the south there used to be an independent kingdom called Pattani. Do you know about it? The people were Muslims, Malays. Then came the age of colony-hunting. Siam took Pattani as a colony. It was just like the French and British imperialists. Siam also wanted to be a civilized country—Siam wanted colonies of its own. So they invaded Pattani. People were captured and driven [or herded] to Bangkok. Maybe this is where we came from."

This is quite unlike the narrative relayed by the imam. Very rarely did people describe Siam as a predatory state. The events narrated above, the capture of southern peoples, the transplantation to Bangkok, are well documented, but in day-to-day life, in the memories of most people, Siam's past as colonizer has been erased. Much more prevalent is the story of Thailand as the only country in Southeast Asia to escape colonization. Many say that this makes Thailand unique, and

that one should be proud that “we” have never been colonized. Siam's past as colonial power, is submerged by this story. Siam's colonial relations with the south in the early 19th century are summarized by Vella: “The essential ingredient in the relationship between Siam and its Malay vassals was the superior physical strength of Siam. The Malays had no bonds of language, culture, or religion with the Siamese; they did not look for Siamese leadership in such matters” (Vella 1957:61). Contemporary southerners are, it seems, in an awkward position in relation to the popular expression “we have never been a colony.” The other side of the coin is a story about Siam as victim. British and French imperialists, they say, took territories away from Siam. Thus, many in Thailand claim that the country used to be bigger. Territories now in Cambodia, Laos, and Burma are said to have been snatched by the British and French imperialists, and then inherited by neighboring, post-colonial nations. These stories are often combined. So, for instance, Rama V is now remembered as the king who, reluctantly, as one man put it, “sacrificed the arms and legs of the nation in order to save the body.” So Siam is a victim, but also unique, the exception, the lone escapee of colonial domination. The violent incorporation of the southern states has no place in this imaginary of an already bounded, collective, national body.

And so this is the other possibility: the people of Maha Nak are the descendants of war captives. It is, in any case, significant that a trace of this colonial past persists in this place. It is a trace that might connect them, again, to the south—not only to the contemporary landscape of conflict, but to a once independent Islamic state. This was relayed as an interpretation of origins, based on traces of a real-enough past. It was not an emotion-stirring wound. Such memories of colonial designs, capture and transplantation, seem to have been subordinated or neutralized to a considerable degree by other collective memories, and perhaps also a need to belong and claim place. The people of Maha Nak are quite clear about where they belong: here, in Bangkok, with the mosque. Assmann notes that “the disappearance of ethnic groups (apart from rare exceptions

like the Inca Empire) is not a matter of physical annihilation but of collective and cultural forgetting" (2011:140). One might also ask why people forget, and perhaps even explore different modes of forgetting. It is not sufficient to attribute forgetting to natural, inexorable erosion, only sometimes and only minimally restrained by cultural imperatives to remember. It seems probable that the community at Maha Nak is in part, if not in whole, of peninsular, Malay origin. But today it may be ties of faith and shared borders, rather than ties of origins, that bind Maha Nak to the peninsular landscape. Forgetting may go hand-in-hand with an imperative to belong. The people of Maha Nak do not fight for an independent Islamic state. Rather, they quietly, and confidently, make their place, here, by the canal, as an Islamic community in a Thai metropolis.

## Conclusion

This chapter began by introducing the reader to the Saen Saeb canal. The canal provides the basis for a particular kind of landscape. It is a passage, a line of infrastructure; it links up to other parts of the urban transportation system. The community of Maha Nak is one point along this line, a reality that does much to establish and orient the position of this place in the city. It is located on a particular path; it is not just a spot in differentiated space. The water passage is also full of life, meaning, culture. Its foul reputation, its notoriety in Bangkok, has strong implications for how place is perceived and experienced, by insiders as well as outsiders. The community now lies along other paths as well, especially asphalt roads, which are lined with markets and new sorts of vendors, both like and unlike the itinerant canoe-paddling vendors who used to row through the canal. This landscape of streets and small-scale vendors, though little discussed in this chapter, is yet another dimension of the place that congeals around the mosque. But the Saen Saeb canal, in spite of more than a century of road-building, is still a powerful source of meaning for this place. It is full of memories and the day-to-day life of memory maintains connections to the canal. It is

part of the body of stories and fragmentary images that make this place. It is, in some senses, more important than the roads, more definitive. Unlike many other old canals, Saen Saeb was never transformed into a street and the community of Maha Nak has remained canal-side.

The two landscapes are interlocked by this particular place. The community of Maha Nak is both a canal-side slum community, as well as a community of people who engage in commerce. One of my broader aims is to show that this is a crucial aspect of place—a place can be a meeting point between multiple landscapes, far and near. The character of those landscapes, as well as the practices and politics through which they are integrated, is part of the life of place. In addition to the canal and the market-lined streets, this place also integrates the broader landscape of central Thailand, namely the Chao Phraya River and the downstream migration of people and power after the violent collapse of Ayutthaya. This is one of the central, official stories of the Thai nation, a story prominent in the collective memory of Bangkok and beyond. It is a story of Central Siam/Thailand, but also of the nation. It reaches well beyond the immediate landscape. Regardless of origins-in-fact, it is significant that at least some of the people of Maha Nak, an Islamic community, can see themselves in that national, Thai or Central Thai, narrative. One is reminded of the Muslims of old Ayutthaya, now the center of a glorious, golden past. The image and reality of Islam at the center, as one faith among others, is an alternative to imaginaries of Ayutthaya as the center of a narrowly-defined, authentic Thai culture.

Moving beyond Bangkok and Central Thailand, this place also has connections with the southern peninsula, even if some tried to dissociate from it. Non-Muslims in Bangkok do not have to clarify their position in relation to the south. As a community of self-described Thai Muslims, however, the status of the southern provinces, where Thailand's Islamic population is concentrated, is an unavoidable aspect of the life and politics of place. Non-Muslim communities may also be impacted by the conflict, but not in the same way. It enters the space of Bangkok

residents by means of maps which depict it as part of a collective, national space. It arrives by TV broadcast and photos of vehicles torn apart by explosives. It is part of how the contemporary nation is imagined, with the south as a dangerous, unstable fringe that must, nonetheless, be kept at all costs. Non-Muslims in Bangkok sometimes described the situation in the south, rather elusively, as a "political game." Some said, "they [i.e., Muslims in the south] want to be big." Others raised the specter of foreign, colonial designs, suggesting that Malaysia was secretly fomenting the conflict, arming the separatists. Malaysia, they said, is colony-hunting—aiming to take the southernmost provinces of Thailand. In short, the southern landscape may also play a part in the place-making practices of Bangkok's non-Islamic population. But the people of Maha Nak are positioned somewhat differently and thus the south is integrated into the local imaginary in a such a way that questions of origins, identity, and faith are of higher intensity.

And then there is the wider, transnational landscape of Islam. Recall the school teacher, Kru Ratri, who said that after her pilgrimage to Mecca she became more strict with the arrangement of her headscarf. This can be considered in contrast to Buddhism, Thailand's dominant, state-enshrined religion. Buddhism has been, to a remarkable extent, nationalized. In spite of its origins in the subcontinent, well beyond Thai borders, Buddhism seems in Thailand to be almost indigenous.[21] Buddhist faith and practice do not necessarily connect one to Buddhists who exist beyond national borderlines. The culture of pilgrimage, traveling to make merit at Buddhist temples (some say it is good to make merit at a distant temple) does not generally extend beyond the national horizon. People know that Buddhism has origins elsewhere, but this seems to be forgotten in day-to-day life. Rather, what is remembered is the popular slogan: Nation, Religion, King. The middle term generally means Buddhism, and one sometimes hears it worded as such:

[21] Prapas Cholsaranont, a columnist, writes, "Strange, isn't it? Many things in our world were born in one place, but grew up [เติบโต] in another place […]. Theravada Buddhism has grown up in our country—so much so that, today, Thailand is the center of Buddhism. But don't forget: the founder of our faith was an Indian" (ประภาส 2011:50).

Nation, Buddhism, King. That is the pattern of connection that dominates. To be Buddhist is to be Thai and to express loyalty to the monarch. To be Thai is to love the king and be Buddhist. This is a powerful element in the broader reification of "Thai," a cultural imaginary from which emerges the contested expression "Thai Muslim." One thing that Muslims in Thailand seem to share, whether or not they self-identify as Thai Muslims, is a sense of connection with a transnational community of believers. The mosque at Maha Nak is one of millions. The call to prayer resonates through distant cities and villages, places beyond the national horizon. Such notions of transnational religious community are alien to Thailand's Buddhist institutions.

The transnational landscape of Islam is centered in the Middle East. Around the time of Loi Kratong, when candle-carrying banana-leaf boats are released on the waterways (see Chapter 1), a Muslim friend at Maha Nak noted that his community has no such tradition. "Our faith," he said, "was not born in this environment." Indeed, as Rodriguez observes, "It was within the ecology of the Middle Eastern desert that the mystery of monotheism blazed" (2013:36). At Maha Nak, one prays toward Mecca, a place far away, the center of the Islamic landscape. The call to prayer is in Arabic. One's pilgrimage to Mecca is marked on one's grave.

Places bring together landscapes. How they do so is likely to change over time. One can be sure, for instance, that the founders of the community at Maha Nak had different relations to the south as well as to Ayutthaya. In those days, i.e., around the mid-nineteenth century, Thailand did not exist. There were few maps and they looked quite different from the ones we see today. The question of borders—at first a distinctly foreign, political obsession—had not yet been asked (see Winichakul 1994). This place in Bangkok has well over a century of temporal continuity, but its manner of pulling in the wider world has surely changed. Memory is a crucial part of how this happens. Memory, as one author argues, "draws the world together, re-membering it and endowing it with a connectiveness and a significance it would otherwise lack—or rather, without

which it would not be what it is or as it is" (Casey 1987:313). In this chapter, I offer an ethnographic analysis of connection, of how memory brings together a limited number of landscapes. I begin with a place, and ask: which landscapes? And how? Landscapes are human-inclusive, always full of meaning and traces of past experiences. Memory, a living, cultural facility, is selective and dynamic. It is part of the life of place. We can learn about the immediacies and exigencies of place, including the problem of belonging, by looking at how multiple landscapes—near and far, but always limited in number—are woven together in place.

# CONCLUSION

Water splashes and sprays as fares are collected. A boy climbs along the edge of the boat, his nose and mouth covered with a skull-face cloth. Full boat. Faces moist with sweat. Along the edge of the canal: graffiti on concrete. We go under a bridge, then emerge. The slum vanishes and skyscrapers rise, condos and hotels. Ropes are pulled, the blue tarp goes up, partially obscuring the passage. Water breaks, the engine rumbles. No one talks. A blue ambiance is on the page and all around. The tarp flaps, taps my head. Then . . . release. We slow down. Gears reengage.

Boomgaard observes that "in the study of Southeast Asia, there has always been a strong emphasis on everything terrestrial with a concomitant neglect of aquatic aspects" (2007:1). What one finds here, in the preceding pages, can be called a water-centered ethnography. But water here most often appears in the form of waterways, which are always tightly engaged with land. Rivers and canals have banks as well as terrestrial beds. Seas, of course, also have their beds and coastlines, but waterways are different. The banks are usually close and within sight. There is always a bond between the terrestrial and aquatic. My focus here has been not on people living in the water, but rather along the water (though some do jump, wade, or fall into it). What meanings inhere in the waterways? How does memory incorporate these passages? Where do waterways take us? What possibilities do they make available? Waterways do not exclude the terrestrial. To the contrary, waterways provide distinctive ways to engage and explore the terrestrial.

In the course of writing this ethnography, which is also about Bangkok and Thailand, I have often thought about Winichakul's (1994) argument that the Siamese/Thai "geo-body" was brought into being by maps. This can remind all of us, not only those who work on Thailand, just how much maps have shaped worldviews. Maps, at least the modern, "objective" variety—diagrams of earth, water, territory—have changed the forms, scales, and conventions of memory.

Maps often present us with shapes in solid colors with bold border lines, uncorrupted, distinct from adjacent shapes in other colors. Unlike the Mekong, the Chao Phraya River is not a border. Rather, the border encloses it. It flows through the center of the geo-body, and it is closely tied to the geo-body's official temporality, its timeline. It is part of the myths of origins. Sukhothai, supposedly the first Thai capital, lies upstream from Bangkok. As a river, the Chao Phraya is also a maternal being, a water-mother, and it is said that it was once central to a national way of life. Thais, as many informants put it, have long been "tied" (ผูกพัน) to waterways. As noted previously, there are a variety of ways to consider origins, including: how, when, and why? Here I have often discussed the geography of origins, including directionality, the spatial context of sites, and the specific character of the landscape. The landscape, as I have tried to show, is both material and imagined, a product of memory as well as erosion, deposition, and the brute labor of digging and building. Note again that prior to nation-building the river was broken, so to speak, into segments, and each segment had its own name. Only during the Fifth Reign, in the late nineteenth century, a time of large-scale reorganization of the state, was the river unified and given a single identity: the Chao Phraya River. The name suggests collective life in a certain form; as collective life changed, so did the landscape. And now even someone from Isan can claim that, in the old days, the Chao Phraya River was the heart of the Thai people. But note also that the Chao Phraya acquired its name right around the time that the first roads were built in Bangkok, and roads were often cited by informants as constitutive of a change in the way of life. Just as the Chao Phraya River came into being, people began to "turn away" from it (see the opening of chapter 2).

In this ethnography, I approach waterways as a feature of landscape. J. B. Jackson asserts that one of the earlier meanings of scape was "sheaf," i.e., some sort of collection (1984:48). And thus *landscape* might have referred to a collection of lands, or plots put to various kinds of use.

An intriguing idea. Words, of course, are not reducible to their etymologies. Meanings change, meanings are agglutinated, meanings are shed; some might be lost, some might be recovered, some might be created. Older or ostensibly original meanings are not necessarily better or more authentic. But this notion of landscape as a sheaf or collection has, for me, been a productive one, good for both thinking and writing. Landscape, as I understand it, is part of collective life, including collective memory. In Thailand, the waterways play a key role in the process of collecting; they not only "cut through" but also bind together the broader landscape. Discussions in Bangkok of the Chao Phraya River often travel upstream to ancient cities and the glories and tragedies of those cities. Discussions also go upstream to the countryside, the rural, agriculturally productive hinterland, which is laden with a complex network of associations: sufficiency economy, a less competitive way of life, as well as laziness, liquor, and the love of (the former prime minister) Thaksin. Strangely, perhaps, memory in Bangkok flows not so readily with the river current—it rarely travels out to the gulf or beyond. Within Thailand, the degree to which water and maritime commerce have bound Southeast Asia into a whole is only just beginning to be explored. Later this year, 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is expected to open. How will Thais see themselves when Thailand becomes a part of Southeast Asia? The immanent formation of the AEC is creating demands for a new past, a transformation of collective memory. How, one might wonder, will water figure into this emergent past? Will the AEC reshape the Thai landscape?

Consider again the merchant ship. It seems that the merchant ship always comes upstream. These ships are, at some level, part of a broader Southeast Asian past, present, and future. The Chinese did trade and settled in many Southeast Asian cities. Chapter 1 is about the Chinese in Bangkok. This developed out of my fieldwork conditions; so many people in Bangkok self-identified as Chinese. These people often self-identified as Thai as well, but could shift and offer

comparisons between Thai and Chinese. Many told stories about merchant ships—often second-hand or otherwise inherited memories of arduous overseas journeys and the subsequent struggles and/or easy assimilation into Bangkok. Chapter 1 circles around this theme, emphasizing the role of the Chinese in shaping not only Bangkok but the Thai nation. Allow me to briefly add a few comments on an important work: Kasian Tejapira's book on the Chinese in Siam, *Looking through the Dragon Design* (เกษียร 1994). The title of the book is derived from a serial TV drama, a rags-to-riches story about a Chinese immigrant to Siam. An informant once mentioned this drama to me, encouraged me to watch it, and described it as a reflection of her life. She was Bangkok-born, but spoke Teochew, a dialect of Chinese, at home with her immigrant father. The opening credits of the drama, *Through the Dragon Design*, feature a merchant ship with men huddling together, crying, and vomiting over the edge. Tejapira offers a wonderful, telling anecdote. One evening, at a restaurant in Bangkok's Chinatown, a singer sings a nationalistic song from China in Mandarin to an indifferent audience—most of whom are Thai-born Chinese. But when the singer then sings the opening song from *Through the Dragon Design*, the mood changes entirely. The restaurant goers are rapt, some sing along, and the song is followed by generous applause. Part of the story is that many in the audience have only little if any comprehension of Mandarin. But the more important point is that *Through the Dragon Design* had a special resonance with Bangkok's Thai-born Chinese. It told a compelling story about the Chinese experience in Siam/Thailand, a story never before televised. It was a huge hit.

Tejapira reminds us that there is a Chinese experience particular to Siam. Being Chinese in Siam is not the same as being Chinese in China. My emphasis is different, though not in opposition. I wanted to write about the experiences of Chinese in Siam, but to also highlight some of the ways the Chinese made Siam and also made Thai. I push for a re-framing of national origins, arguing that the Thai nation began not in Sukhothai but in Bangkok, a city filled, for as

long as anyone can remember, with Chinese people, immigrants and their children, and thriving with Chinese-run commerce. The rhetoric of nation and nation-building would probably have sounded very alien to the inhabitants of the ancient "Thai" capitals of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai, as well as the inhabitants of early Bangkok. It was only much later that nation-building began. As I ask in chapter 1: what would "Thai" mean without the Chinese? The Chinese played a key role in the shaping of Bangkok and its aquatic landscape, and were implicated in many ways in the formation of a Thai national identity, an identity in which they have been sometimes excluded, sometimes included. The landscape of the Chao Phraya in Bangkok, though absorbed into the official national narrative, also offers chances to re-read and re-imagine the nation.

Chapter 2 also concerns origins, but in a different way. I consider notions of an old "way of life" associated with waterways, as well as perceptions of continuity and change. As I explain in the chapter, the expression "way of life" was given to me by informants. But, arriving in the aftermath of floods—not the sort that nourish the soil, but the sort that wreck people's houses—I also saw that people were grappling with a reminder of just how much things had changed. Such change sometimes registered as loss. A sense of loss, I argue, persists in the landscape. Loss is part of the landscape's story; certain parts of the past remain there, ghost-like. It is also a landscape haunted by impending loss, including the eviction of some of its inhabitants. Part of the chapter is about a small community by the Chao Phraya, facing immanent eviction, but still asserting their bond to the river. This chapter may take the reader to some surprising places, but, again, this is one of the intriguing features of waterways: such passages connect places and people together. Following the waterways, what remains of the old, urban transportation infrastructure, one sometimes sees contemporary problems from a new perspective. In this chapter, one is offered glimpses of the Red-Yellow conflict, the aging monarch, the rural-urban divide, and the relationship between ghosts and urban development. These matters are all related

to the landscape's temporality, the complex terrain of old and new, of continuity and change.

All the foregoing chapters concern collective memory, and thus the past. How does the past persist in the present? Landscape, as a collective form, provides ways to explore collective memory. The form and content of the landscape are products of shared life, culture. Chapter 3, however, concerns the erasure of violent pasts from the landscape. The landscape, though collective, is also sometimes exclusionary. If one looks carefully, one may find striking absences. What frames appearance? Why are some parts of the past close, immediate, present, whereas other aspects are invisible? One will not, of course, find a single mechanism that can be applied in all cases. I raise these questions, not to answer them once and for all, but to create dissonance. As in other chapters, I often try to provide evocative accounts of landscape. I also try to show, however, that experience-near and representation-centered approaches to landscape can compliment one another. Building a bridge between them may allow for a fuller picture, a deeper apprehension of landscape. The reader will see that representations (such as official narratives of nation) already frame the landscape, and also that practices of representation are at work, ongoing, in the landscape. In the royal barge procession, such practices are part of the scene. This symbolically-rich event evokes a certain past, according to which Bangkok and its ruling dynasty are descended from Ayutthaya. It is also an event in which the military positions itself as protector of the monarchy. Representation shapes how landscape is seen, imagined, remembered, not only from afar, but even when one is within the landscape. My writing style is part of the argument. I try to bring the reader to the river's edge, but also to evoke absences—especially the destruction of Vientiane by Siam and the forced transplantation of the survivors, ethnic Lao, to the basin of the Chao Phraya River. The modern terrain of the Chao Phraya was partly built by the Lao war captives deported from Vientiane. And many of those in the Lao-speaking provinces of the northeast are also descended from war captives. Questions about this are just starting to stir

within Thailand itself—that is how I became interested in this problem. It was not an obsession that I brought with me into the field. It is encouraging to see authors, writing in Thai, trying to work outside the limits of official versions of the Thai past, even if such work still remains mostly beyond the horizons of popular memory. The future may be different. The creation of the AEC may help erode the boundaries of collective memory and create new possibilities. The riverine landscape might someday be seen in a new, more inclusive way.

The current situation (spring 2015), however, does not lend itself to optimism. Universities are monitored by the police and military. Topics of public lectures and panel discussions must be announced in advance to the authorities. Even before the seizure of power by the military, freedom of expression was severely limited. Defamation cases have multiplied dramatically since the coup in 2006 (Streckfuss 2011). In this regard, Pavin Chachavalpongpun writes, "We see that the situation, in terms of protecting human rights in Thailand, has reached the lowest point. […] The lèse-majesté law has been used increasingly as a political weapon" (ปวิน 2012:16). It is getting worse. Thailand is once again a military dictatorship, and the right to speak is withering.

About two-thirds of chapter 4 was written before the most recent military coup (May 2014). It is about how memory integrates past, present, and future. How do people imagine collective trajectories? At what scale? And in what terms is it described? Here the key terms are material and heart-spirit, which, during my fieldwork, were often set in contrast to one another. This chapter offers four case studies—non-exhaustive, of course, but it covers some key patterns. Many themes described here would have come up in other case studies I could have written. Perhaps the biggest provocation in the chapter is this: Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country to have never undergone decolonization. Above all, this is a question. What has this absence meant for Thailand? The notion that Thailand escaped colonialism has been in question for decades. Siam/Thailand was very much a part of a broader, regional colonial economy. It was

also re-shaped, in many ways, along the lines of nearby colonial systems. But, unlike its neighbors, Thailand never experienced an end to colonialism—which might have been a profound break or transition. I am reminded of my informant's solution, his preferred remedy for society's backward heart-spirit: “Erase the old system.” That, it seems, is what really scares the military officials, as the military is one of the institutions most deeply invested in the old system.

Continuity and change are key themes in this ethnography. But here the point is not so much to measure one or the other, but rather to explore perceptions of continuity and change. Such perceptions, as discussed in chapter 4, are related to how one sees and engages the future.

Chapter 5 is about the ties between place, landscape, and belonging. My use of the expression “how belonging takes place” is deliberate. Places can bring together multiple landscapes, and the question of belonging can be related to broader spatio-temporal geographies. This is also an instance of a recurring theme in this dissertation: the connectivity of waterways. The place in question, a canal-side, Islamic community in Bangkok, draws together national and transnational space in a distinctive way. Other places offer other configurations of near and far. Places can contain multiple scales. This drawing together of the wider world, parts of it at least, gives character to place. It tells us something about how people find, create, or negotiate senses of belonging. Muslims are often in a precarious position in Thailand. As shown in chapter 5, status as insiders, as nationals, is not always a given. And inclusion can also be problematic. Ask: inclusion in what terms? Many of my Muslim informants in Bangkok self-identified as Thai Muslims. But the question remains as to whether or not those who do not self-identify as Thai can belong in the country that was once known as Siam. According to one local origin story (again, the geography of origins), this community could be traced back to Ayutthaya, the city that figures so prominently in official narratives of the Thai past. This goes against tendencies to identify Islam only with Thailand's far south. Many in Bangkok remember those provinces as a

source of perpetual separatist violence carried out by Muslims, a reality that could not be ignored in the community in question. The southern landscape was related to this place in Bangkok, even if some tried to dissociate themselves from it. At the same time, fragmentary memories of Siamese aggression against the south, as well as deportation of southern Muslims to Bangkok, could also be found in this place, traces of Siam's imperial past, its own colonial violence.

One never arrives altogether formless. I arrived with questions about memory and landscape. I had read a lot of books and had a number of unusual ideas. And, no doubt, this starting point, or carry-on luggage, or toolkit, mediated to some extent how I came to see and describe Bangkok and Thailand. But, in the course of doing ethnography, one bumps into things. One gets caught in the rain. Perhaps the street vendor, still a stranger, lends you an umbrella. One is surprised again and again. One commits time, labor. One dwells. One listens. One enters conversation. At times one misunderstands or is misunderstood. But, in the course of it, one learns. I learned from the Chao Phraya River, from canals, from stories, from unlikely encounters and improbable relationships. The end is not determined by the beginning. My intention is not only to say that the study of memory and landscape can help us understand Bangkok and Thailand. This ethnography is not only for Thai-specialists. Rather, I have tried to build, from the material collected in Thailand, an ethnography that will encourage the contemplation of memory and landscape.

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