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Rappa, A.I. *The King and the Making of Modern Thailand*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Antonio L. Rappa clearly intended *The King and the Making of Modern Thailand* to be a provocative book. It is, but perhaps not in the way he intended. The Singaporean professor has published a sustained critique of the major institutions of contemporary Thailand. Focusing on the figure of the recently deceased King Bhumibol Adulyadej, or Rama IX, Rappa missed few opportunities to condemn social injustices, abuses of power, and general hypocrisy. In the opening paragraph of the preface, the author presents his argument:

The King and the Making of Modern Thailand defines the nature of Thai politics as centering on self-preservation over morality. Ethics and morality are over-shadowed by avarice, greed, corruption, cronyism, and nepotism. The apex of Thai society is the monarchy, where the preservation of the Chakri Dynasty has been proven to be more important than any moral consequences. The monarchy is protected by a cult of personality and the Grand Chakri Narrative. (viii)

He continues in the next few pages to list subjects to which he will repeatedly return: systematic corruption, the contrast between the king's wealth and widespread poverty; the political uses of history and religion; a massive military that faces no external threats and focuses its energy on domestic political control; and organized crime, including the sex trade and human trafficking. Noting that others have worked on these various topics, Rappa claims that his intervention stands out, as he "attribute[s] these nefarious problems of corruption, cronyism and nepotism to the monarchy" (x). And this is only in the opening sub-section of the preface. What follows are over 265 pages that consistently flirt with the Thai kingdom's strict *lèse-majesté* laws (a collection of decrees designed to prohibit perceived insults to the monarch and the royal family). Considering the current junta's liberal use of these laws to crack down on domestic and international critics, it appears that Rappa does not intend to return to the Land of Smiles at any time in the near future.

After launching its scathing attack in a 16-page preface, *The King and the Making of Modern Thailand* offers eight chapters. These are listed as discussions of the rise of the monarchy; nationalism; violence and the "Grand Chakri Narrative"; religion as a tool of corruption; economic security; female sex workers; and a historical comparison between Rama IX, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and the 18th century Siamese king assassinated by the founder of the Chakri Dynasty. The final chapter is simply entitled "The Ninth Rama." Rappa's central argument is that as the world's wealthiest monarch, Rama IX benefitted from years of collaborating with the military elite to fleece the nation of its wealth. The book repeatedly invokes the metaphor of a white elephant living under a mango tree. As Rappa repeatedly explains, white elephants were sacred creatures that ate so much that they were a tremendous burden on their owners. Given as a royal gift, they were a way for Siamese kings to impoverish nobles who were potential rivals. For Rappa, a white elephant eating its fill of mangos symbolizes the monarchy greedily gobbling up Thailand's wealth. Considering the near sacred status of the late king, this is a dangerous metaphor to repeat, let alone put into print. While supporters of democracy, human rights, and social justice might be initially inclined to applaud Rappa's bravery in speaking truth to power, his delivery and the content of his attack might lead them to reserve their praise.

While the table of contents seems organized and systematic, the book is not. Within these eight chapters, Rappa veers wildly from topic to topic, frequently covering the same ground. Readers will find the book extremely repetitive. Indeed, there are several passages from a

paragraph to a few pages that are literally repeated. For example, page 52 contains text repeated with only minor edits on pages 73 and 74. This is only once instance of self-plagiarism within the book. Considering that the author frequently cites his own works of journalism, it is possible that these are cut and paste errors rather than academic malfeasance. Nonetheless, a proper editor should have caught and removed such sloppiness. Throughout the book, there are numerous errors, ranging from misspelling Mao Zedong's name and claiming that the Cultural Revolution started in 1960 to calling Cambodia land-locked and confusing the geography of the Khmer Empire's capital. While many of these mistakes are fairly minor, they indicate a lack of fact checking and cast a shadow of doubt on the rest of the book's accuracy. Speaking of editing, Rappa's prose is frequently of very low quality, with numerous grammatical errors, malaprops, and vague statements (and he has the nerve to criticize established Southeast Asian scholars such as Ruth McVey for their writing style, page 254!). Some of the sentences are so poorly constructed that they will confuse many readers. At several points, Rappa uses the term "Occidentalism" to refer to Western scholars using a stereotyped image of Asia. Obviously, the word he is looking for is "Orientalism." Bad writing paired with redundancy makes for a long and frustrating reading experience.

Rappa's methodology and analysis pose even greater problems than his prose. The author bases many of his claims on research conducted with "focus groups," rumors collected from alleged members of the royal circle, and personal observations collected between 1981 and 2016. (The 1981 date is curiously early considering the author's age and previous service in the Singaporean military). There is an appendix that lists the names of 225 of the author's interviewees, along with their hometowns and the topic of their respective interviews. Considering the rather incendiary nature of Rappa's conclusions, one might wonder if the author should have shielded the identity of his informants. Despite offering this list of names, Rappa never explains his methodology and fails to offer the questions given to his so-called "focus groups." Rappa's lack of fluency in Thai raises further concern, although he notes that he has hired translators and research assistants over the years. Most of his assertions are not supported with appropriate evidence. It would be generous to suggest the book is more journalistic than academic, though this would be ironic given his dismissive attitude towards journalists like Andrew MacGregor Marshall. Rappa's weak use of supporting evidence is compounded by the way in which he shifts from subject to subject, dealing with some issues in depth and giving others only a superficial discussion.

The sections on female sex workers in contemporary Thailand are shockingly bad. After initially writing about these women without any sense of their agency as individuals, Rappa then offers a few tired clichés to explain organized crime systems, frequently arguing that prostitution and human trafficking are central to the Thai economy. He is careful to state that there is no proof that the monarchy was involved in or had knowledge of such abuses but implies that since Rama IX was a "God-King" and incredibly wealthy, he should have known about the country's human trafficking and sex trade industry. The author throws in several comments about what he has seen in Thailand's red-light districts, but these asides are colored by rather unprofessional and snide remarks. Rappa's moral outrage seems sincere, but his poorly structured reasoning and frequent use of conjecture and rumor as evidence hinder his persuasiveness. Rappa's command of gender theory is weak and even verges into the comical, such as when he invokes his "feminist teacher" but fails to properly explain or cite her work. In these sections of the book, the author cites numerous theorists but never actually engages their relevance to his argument.

Rappa's use film theory to critique Orientalist sexual desire in Thailand is disastrous, showing both a weak command of theory and of the films themselves.

Throughout the book, Rappa makes numerous statements that will surely not only run afoul of the current Thai junta's censors but also anger Thais and non-Thais alike. His provocative claims include that the Chakri Dynasty is really Burmese and not actually Thai, that many foreign scholars in Thailand inform on their students to protect their own sexual indiscretions, that Rama IX suffered from "schizophrenia, a mental disorder he contracted in his twenties after a severe car accident in France when he crashed his sports car," and that Rama X "suffers from bipolar disorder and has severe mood swings" (p. 247). Elsewhere, he attempts to use levity in a questionable manner. For example, in a discussion of violent repression on university campuses, Rappa jokes about October not being "a good month for Thammasat students" (p. 32), flippantly referring to the 1976 massacre of Thammasat students on October 6 of that year. While he rightly condemns corruption at all levels of Thai society, including within the monarchy, police, and military, Rappa has difficulty proving his claims, and the book's shortcomings undermine a potentially important critique. Rappa is not naïve and claims to have been physically threatened by Thai officials on several occasions. It is a shame that Rappa is willing to put himself at risk for such a poorly constructed book.

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