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# Power and ritual in the city: Mourning and political juncture at Bangkok's Sanam Luang

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*This article argues that ritual remains a potent instrument for the generation of national identity and citizenship in Southeast Asia. We focus our analysis on the ritualisation of public space in Bangkok, Thailand, under the military-led government of General Prayut Chan-o-cha. The authors provide an ethnographic analysis of Sanam Luang, arguing that between 2016 and 2017 funeral rites held in this public space would reanimate it as a catalyst of national unification. As in other cases of ritual in public space, however, the intensified securitisation and control over national mourning for King Bhumibol by the military government, gave way to a range of reactions, including increased protests and criticism of the ruling government and Thailand's *lesé-majesté* laws by a predominantly youth-led movement in 2020.*

Sanam Luang is a large, open field in Bangkok which has been used for ritual activity since the establishment of Thailand's modern capital in the eighteenth century. Abutting the northern wall of the Grand Palace and facing Thammasat University and the Chao Phraya River to its west, Sanam Luang contains 27.2 acres of open grassy space.<sup>1</sup> While small trees surround its perimeter, the field is devoid of permanent monuments. Public activities that have taken place in Sanam Luang range from funerals and coronations to markets, concerts, and protests. As such, this seemingly nondescript open space has served as a key site for encounters between the Thai state and public since its inception.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Pornpan Chinnapong, 'Bangkok's Sanam Luang (the Royal Ground): From a historic plaza to a civic space', in *Globalization, the city and civil society in Pacific Asia*, ed. Mike Douglass, K.C. Ho and Giok Ling Ooi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 272–85.

2 Elizabeth Howard Moore and Navanath Osiri, 'Urban forms and civic space in nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Bangkok and Rangoon', *Journal of Urban History* 40, 1 (2014): 158–77.

Following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) on 13 October 2016, Sanam Luang soon filled with people and activity, becoming the primary location for large-scale public mourning and funeral practices. A broad range of activities took place in and around the field until the royal cremation in 2017. Essential emergency health care, food, and transportation were provided for the millions of mourners participating in this pilgrimage to the symbolic heart of the nation. Booths that filled the open grassy area also provided information on appropriate dress and mourning behaviour. In the months following the king's death, along with the police and army, workers from various arms of the government—municipal, national and palace—increasingly took over controlling and monitoring activity in the space. Large events involving hundreds of thousands of Thai citizens were orchestrated and managed on Sanam Luang's grounds. Images of and knowledge about Sanam Luang and the events surrounding the royal funerary rituals were then disseminated through social media and television to people throughout the nation.

After serving as a space of ritualised national unity over a year-long mourning period, however, Sanam Luang and the surrounding urban fabric became a site of political unrest. In 2017, a plaque commemorating the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 located just north of Sanam Luang was secretly removed and replaced by one commemorating the monarchy, a move that caused an uproar—especially among students. In 2020 students flooded the area in protest against the military-led government that had ruled Thailand since 2014. Initially known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the military-led government came to power after a coup ousting Yingluck Shinawatra.<sup>3</sup>

We investigate the ritualisation of Sanam Luang, attending to how this ritualisation was used by the Thai government to maintain the status quo between citizens and political authority figures. In our analysis of Sanam Luang, we reveal how the Thai state used processes of securitisation, controlled aesthetics and bureaucratisation of volunteer activity, as an attempt to shape the field's ritual liminal power toward conservative political goals. These conservative political goals emphasised the sacred quality of the relationship between citizenry and monarchy in order to inculcate a sense of national unity and political hierarchy. Building on Thai and Southeast Asian scholarship on ritual and power, we argue that the example of Sanam Luang reveals how the ritualising of public spaces in support of conservative hierarchies prepares the ground for those hierarchies to be challenged, using the same sacred and symbolic qualities of that space. In other words, the liminal qualities of ritualised urban spaces contain the potential for their own subversion. In this article we attend to multiple scales of ritualisation, including the language, clothing, bodily comportment and movement of mourners, as well as the religious and political symbolism and mythical narratives inscribed into Sanam Luang as a space of mourning.

3 Yingluck and her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted in the 2006 coup, were populist leaders known for their social reforms and neoliberal economic policies, backed by a primarily rural subset of voters. Although elections were held after the death of King Bhumibol, and the National Council for Peace and Order was dissolved, Prayut remained in power until the national elections of May 2023.

### Harnessing ritual's liminal power

Our analysis of Sanam Luang builds on classic anthropological approaches to the study of ritual and liminality in order to explore the role of ritual in shaping the contemporary politics of urban Thailand and Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> In his essay 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage', Victor Turner describes the liminal state as a moment and space that restructures social relationships outside of the moment itself. In order to access this space of 'pure possibility', however, individuals are stripped of identity and visibility through ritual practices requiring 'complete obedience'.<sup>5</sup> For Turner it is this play between *comunitas* (a ritual temporary moment of equality) and the pre-existing structural hierarchy that opens up the possibility for the establishment of new institutions and customs.

Foundational studies on Southeast Asia such as those by Stanley J. Tambiah in Thailand and Clifford Geertz in Indonesia highlight the way in which the relationship between citizens and state are connected and animated by ritual performances.<sup>6</sup> Tambiah argued that the development of the modern Thai state was articulated within a historical legacy of integrating religion and politics. The idea of the pulsating polity centred around multiple *moeang* or polities and mirroring the form of a mandala, has provided a key theoretical framework made famous by Tambiah for interpreting the organisation of power within the nation.<sup>7</sup> Catherine Allerton also reflects upon the prevalence of this relationship between ritual, geography, and power in the study of twentieth-century Southeast Asia more broadly, where scholars 'stress the significance of what is frequently labelled 'sacred geography', or 'a conceptual system in which certain places are of central ritual importance because it is there that one accesses cosmic currents of ritual purity and power'.<sup>8</sup> Such relationships between community and cosmos, argues Michael Herzfeld, are also visible in the shaping and planning of urban space so that 'the ground plans of cities have reflected the desire to reproduce cosmology terrestrially'.<sup>9</sup> Bangkok's Sanam Luang is one such space of 'central ritual importance' that reflects Indic spiritual conceptions of space.<sup>10</sup> Located directly next to the

4 Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of the religious life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Dover, 2008 [1912]); Victor Turner, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970 [1967]); Arnold Van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (New York: Routledge, 2013 [1909]).

5 Turner, *The forest of symbols*, pp. 7, 10.

6 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

7 Tambiah's discussion of the mandala leans on the work of Robert Heine-Geldern, 'Conceptions of state and kingship in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 2, 1 (1942): 15–30, as discussed in Deborah E. Tooker, 'Putting the mandala in its place: A practice-based approach to the spatialization of power on the Southeast Asian "periphery": The case of the Akha', *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 2 (1996): 323–58.

8 Catherine Allerton, 'Introduction: Spiritual landscapes of Southeast Asia', *Anthropological Forum* 19, 3 (2009): 235–51.

9 Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy: Social poetics and the real life of states, societies, and institutions*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 23; See also Matt Wade, 'Hyper-planning Jakarta: The Great Garuda and planning the global spectacle', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 40, 1 (2019): 158–72.

10 See Lawrence Chua, *Bangkok utopia: Modern architecture and Buddhist felicities, 1910–1973* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021).

Grand Palace and the Lak Moeng or City Pillar, the ritual significance and liminal power of Sanam Luang has been, and continues to be, harnessed by diverse political actors, particularly the Thai state (both government and monarchy) to renew and create new relationships between themselves and the Thai polity.

What has not been adequately explored however, is the way that such state-led ritual efforts contain within them the seeds of their own unravelling. Although focused on rural regions, Katherine Bowie's analysis of ritual in the Thai Village Scout movement in the 1970s provides important groundwork for understanding the political potency and potential violence of ritual in Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Just as the Thai Village Scout movement sought to create a sense of national unity against the threat of communism, the control and surveillance that shaped the mourning rituals for King Bhumibol reflected a similar sense of urgency to unify the Thai public, in this case amidst the death of a stabilising figure in politics. Such state-led ritual efforts unintentionally reanimated Sanam Luang as a key centre of political unrest. Rather than solidifying the monarchy's and military government's right to rule, the careful regulation of mourning activities in Sanam Luang reinvigorated the political memory of this space where the public, military, and monarchy have each staked claims on its ritual power.

This sense of state-led political urgency was palpable on the day that King Bhumibol's death was announced. Prayut spoke to the Thai public, urging citizens to refrain from conflict, pleading:

Please take the opportunity to boost one another's morale. All of us share the same feelings because we have our common father of the nation. Please help protect national peace and do not let anyone trigger conflicts that would lead to turmoil.<sup>12</sup>

This request reflected a common theme in the Prime Minister's public statements that were set on directing public reaction to the King's death toward patriotic acts of unity rather than public debate or political change. As such, the management of mourning rituals at Sanam Luang was motivated by a desire to generate feelings of unity where they did not necessarily exist. Far from being politics-free, the mourning rituals at Sanam Luang were politicised from the first day of mourning when the prime minister called upon Thais to avoid turmoil.

There have been other useful analyses of the mourning that took place at Sanam Luang.<sup>13</sup> However, our analysis focuses on the broader political significance surrounding these mourning rituals, contextualising them within a political history of

11 Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of national loyalty: An anthropology of the state and the Village Scout movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

12 Anon., 'Notable & quotable: The King of Thailand is dead; His Majesty the King brought people from their hopelessness to their determination, security and courage', *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, 13 Oct. 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/notable-quotable-the-king-of-thailand-is-dead-1476400449> (last accessed 22 Mar. 2022).

13 Supeema Insee Adler and Deborah Wong, 'The funeral of King Rama IX: Mourning and the Thai state', *Asian Music* 50, 2 (2019): 122–60; Thanya Luchaprasith, 'Royal tourism in Thailand: Visitor's experience at King Bhumibol's Crematorium Exhibition', *Tourism Culture & Communication* 3, 2 (2021): 66–94; Irene Stengs, 'United in competitive mourning: Commemorative spectacle in tribute to King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand', in *The secular sacred: Emotions of belonging and the perils of nation and religion*, ed. Markus Balkenhol, Ernst van den Hemel and Irene Stengs (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 263–84.

Sanam Luang. Pilgrimage to Sanam Luang served as a rite of passage for citizens that confirmed their status as national subjects while the heightened securitisation of this space and control over mourning practices made visible tensions surrounding contemporary military rule and Prayut's vision for the nation. By heightening the ritual power of a key national site through the strict management of public mourning, the liminal potential of the site was laid bare and amplified, giving opposing actors a focus where they might challenge the norms, histories and hierarchies of the nation-state. In other words, we argue that the intensified ritualisation of monumental urban spaces like Sanam Luang can strengthen potential energies of resistance.

Our methodological approach to understanding space, power, and society is both ethnographic and historical. This approach does not hold the built environment, bureaucracy and ritual as separate spheres of experience or analysis but looks across built and social space. We first visited Sanam Luang together on the night that King Bhumibol died on 13 October 2016 and returned over twenty times, often together, during the 2016–17 mourning period. We participated in public events taking place in the space, such as watching the coffin being driven into the temple and palace compound, helping to collect and sort donated flowers and waiting in long lines to pay respects to the King's body. We also volunteered with a team assisting the tourism police, where our duties were assisting tourists seeking directions and information about allowed activities at Sanam Luang and the area surrounding the palace.

Our analysis of this ethnographic material looks for repetitions and themes in terms of symbolism, speech, dress and the management of space. In doing so, we investigate the way that the Thai state re-invents and legitimates its authority by surveilling space and ritual activity at Sanam Luang. Yet we also recognise the importance of Sanam Luang as a site of grief and mourning. The everyday experiences of people at Sanam Luang constitute more than a single political power project. We therefore hold these experiences as one important scale for interpretation, while analysing them in tension with the instrumentality of state power and its transformative effects.

### **Ritual, conflict, and the foundations of Sanam Luang**

In order to understand the political significance of Sanam Luang in contemporary Thailand it is necessary to understand the way this site's symbolic power within the nation has changed throughout modern history. The use of Sanam Luang, its political associations and the historic events that have occurred within it, reflect shifting relationships between political actors, most often that of the monarchy, state and the public over time.

It was the territorialisation of the Thai nation-state and the fall of its capital, Ayutthaya, in the eighteenth century that defined Bangkok's emergence as a new centre of political power.<sup>14</sup> Historical and sacred legitimacy was built into this new centre of power by King Rama I who appropriated Ayutthaya's seventeenth and eighteenth-century urban form.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the full name of Bangkok in Thai translates as

14 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

15 Rama I founded Bangkok as the capital after the overthrow of King Taksin. The new capital of Bangkok was moved from the Thonburi side of the Chao Praya River to its eastern banks and the architecture and urban plan of the city was patterned on Ayutthaya.

The city of angels, the glorious city, where the eminent jewel of Kosindra resides, the great city Ayutthaya of Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the town of delight, abounding in enormous royal palaces, the celestial vimāna, where reincarnated gods reign, a city built by Viśnukam at the consent of Indra.<sup>16</sup>

Bangkok's Grand Palace, established in 1782, was conceptualised by Rama I as the ultimate centre of the city and nation, with the architectural form of the roofs meant to symbolise Mount Meru, which in the Buddhist texts and narratives is the centre of the universe, and hence, the mandala.

Sanam Luang has served as a royal funerary ground and field since its construction adjacent to the Grand Palace. Initially only members of the royal family were cremated at Sanam Luang in elaborate ceremonies of both political and spiritual significance. Thai funeral pyres, especially those constructed in Sanam Luang, are rich in Buddhist symbolism. The pyre itself represents Mount Meru and the cosmic heavens. Decorative elements and figures from Hindu mythology like the Garuda are incorporated into each tier of the pyre.<sup>17</sup>

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century under King Mongkut (Rama IV) that Sanam Luang received its current name and became a monumental space for political spectacle as well as ritual in the city.<sup>18</sup> Ritual events held in this space included the annual royal ploughing ceremony taking place in late spring in the Northern Hemisphere and the celebration of other royal events like birthdays, which were then not open to commoners.<sup>19</sup> Under the rule of Mongkut's son, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), however, the walls that had previously surrounded Sanam Luang were taken down and more public events began to take place in this portion of the city. As a key site where the relationship between the monarchy and public were fostered, the field served as a military parade ground, a festival space where the city's centennial celebration was held in 1882, and a venue for leisure activities such as golf and horse racing for the nation's most elite citizens.<sup>20</sup> Such uses of the 'royal field' by the royal family were meant to mirror private and public parklands observed on their state trips abroad. Elizabeth Moore and Navanath Osiri argue that Sanam Luang took on broader importance in terms of national symbolism at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> In 1902, tamarind trees were planted around the perimeter of Sanam Luang alongside a new urban walkway down the centre of the field. These changes imitated urban displays of global modernity King Chulalongkorn had observed in European cities, where citizens had congregated within tree-lined promenades.<sup>22</sup>

16 Chua, *Bangkok utopia*, p. 14.

17 Adler and Wong, 'The funeral of King Rama IX'.

18 Chua, *Bangkok utopia*, p. 86.

19 Koompong Noobanjong, 'The Royal Field (Sanam Luang): Bangkok's polysemic urban palimpsest', in *Messy urbanism: Understanding the 'other' cities of Asia*, ed. Manish Chalana and Jeffrey Hou (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), p. 81.

20 Pornpan Chinnapong, 'Bangkok's Sanam Luang'.

21 Moore and Osiri, 'Urban forms and civic space in nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Bangkok and Rangoon'.

22 Ibid.



The construction of Ratchadamnoen Avenue and Dusit Palace by King Chulalongkorn also transformed the relationship between the historical core of the city, with Sanam Luang at its heart, and the rest of the growing city. Named using elevated royal vocabulary and meaning 'walk of the king',<sup>23</sup> Ratchadamnoen Avenue connected Dusit to the Grand Palace. The avenue not only facilitated urban flow into Sanam Luang for ritual events like coronations, national holidays and funerals, but it also created a route along which the public could welcome the royal family home following trips overseas. This Champs-Élysées of Thailand set the groundwork for urban monumental spaces that would emerge after the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

Many changes were made to the administration of Bangkok's urban space after the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Not only was the city's geography recentred around the Democracy Monument, commissioned in 1939 to commemorate the 1932 revolution, but spaces previously associated with the royal family were reconceptualised by the state as 'democratic' and were 'given back' to the public. The new Democracy Monument retained Buddhist imagery, but royal symbolism was not included in this new monumental node within the city. After the fall of the absolute monarchy, the People's Party government also made conscious interventions in the rituals and architecture surrounding Sanam Luang in order to democratise this site of monumental importance in the city. One way in which the government was able to do this was through the use of Sanam Luang as a funerary space for individuals outside of the monarchy. In 1934 a funerary pyre was constructed for 17 people killed during the Bovorn Dej Revolution.<sup>24</sup> The pyre used a less decorative modernist aesthetic, with an emphasis on horizontality over the traditional vertically oriented pyres. Lawrence Chua comments that the 'crematorium was transformed from an exclusive ritual space for members of the royal family and the titled bureaucracy to a public space for the performance of political spectacle'.<sup>25</sup> In 1948, a large weekend market was also established on the Sanam Luang grounds, shifting the use of this space further toward 'common' use.<sup>26</sup> Kite flying on the open field was another a regular activity enjoyed by the broader public.<sup>27</sup>

From the 1960s onwards, Sanam Luang became a key site of political unrest and protest. In October 1973 a student uprising led to the fall of Thailand's military leaders, Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Jarusathien. Thai college students taking part in these demonstrations decorated Sanam Luang with patriotic and democratic banners and marched from the Democracy Monument to, eventually, the palace. As a result of these protests the government agreed to release political activists imprisoned in early October as well as to a year-long deadline for a permanent constitution. When protestors reached the palace after achieving their demands, however, many

23 In fact the meaning of Ratchadamnoen is unclear. It may be an imitation of 'Kingsway' or it may allude to either 'Progress' in the ethical sense or progress as meaning walking forward. See Michael Herzfeld, *Siege of the spirits: Community and polity in Bangkok* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 78.

24 Koompong Noobanjong, 'The Royal Field (Sanam Luang)', p. 81.

25 Chua, *Bangkok utopia*, p. 78.

26 The market would eventually be moved north of the city and continues as the Chatuchak Weekend Market.

27 See Pornpan Chinnapong, 'Bangkok's Sanam Luang'.

demonstrators were killed by police and military sent to break up the large crowd of students; an event that preceded the military government's fall on 14 October 1973. A year later, King Bhumibol would grant permission for the cremation of the over 70 protestors who had been killed in these demonstrations to take place in the royal field.<sup>28</sup> When Thanom Kittikachorn returned to Thailand in 1976, student protesters once again came together to protest the ousted military leader and the right wing, conservative government that supported his return from exile. However, the government response to these protests that played out on the grounds of Sanam Luang on 6 October 1976 would become known as one of the darkest moments in Thai political history: the Thammasat massacre. On this day more than a hundred protesters, primarily students from nearby Thammasat University, were brutally murdered when protesting the return to military rule. Students were sexually assaulted, hanged from trees and their corpses desecrated in and around Sanam Luang. At the time, protesters were accused of *lèse-majesté* and deemed communist sympathisers by the government. This horrific event was largely not spoken of in Thailand publicly. To this day there has been no official investigation into the atrocities. This dark history is not taught in the mainstream Thai educational curriculum and it has come to represent a powerful rift amongst intellectuals, the institution of the monarchy, and the state.

Just two decades later, during the events of 'Black May' in 1992, police and army personnel attacked hundreds of thousands of protestors who had gathered along Ratchadamnoern Avenue to show their opposition to the military government. By the early 2000s, however, concerts, political protests, selling goods, an evening market and even sleeping in Sanam Luang were commonplace. These activities were then banned after large-scale protests were held at Sanam Luang by the UDD (United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship) in 2010. The government response to protestors triggered death and violence in other parts of the city when the army opened fire on civilians.<sup>29</sup>

These repeated political gatherings and conflicts in and around Sanam Luang have deeply impacted the common and democratic symbolism of this urban space, yet there is little physical commemoration of these events at the field itself. There are only two key memorial sites erected in the urban fabric that surrounds the field: the 14 October 1973 Memorial on Ratchadamnoen Road; and the 1976 Thammasat Massacre memorial just inside the grounds of Thammasat University near the northwest corner of the field. The traces of more public and democratic uses of Sanam Luang in the 1930s have now been largely erased. Chatri Prakitnonthakan describes the return to the use of royalist symbolism at Sanam Luang following the 2006 coup d'état that removed Thaksin Shinawatra as 'ultra-thai architecture'.<sup>30</sup> Pornpan Noobanjong similarly identifies how the renovation and resulting securitisation of Sanam Luang in 1999, 2003 and 2010 are examples of attempts by the Bangkok city administration to 'return' Sanam Luang to its royal

28 Ibid., p. 90; James M. Markham, 'King of Thailand honors 1973 dead', *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/10/15/archives/king-of-thailand-honors-1973-dead-he-and-queen-join-rite-for-youths.html>.

29 See Claudio Sopranzetti, *Owners of the map* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

30 Chatri Prakitnonthakan, 'Ultra-Thai architecture after the 2006 coup d'état', *South East Asia Research* 28, 2 (2020): 120–39.



roots.<sup>31</sup> Access to Sanam Luang was restricted during this period by the installation of CCTV cameras, loudspeakers and gates designed to surveil and control the flow of pedestrians through and around this field. The authorities achieved further control by limiting the hours Sanam Luang was open to the public. While leisure activities like taking photographs and cycling were still permissible, the area was reserved as a ‘cleaner’ space—and refocused more exclusively towards ‘respectable’ middle-class leisure activity and celebrations of the monarchy.<sup>32</sup>

This mixed history of political conflict, urban beautification and ritual that comprises Sanam Luang set the scene for the year of mourning for King Bhumibol.<sup>33</sup> In the following sections we capture how this ritual mourning process transformed between 2016 and 2017.

### **Pilgrimage and renewed ritual**

On the night that the Thai citizens received the official announcement of King Bhumibol’s death on the 13 October 2016, Sanam Luang and the spaces surrounding the palace were remarkably quiet. That evening, many people went immediately to spend time with family and friends and very few were drawn to visit this open space facing the Grand Palace. Indeed, we, the authors, were among a very small group of about thirty observers who were gathered at Sanam Luang around 9 pm to watch the gates to the palace from the side of the road. A few candles were lit by onlookers around us, but when we asked some middle-aged women why they were there, they replied they had just stopped by on their way home. This comparatively small and haphazard congregation on the night of the King’s death highlights the enormous role that bureaucratic organisation by Thai institutions both government and non-government would play in generating the subsequent crowds and ritual practices at Sanam Luang over the following months. Our experience that evening was a useful reminder that despite the field’s history, there is nothing intrinsically important about a public ritual space; rather, it is made into a symbol and catalyst by deliberate human intervention.

On 14 October, the day following the announcement of King Bhumibol’s death, the King’s body was transferred from hospital into the palace complex. Tens, and quite likely hundreds of thousands of mourners, streamed into the palace area throughout the day, walking to the site from all directions via ferry piers, bus stops, elevated and underground train stations. Arriving at the palace, the crowds met a sea of seated citizens, dressed in black and patiently marking the passing hours. Older ladies waved paper fans, young co-workers shared snacks, but if talking or movement rose above a whisper, police were there to order the offenders to remain quiet and seated.

The journey to Sanam Luang made by millions of Thai citizens during the year of official mourning can be understood as a pilgrimage. Turner argues that ritual is important in a time of conflict, providing a widely shared drama, narrative and tactile,

31 Pornpan Chinnapong, ‘Bangkok’s Sanam Luang’.

32 In 1985, 1995, and 2007 funeral pyres were erected for members of the royal family.

33 See also Michael Herzfeld, ‘The blight of beautification: Bangkok and the pursuit of class-based urban purity’, *Journal of Urban Design* 22, 3 (2017): 291–307.

physical experience in which ruptures are resolved.<sup>34</sup> According to Turner's argument, while symbols are not necessarily united in the same meaning for all, they can harness emotional efficacy and channel it towards a particular direction. It is through this perspective that we analyse the increasing involvement of the palace, military government and other conservative political actors in the process of mourning and volunteering at Sanam Luang.

When interviewing participants about their reasons for coming to Sanam Luang for mourning activities, many responses used the word '*tang jai*'. *Tang jai* has no direct equivalent in English and refers to an emotional experience channelled into a resolute attitude of action. For example, several people when speaking about their reasons to visit or volunteer at Sanam Luang said that they felt '*tahm kwam tang jai*'—that is, they were following the resolve of their heart. These expressions indicate a determination of action, rather than a passive experience, and reflect how visiting Sanam Luang operated as a pilgrimage. The journeys of visitors to Sanam Luang emerged out of emotion and reflection—people took time out of their ordinary business or social activity for this pilgrimage owing to the deep meaning of the very visit itself.

In Thailand, understandings of economic, political and spiritual hierarchies are often interpreted as interwoven, owing to the Buddhist belief that people are positively or negatively affected by their karma.<sup>35</sup> Acts of *tham bun*, or merit-making, can include chanting, giving donations, fasting, decorating statues and spaces and special pilgrimages. These acts of 'making merit' are discussed in public discourse as both honouring spiritual beings and improving an individual's level of goodness. The extent to which King Bhumibol is treated as a sacred figure has changed over time and varies in Thailand according to geography, political affiliation and age. There was no doubt, however, that the royal funeral practices managed by city, national and palace administration treated the King as divine. A media guide created by the Committee on Public Relations for the Royal Cremation of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej states, 'The king is believed to be the reincarnation of a god' and that merit-making tam-bun ceremonies are 'meant to accord honour in the same manner as when the royals lived.'<sup>36</sup> To journey to Sanam Luang and take part in the national mourning can be understood therefore as a pilgrimage that would not only increase one's own merit, but also benefit the nation.<sup>37</sup>

The top-down and institutional control of securitisation, volunteerism and aesthetics at Sanam Luang harnessed the liminal power of these funerary rituals for the purpose of realigning the identity of citizens to the Thai monarchy and the two other institutions often referred to as the 'pillars' of Thai society—the army and

34 Turner, *Forest of symbols*.

35 Edoardo Siani, 'Buddhism and power', in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalongpon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p. 270.

36 Committee on Public Relations for the Royal Cremation of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 'Media Guide: Royal Cremation of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej 25–29 October 2017', <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017343075/> (last accessed 12 Oct. 2023).

37 Penny Van Esterik describes how different political regimes in Thailand like that under Marshall Phibun Songkram harnessed spiritual concepts such as *kalatesa*, the proper ordering of time in space, in order to connect the spiritual alignment and health of an individual to the health of the nation. See Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2020 [2000]).

the Buddhist *sangha* (the centralised order of senior monks with religious authority).<sup>38</sup>

### Securitisation

During the first months that Sanam Luang served as the centre for mourning the late King, it was transformed from an ad hoc pilgrimage site to a secure, monumental urban space with controlled exits, entrances and restricted areas. As a result, the more 'common' or bottom-up and diverse uses and meanings attached to Sanam Luang were removed and replaced with palace and government-sanctioned messaging, symbolism and mourning activity. The securitisation heightened certain ritual qualities and created an auspicious affect by creating a ritual threshold that had to be crossed by mourners in order to enter this transformative liminal space.

The first few days and weeks following King Bhumibol's death saw minimal regulation of Sanam Luang. While police were certainly present, people moved across the field and roads surrounding the palace largely at will. Buddhist rituals such as the chanting of *suttas*, lighting of candles and offering of flowers were initiated by individuals and by small groups without palace or government-backed affiliation. Many people participated in groundskeeping, singing and the collecting, selling and arranging of flowers. Giant screens broadcast video memorials and mourning events and ceremonies, while many picnicked and rested on the grassy lawn, observing the buzz of activity surrounding the area. People walked onto the oval-shaped field from multiple directions, and there were always groups of people sitting in haphazard groups to rest and to share a meal. These mourners sat upon sheets of plastic and foil that were sold by vendors who walked along hawking their goods including umbrellas, ice cream and portraits of King Bhumibol. Other individuals pulled up to Sanam Luang in small trucks and handed out food donations.

During this short period, Sanam Luang reflected the ethic of a 'commoners' field. Large numbers of homeless people, and people from outside of Bangkok with no local accommodation, arrived at Sanam Luang and occupied the space, eating and sleeping in the field. Each day, groups of employees or friends would arrive and hand out food to anyone who was hungry. Day and night, Sanam Luang bustled with activity. Special events included patriotic music concerts organised by a range of private and public groups and institutions. People shared information through friends and social media, but it was not easy to get information about what time gatherings might occur as there was no single channel of news and information. Movement in the area was generally confused. For example, soldiers would temporarily block off areas of the road because a royal motorcade was expected, but the expected cars did not always arrive.

By late October, state institutions, including the police and the army, had deployed personnel to secure Sanam Luang, part of a larger top-down bureaucratic takeover of all access, movement and ritual activity in the area.<sup>39</sup> Large gates were

38 Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and politics in Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1982).

39 This process reflects, as Deborah Wong and others have argued, how ritual power is achieved not only through *how* things are done, but also through *whom* the rituals are performed or by whom they are sponsored; Deborah Wong, *Sounding the center: History and aesthetics in Thai Buddhist performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

installed at each entrance to the field, equipped with a metal detector through which each visitor had to pass through individually (fig. 1). From this time on, about a month after the king's death, the thousands of visitors passing through the gates every day were also required to display their national ID cards or passports. All bags were also inspected by officials manning each gate, and special permission was required for large bags brought into the mourning area. It was not clear which persons were accepted through the gates, but homeless people were no longer permitted to sleep or rest in Sanam Luang and hawkers were restricted from selling their goods in Sanam Luang.

There were moreover such large numbers of police officers, soldiers and checkpoints, that all visitors to Sanam Luang, from that point on, had their movements checked several times over the course of a single visit. Soldiers and police were responsible for the mapping and control of movement, marking of gates and restricted access areas, and regulation of mourners' bodily deportment and dress. People were continually being ushered to move on a central path, pass through a metal detector or made to wait in designated seating areas by police and soldiers.

Police and army tents were stationed at most of the gated entrances, and next to these tents stood large boards displaying maps of the pilgrimage area, that is, of the palace, Sanam Luang and the surrounding roads. These maps provided information for the purpose of orientation, but most significantly they introduced new rules



**Figure 1. Mourners moving through secured gates into Sanam Luang. Photograph by Bronwyn Isaacs.**

about areas that were off limits, or controlled in new ways. Tourist police explained to us that the coloured roads on the map indicated walkways that were allowed or blocked off to traffic. When we asked about the points throughout the maps that were marked by large stars, we were told that they didn't have a particular classificatory purpose beyond showing that these were *saksit*, or 'sacred' areas. Upon further examination, it became clear that each of the stars represented checkpoints and police stands located within and around Sanam Luang. In using the word *saksit* (sacred), the officer at the checkpoint employed a usefully ambiguous term. *Saksit* has strong religious connotations and is associated with ritual, correct procedure and sacred locations that require self-disciplined and morally conservative behaviour including speech, deportment and dress. For example, when we interviewed one young woman about her opinions of the Sanam Luang area during the mourning period, she described it as *saksit mahk* (very sacred) and contrasted it to the Siam shopping area in downtown Bangkok which she described as *issara* (free). In other words, the *saksit* quality of Sanam Luang during the mourning period produced a sense of constraint and restriction for a spiritual purpose in contrast to the problematic unbridled freedom and consumerism represented by Bangkok's commercial heart.<sup>40</sup>

The heavily guarded access to Sanam Luang changed the ritual quality of the space in two main ways. Firstly, the site was now strongly marked and controlled by the palace and the government whereas previously there had been much greater freedom of movement and expression. Secondly, the necessity of passing through the checkpoints created the sense of crossing a threshold, from the secular to the sacred. These efforts at securitisation therefore renewed and heightened the special and sacred historical marking of Sanam Luang as an exceptional space. The deployment of police and the army for intensified security further had a territorialising effect, removing the rights and use of space by many for the political purposes chosen by an elite minority.

### Regulating the aesthetics of mourning

In conjunction with the securitisation and territorialisation of Sanam Luang during the mourning period, members of the police and army were monitoring all kinds of human activity and display, even at the intimate levels of personal dress, posture, writing and speech. This concern with deportment and manners cannot be understood only as a question of mere respect or decorum. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Thailand's monarchies and military governments sought to instil hierarchical notions of order and obedience by teaching and policing 'manners' in terms of correct deportment of the body, speech and the mind.<sup>41</sup> In this case too, the military government was invested in policing manners, regulating clothing, gestures, speech, public debate, spiritual activities and the narratives of King Bhumibol's life and work. Entering such a controlled and auspicious space had a liminal effect that both unified and ordered the national polity.

40 This tension reflects the Sufficiency Economic Philosophy promoted by King Bhumibol that emphasised a Buddhist, 'middle-way' approach to development based on constraint rather than excess.

41 Patrick Jory, *A history of manners and civility in Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).



Arguably the most immediate and visually striking aspect of visiting Sanam Luang during this mourning period was the universal application of a grey-scale colour palette in the crowds flooding its grounds. On the night of King Bhumibol's death, the palace announced that wearing black dress for a year had been ordered for all governmental employees and was strongly recommended for all Thai citizens. Although wearing black was not a legal requirement, anyone in Bangkok not wearing black, white or grey for the next 12 months, and most especially in the first six months, was quickly reprimanded whether in-person or through online platforms by friends, family and strangers alike. To facilitate this dress code, within a month of the King's death, large vats were set up in Sanam Luang for the purpose of dying clothes. This service was utilised mostly by the elderly, and the majority of pilgrims visiting Sanam Luang dressed in formal and usually, new clothes.

By 28 October 2016, visitors to Sanam Luang were being admitted into the palace compound where they could view and pay respects to King Bhumibol's coffin. According to Thai media reports, over 10 million people would visit the coffin, making donations of 790 million baht.<sup>42</sup> Large sections of Sanam Luang were dedicated for marshalling these visitors on long rows of white plastic chairs where hundreds of mourners were seated at a time. For those entering the palace compound, even greater attention was typically given to dress and bodily display. Although it was clear that conservative dress, appropriate for any Buddhist temple, was expected by all, many people bought special formal outfits to wear to the area. Men wore tailored shirts, long pants, and often, black leather shoes. Women wore makeup, long skirts or pants and often had their hair done up in hair nets or with elaborate bows. Many women also wore sparkling glass brooches and clothes with layers of lace or intricate silk patterns.

Large posters at the gates to Sanam Luang, similar to those found outside many Buddhist temples in Thailand frequented by tourists, displayed what was appropriate clothing for going into the palace (fig. 2). The posters were very detailed, indicating what kinds of fabrics and sleeve styles were appropriate for mourners. Those who created these guides paid extra attention to describing the requirements for women's attire. Women who were judged to be inappropriately dressed (most frequently because of the length of their skirt) had their identities recorded and were given new sarongs to borrow as well as an ID tag that marked them as wearing corrected clothing.

The control of bodily aesthetics extended beyond dress to encompass speech and comportment. When visiting the King's coffin in the palace grounds on 20 March 2017 we learned that mourners had to be careful about how they walked, talked and moved through mourning space. We noticed that guards yelled at people who took photos while walking, and few people dared to whisper, let alone speak out loud. On the day of our visit, King Bhumibol's daughter Princess Sirindhorn came by in her car. We were hurriedly instructed by guards to sit '*riap roi*' (neatly). This required us to sit with everyone in long, uniform lines with our legs carefully tucked

42 Thairath Online, ย้ำ 30 ก.ย.ปิดถวายบังคมพระบรมศพ- ยอดประชาชน 317 วัน มี 10.65 ล้านคน [Reiterating, 30 September will see the end of paying homage to the royal remains: In 317 days, a total of 10.65 million visitors], *Thairath Online*, 17 Sept. 2017 (accessed 25 Feb. 2022).





Figure 2. A poster describes appropriate and inappropriate dress for paying respects to the late king, with special emphasis on women’s clothing choices. Photograph by Bronwyn Isaacs.

in a direction away from the princess and our bags hidden behind our bodies. Upon arrival at the *sala* (pavillion) housing the King’s coffin we had to remove our shoes, walk slowly and not make any noise above a muted whisper. A sense of seriousness and vigilance hung in the air. Everyone that we saw appeared intent on behaving in a most appropriate manner.

This use of conformity and discipline can be understood in Turner’s terms as a strategy for heightening the liminal power of ritual—the more that everyday social markers are removed, the more powerful the sense of unity and transformation.<sup>43</sup> By removing everyday identity, dress and deportment, Thai visitors were re-figured

43 Foucault, *Discipline and punish*; Turner, *Forest of symbols*.

as more unified, obedient subjects within a community that adheres to Buddhist self-discipline in its identity and political membership. This did not mean that signifiers of class and privilege were entirely erased. Mourners who donated very large sums of money were permitted to sit in a carefully roped-off area in front of the *sala*'s entrance. While regular visitors were ushered through the *sala* quickly, remaining either standing or seated on the ground, these more wealthy donors were comfortably seated on chairs for an entire evening of observation and meditation. These visitors were also dressed ostentatiously, with lavish fabrics, expensive jewellery and decorated military uniforms.

The repetition of slogans, phrases and symbols by those partaking in and promoting mourning activities was another way in which the aesthetics of Sanam Luang were amplified and regulated. The Thai numeral for nine (๙) was one of the most popular and repeated symbols visible throughout the mourning period (King Bhumibol had been the ninth monarch of the Chakri dynasty). Many people wore badges in the shape of a nine and beautiful flower wreaths in the shape of a nine were donated to adorn the inside of the *sala* housing the King's coffin. Another key text or message, repeated throughout Sanam Luang—on t-shirts of volunteers, golf carts used for transportation, tent stands, and posters—'*Tham di poea paw*' (Do Good for Father), emphasised the relationship between citizens and the monarchy as one of kinship in addition to that of being subjects. Radiating beyond Sanam Luang, on TV and social media the slogan *tham di poea Paw* was used as a popular hashtag, in advertising slogans, and as a motto for various volunteer initiatives in the wider city. These repeated four words expressed a kinship relationship (children to their father) as well as an imperative of ethical action. Beyond the proliferation of these phrases and symbols, specific fonts were shared and even newly created by mourners in honour of the deceased King. This standardisation and uniformity in font aesthetics was visible in the wreaths, company signs on tents, T-shirts, bags for shoes inside the palace, and other signs. Many of the Facebook, Instagram and other social media posts spread from the event also used the same fonts and even the same images. In the same way that a repeated chant has a subliminal effect on a speaker or hearer, repeated visual symbolism and messaging highlight a space and moment in time as set apart from the everyday. The repetition and condensation of meaning and symbolism, combined with the securitisation of this portion of the city, heightened the ritual experience of unity, hierarchy and submission for mourners. The pilgrim heading towards Sanam Luang moved through a crescendo of symbolism, loaded messaging and, last but not least, surveillance. The intensity of the aesthetic repetition, clear messaging (such as 'Do Good for Father') and regulation of dress and comportment were intimately and, we suggest, overbearingly tied to a singular moral and political message that celebrated the King as the moral leader and father of the nation.

Religious messaging was most clearly on display through the architecture of the funeral pyre constructed at the centre of Sanam Luang that was designed by architect Theerachat Weerayuttanon and art technician Korkiat Thongphut.<sup>44</sup> Rich in

44 Nick Mafi, 'Here's why Thailand is spending \$90 million for a funeral', 25 Oct. 2017, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/thailand-set-fire-30-million-building> (accessed 13 Oct. 2023).

Theravada Buddhist symbolism the pyre echoed the form of Mount Meru, a man-made interpretation of the cosmic heavens that was topped with the figure of Garuda, the servant and vehicle of Vishnu, of whom the Thai King is an avatar.<sup>45</sup> As part of the cremation rites, 85 replicas of Bhumibol's funeral pyre were erected around the country; one in each of the nation's 76 provinces and another 9 around Bangkok.<sup>46</sup> The pyre design, however, was not without controversy. One artist crafting a sculpture of a Garuda for the pyre in Sanam Luang came under scrutiny when he carved the logos of Facebook, Apple, and Google onto its wings. Although he asserted that including these logos was meant to celebrate technological achievements under King Bhumibol's reign, many people thought that their inclusion was inappropriate in association with powerful religious symbols. Given that Buddhist teachings assert a separation from the material world, the idea that these companies could possibly profit from this mournful occasion was seen as extremely problematic and the logos were removed.<sup>47</sup>

### Vetting the volunteers

When the palace and government agencies began securing and transforming Sanam Luang at the end of October 2016, they also instituted a clear vetting process by which people or institutions could access the space for volunteering and spiritual practices of *tham bun*. After the initial burst of spontaneous merit-making acts and the gathering of unprecedented crowds around haphazardly planned events, all volunteer practices and merit-making events were bureaucratised into a centralised system. Caretaking acts such as rubbish collection and decoration were no longer undertaken by a wide variety of individuals and groups on their own accord, but rather by bringing in paid workers from other areas. Teams of groundskeepers who normally worked at temples in other parts of the city were a constant presence, and the police and army regiments on duty were also sent from nearby or central Bangkok locations to help secure the palace and Sanam Luang.

Gaining access to the space as a volunteer was contained into official channels administered by police and accountable to a range of official bureaucratic and political actors. These actors appeared to include the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), the Bureau of the Royal Household and the national government. Certain government and private institutions became semi-permanent fixtures on the usually empty field. Institutions with large, semi-permanent tents on site included the Thai Central Investigation Bureau team, the Thai Army and the government media department. It was necessary to seek permission at this last tent before filming in the area. Media companies and teams from Thai TV networks were also allowed semi-permanent vans on site. Although there were initially many organisations and groups

45 Adler and Wong, 'The funeral of King Rama IX'.

46 Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Panu Wongcha-um, 'Sea of black in Bangkok as thousands flock to late king's funeral', 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-king-idUSKBN1CV02S> (accessed 22 Mar. 2022).

47 Kaewta Ketbungkan, 'Tech logos removed from royal crematorium garuda', 3 May 2017, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/featured/2017/05/03/tech-logos-removed-royal-crematorium-garuda/> (accessed 8 Mar. 2022); Trude Renwick, 'Spiritualizing the material: Assembling the everyday space of Bangkok's commercial landscape' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2021).

providing food and other volunteer services at Sanam Luang, eventually, the number of volunteer tents on the field was limited to a select few. This restriction occurred alongside the construction of the funeral pyre and increasing numbers of visitors to the space.

The bureaucratic administration of Sanam Luang went beyond safety and thoroughfare issues as volunteers were vetted to fill the remaining tents located at the field. As a result, organisations running these semi-permanent tents that provided official volunteer services were selected from among the most privileged sectors of Thai society.<sup>48</sup> Thailand's wealthiest companies and conglomerates like the CP Group, largest banks and oldest higher education institutions all ran volunteer activities in the area. Many of these entities have historical and ongoing links to the monarchy. Each volunteer group was required to erect a tent on the ground, which was marked by a black and white sign indicating the institution sponsoring the services at that tent. One of these tents was staffed by alumni of Chulalongkorn University, the oldest and one of the most elite universities in Thailand. Run between 11 am and 5 pm each day, this tent had at any one time a team of about ten people distributing drinks and small snacks to mourners exiting the palace compound after they had paid their respects to the King's coffin. We interviewed an older man who was a manager and regular volunteer at this tent and in his discussion with us, this man emphasised the vetting process through which potential volunteer tents were evaluated.

The volunteer explained that most organisations were required to commit to providing a volunteering presence at their tent at Sanam Luang for 100 days before being granted approval to offer their services. He explained to us that 'To make a commitment to volunteer was considerable. Very few were able to promise to look after 30,000 mourners a day over a long period of time.' But, the volunteer made sure to point out that among the Chulalongkorn network, 'there are a lot of wealthy people' not to mention, several famous companies linked to the university via the alumni network. As the manager explained,

Making an application with the palace is not easy. But when we made an application with the palace, it is not difficult for us [as] we are a school started by [Thai King] Rama the 6th. Perhaps for some applications the process takes some time, but for us, it is fast, because the palace knows we have large resources and we are connected because Rama 6 was Rama 9's [King Bhumibol's] grandfather.

In his interview with us this man voiced what was also visually evident regarding the volunteer process: official tents providing volunteer services at Sanam Luang were staffed by the wealthy, well-connected and famous rather than citizens from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The vetting process by which merit-making volunteers were screened at Sanam Luang created a geography of distinction where those with the highest status were allowed responsibility and access closer to Sanam Luang and the palace. Those who wished to volunteer but who were not affiliated with 'official' or vetted tents at

48 See also Felicity Aulino, *Rituals of care: Karmic politics in an aging Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). Aulino describes volunteering in northern Thailand and some of the dynamics, at times hierarchical, amongst different groups engaged in elder care.

Sanam Luang, offered their services in the streets radiating away from the palace and the royal field. A wider variety of volunteer services representing a broader diversity of Thai classes could be found there. These provided a range of goods and services including hair cuts and braiding, free massages, free motorcycle rides and food and drink. The volunteers came from a wider range of class and employment backgrounds. For example, vendors who had recently been banned from selling products in the city's central commercial district constituted one of many groups that volunteered in the wider area around Sanam Luang.

Local police informed us that such peripheral groups of volunteers were also required to fill in a form. However, when we went to volunteer ourselves with the Thai Authority of Tourism (TAT), the police officers and TAT officials looked at us a bit helplessly and said that as we were 'farang ... no[t] real volunteers' we didn't have to complete the forms. The documentation was clearly designed for Thai nationals; outsiders were difficult to conceptualise within the patterns of bureaucratic order. The distinction of non-Thais as 'not real volunteers' again suggested a purpose behind the bureaucratisation that went beyond general order and administration. The securitisation and management of the Sanam Luang area was designed with the refashioning of Thai citizens in their relationship to the state. The practice of form-filling and application-making secured a special kind of privileged access to merit-making participation in the Palace and Sanam Luang areas. The documentation of volunteers also removed their anonymity and contributed to a liminal effect by bringing diverse people into a single system of identification and assessment. At the same time, there was a clear demarcation of hierarchy, with those deemed worthy of volunteering accorded status through their association with an official volunteer tent and gated access to Sanam Luang.

Even after the bureaucratisation of volunteering, some smaller-scale merit-making activities within the more central, gated area of Sanam Luang performed by individual mourners were less controlled and bureaucratised than others. In the first days following the King's death, many Thais from a wide variety of backgrounds made donations of flowers and lit candles at the palace walls. After a few days, official donation boxes were set up for people to give monetary offerings and the lighting of candles, which was not initially controlled by any central administration point, was banned. The practice of purchasing flowers and leaving them along the palace wall, however, was allowed to continue and was easy for anyone to take part in throughout the entire mourning period. Most of the flowers were yellow and white, traditional colours for Buddhist mourning. White symbolises purity and emancipation and yellow, the colour of the king, represents the journey towards enlightenment.<sup>49</sup> This activity did not require going through a checkpoint into Sanam Luang. The flowers were, however, collected up and rearranged or taken to other temples within a few hours of being placed at the palace wall. The continual work of those who picked up the flowers highlighted the careful system designed to handle this impermanent and fragile donation.

49 Chalermsee Olson, 'Essential sources on Thai Theravada Buddhism', *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 16, 1 (1997): 1–10.

The use of bureaucratic processes to safeguard the mourning rites for King Bhumibol reflects the strong interweaving of the sacred and secular in Thai political life.<sup>50</sup> In visiting Sanam Luang during this period of mourning, visitors participated in a shared drama or storytelling where social status bent briefly in a united ritual moment of mourning for the nation's late King. This unusual liminal moment was structured, however, within a larger system of surveillance and bureaucratic management that reflected and reinforced long-standing social and political hierarchies: ritual at Sanam Luang did not only sustain and reinforce social order, it also provided the groundwork to change and reconstitute it.

### **A new generation and a renewed vision**

Given the shifting use of Sanam Luang in Thailand's modern history relative to those in power, it is not surprising that the death of Rama IX was another such pivotal moment. Other scholars have described the activities and temporary structures erected in Sanam Luang following the death of King Bhumibol, as well as the intensity of ritual and symbolism surrounding the coronation of King Bhumibol's son, Vajiralongkorn, in May 2019.<sup>51</sup> Here, however, we reflect on the remarkable protest activities that have taken place at Sanam Luang, especially since the middle of 2020. One of the most dramatic moments that emerged during these protests was the use of large shipping containers by the police to block 'commoners' access to Sanam Luang.

These protest activities mark a distinctive shift away from the narrative visible throughout the national mourning process that had drawn large crowds to Sanam Luang and Bangkok more broadly. Although the mourning activities in Sanam Luang were carefully choreographed, involving an increase in securitisation and management of this space by the palace and the military, this does not mean that the relationship between Thai citizens and state as expressed in the mourning rituals remained unchallenged, nor did it mean that Sanam Luang's history as a transformative site for political unrest was forgotten.

The wave of 2020 student protests were foreshadowed by another catalyst in public space—the removal of a plaque celebrating the 1932 revolution that ushered in democracy to Thailand. The 1932 plaque, which was located about 3 kilometres from Sanam Luang outside the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, was silently replaced by a royal loyalist plaque in April 2017.<sup>52</sup> Thanavi Chotpradit argues that 'the plaque, as a visual marker of the 1932 revolution, functions as a site of ideological interpellation and contestation where the debate on the origins of Thai democracy and possession of sovereign power has yet to be settled'.<sup>53</sup> In line with Thanavi's argument, we

50 Stengs, 'United in competitive mourning'.

51 Thanya Luchprasith, 'Royal tourism in Thailand'; Stengs, 'United in competitive mourning'; Siani, 'Buddhism and power'.

52 Reuters Staff, 'Plaque commemorating Thai revolution removed, prompting outcry', 15 Apr. 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN17H044> (accessed 8 Mar. 2022).

53 Thanavi Chotpradit, 'A dark spot on a royal space: The art of the People's Party and the politics of Thai (art) history', *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 1, 1 (2017): 136.



see the protest events that have taken place since the death of King Bhumibol as a form of political struggle where different ideas about the nation's future make themselves visible to the wider Thai public.

In mid-2020, dissatisfaction among Thai citizens, mostly younger Thais in their teens, twenties and thirties, with the military government and political status quo materialised in highly visible protest activities in Bangkok. Many of these same young people had participated in the powerful pro-monarchy ritual mourning events of 2016 and 2017. Nonetheless, these young Thais were critical of laws protecting the monarchy, especially the monarchy's wealth and *lèse-majesté* laws providing the monarchy immunity from criticism. They were further angered by what they saw as the military government's un-democratic rule, including the dissolution of the popular Future Forward political party. The young protestors were also motivated to protest because of what they saw to be the government's failures in handling the Covid-19 pandemic, and further dissatisfaction with conservative social values and their implementation in daily life, such as sexist and restrictive uniform dress codes at schools and universities.<sup>54</sup>

One site in Bangkok that has been a focus of youth-led protests has been the Democracy Monument. Located on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, it is one of the few remaining monuments in Bangkok that commemorate the 1932 revolution that ended the absolute monarchy. In July 2020, in September 2020, October 2020 and February 2021 protestors gathered at this site. The focus placed on the Democracy Monument, just blocks away from Sanam Luang, by the protestors both implicates and opposes the mourning rituals orchestrated by the establishment. On the one hand, the protests at the Democracy Monument, located on the same road as Sanam Luang, highlighted this site as an alternative symbol of unification. The young protestors also offered new and competing rituals such as the use of the three-fingered salute of resistance derived from Suzanne Collins' novel *The Hunger Games*, and portrayed in the Hollywood film series, the playing or singing of songs critical of the monarchy, and also alternative aesthetics, including the use of umbrellas and goggles to resist water cannons and express solidarity with democratic youth in Hong Kong. The protestors organised and broadcast their activities using mobile phones and digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Line and Clubhouse. On the other hand, by including Sanam Luang as a site of protest, the protestors not only set up competing sites around which their movement could gather national support, but co-opted the historical importance of Sanam Luang into their own messaging.

The largest of these pro-democracy youth rallies was the September 2020 rally. This rally occupied the nation's political imagination and public consciousness in several respects. There were reports of between 20,000 and 200,000 protestors attending the rally around the palace, Sanam Luang and the Thammasat University campus.<sup>55</sup> At this protest, protestors installed a new Khana Ratsadon (People's Party) plaque displaying the three-fingered salute of resistance in the ground at Sanam Luang. The

54 Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, 'The white ribbon movement: High school students in the 2020 Thai youth protests', *Critical Asian Studies* 53, 2 (2021): 206–18.

55 Peera Songkunnatham, 'The law ought to be king', *Boston Review*, 1 Oct. 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/peera-songkunnatham-the-law-ought-be-king/> (last accessed 15 Mar. 2022).

protestors also claimed they were renaming Sanam Luang (Royal Field) as *Sanam Ratsadon*, ‘Commoner’s Field’.<sup>56</sup> The day following the protest, several student leaders had charges laid against them by the police for their actions.<sup>57</sup> A few of the protestors were charged with breaking the nation’s *lèse-majesté* laws, and several were also charged for installing the plaque and renaming Sanam Luang.<sup>58</sup>

The unofficial renaming of Sanam Luang as Sanam Ratsadon captured people’s attention far beyond the site and the day of the rally itself. An English language online magazine or ‘archive of commoner feelings’ was set up under the name *Sanam Ratsadon*. The first issue, released the day before the national celebration of the Queen Mother’s Birthday was called ‘Mothers’, and celebrated the political activism and sacrifices of ‘ordinary mothers’. The second issue focused on the topic of Thailand’s historically troubled constitution, which has been rewritten twenty times since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932.<sup>59</sup>

The scale of the September 2020 protest in terms of numbers, direct criticism of the monarchy and presentation of alternative national narratives and symbols was shocking to many in Thailand, while also having an enlivening effect on public consciousness.<sup>60</sup> The authorities responded with increased securitisation of Sanam Luang and the Democracy Monument. The heavily policed checkpoints at Sanam Luang that had been installed in the months following King Bhumibol’s death were no longer in place, but there were large-scale deployments of police during planned protest events. Police were also posted along King Vajiralongkorn’s routes in order to deter protestors from joining the crowds gathered to meet and honour him along the roads surrounding the Grand Palace during this period.

In July 2021 an attempted protest at Sanam Luang in March saw 16 protestors arrested and others cleared from the area, but one of the most dramatic spatial interventions in the Sanam Luang area since the construction of the funerary pyre occurred in November 2021. Protestors opposed to the King’s performing royal duties abroad attempted to march toward Sanam Luang from the German embassy on 14 November.<sup>61</sup> However, protesters were prevented from entering Sanam Luang and

56 Bangkok Post, ‘Rally leaders face charges’, *Bangkok Post*, 22 Sept. 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1989271/rally-leaders-face-charges> (last accessed 15 Mar. 2022). *Sanam Ratsadon* can also be translated as ‘People’s Field’ or ‘Citizen’s Field’ but is most commonly translated as ‘Commoner’s Field’. See for example, ‘Sanam Ratsadon, an archive of common(er) feelings’, <https://sanamratsadon.org/> (last accessed 15 Mar. 2022).

57 Since the September 2020 protests, the government has arrested over 120 people under the *lèse-majesté* law known as ‘112’. See FIDH 2021. ‘Second wave: The return of lese-majeste in Thailand’, International Federation of Human Rights with Thai Lawyers for Human Rights and Internet Law Reform Dialogue, no. 774a, Oct. 2021, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/thailand\\_report\\_second\\_wave\\_774a\\_sg\\_au\\_210906.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/thailand_report_second_wave_774a_sg_au_210906.pdf) (last accessed 8 Mar. 2022).

58 *Bangkok Post*, ‘Rally leaders face charges’.

59 ‘Sanam Ratsadon, an archive of common(er) feelings’.

60 Sawaros Thanapornsangst and Panarat Anamwathana, ‘Youth participation during Thailand’s 2020–2021 political turmoil’, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* (2022): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2022.2037513>.

61 King Maha Vajiralongkorn has close ties with Germany where he spends much of his time, with a home in the town of Tutzing. See David Hutt, ‘Thai king under scrutiny in Germany’, *DW*, 14 Feb. 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/thai-king-maha-vajiralongkorn-under-political-and-tax-scrutiny-in-germany/a-60770986> (last accessed 13 Oct. 2023).

the surrounding roads by the use of strategically placed shipping containers. Dramatic images of these shipping containers surrounded by barbed wire and soldiers made international headlines.

These protests and their direct engagement with Sanam Luang in the years immediately following the mourning for King Bhumibol, demonstrate that the intense control over activities in and around Sanam Luang during the nation's ritual mourning did not create the 'common feelings' that Prime Minister Prayut had spoken of in his speech just after the death of King Bhumibol, at least not the way he had meant it.<sup>62</sup> The ritual power of Sanam Luang created a moment of shared unity and refocused citizens' attention on the supposedly divine quality of the King. But the period of national mourning also gave rise to a diversity of political reactions to the government and especially to the Palace that followed.

Hierarchical and authoritarian states are often drawn towards representing the values of a nation as stemming from a mythical past, a tendency evident throughout modern Thai political history.<sup>63</sup> As such, authoritarian actors often attempt to create compliance by then calling for such 'traditional' values to be upheld. As Herzfeld reflects, however, such a blindness to social and cultural change can grate at citizens who use humour, criticism and protest to highlight the state's overly unified and reductive symbolism.<sup>64</sup> We argue that excessive and reductive symbolism and state ritual contributed in this case to a poetics of resistance.

### **Public space, ritual and political juncture**

In this article we unpacked how ritual practice and the political relationships fashioned in a hallowed field in Bangkok during the mourning rituals for the late King Bhumibol reverberated and extended beyond the context of mourning in unintended ways. Indeed, the management of mourning rituals for King Bhumibol was restrictive; it limited access, rights to participate, and to use this public space in order to align the rituals with the nationalist agenda of Prayut's government. These restrictions were rarely challenged at the Sanam Luang during the year of mourning. In the years following this momentous mourning period for Thailand's longest reigning monarch, however, Sanam Luang would be occupied by a very different type of public. The large and active youth protest movement began using Sanam Luang as part of their direct challenge to the continuing rule of a military-led government and the unquestioned role of the monarchy in Thailand. These criticisms of the *lèse-majesté* laws and Prayut's rule by the youth protest movements garnered more public support than any attempt to challenge the monarchy since the early years of King Bhumibol's reign. While the mourning activities and political unrest at Sanam Luang that we have described throughout this article are unique to Thailand, we argue that they highlight the political potency and instability of ritual performance in public space more broadly.

In Southeast Asia, recent examples of political conflict over symbolic city spaces also illustrate the importance of ritualised space to contemporary politics. In August 2021, Malaysian police prevented protestors from entering Dataran Merdeka square, a

62 *Wall Street Journal*, 'The King of Thailand is dead'.

63 Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer*.

64 Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy*.

site associated with Malaysian independence and the end of colonial rule.<sup>65</sup> In Cambodia, 'Freedom Park' in Phnom Penh was established as an official public gathering space;<sup>66</sup> however, when citizens began to use this site to protest against state corruption and election fraud in 2010, the Cambodian government attempted to control the use of the park by erecting large wire barricades, arresting protestors and using violence including tear gas, batons and bullets.<sup>67</sup> Freedom Park is a notable example given its proximity to the temple Wat Phnom Daun Penh, which grants it additional spiritual and symbolic importance. The Cambodian government's repeated attempts to move the park have encountered significant opposition that speak to the site's importance in the national imaginary as a semi-sacred space.<sup>68</sup> Singapore's 'Speaker's Corner' is another Southeast Asian example of a place of public assembly with symbolic power as a site of protest and provocation. As with the state's efforts towards securitisation of the Cambodian Freedom Park, moves by the Singaporean government to erect barricades around Speakers Corner during an LGBT protest event in 2017 arguably increased the visibility of the protest itself.<sup>69</sup> In all of these cases monumental built space is at the centre of a wide spectrum of ritual and political activity that shapes new political meanings, associations and relationships between citizens.

By describing the transformation of Sanam Luang throughout the mourning period by multiple political actors we do not present a causal relationship between these youth protests and the mourning ritual itself. Rather, we argue that the liminal power of this site remains significant to political conflict in Thailand. The fine-grained level of involvement and control displayed during the mourning period at Sanam Luang by all levels of government and the scale of the subsequent protests reflects the power held by Sanam Luang when treated as a site of ritual. The potential of this ritual power was arguably considered dangerous by the respective arms of the national and Bangkok governments that intervened with a highly orchestrated level of securitisation and bureaucratisation after the death of the longest reigning monarch in Thai history. Long after the mourning rituals ended, Sanam Luang remains a potent site of political action in the eyes of both student protesters and government officials. The resulting empty field guarded with army regiments and with shipping containers in November 2021 speaks to the ongoing power of ritual in the city.

65 Alifah Zainuddin, 'Malaysia's youth step up protests as political crisis deepens', *The Diplomat*, 2 Aug. 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/malaysias-youth-step-up-protests-as-political-crisis-deepens/> (last accessed 13 Oct. 2023).

66 Thomas Kolnberger, 'Between mobility and immobility: Traffic and public space in Phnom Penh, Cambodia', *Pacific Geographies* 37, Jan./Feb. (2012): 4–9.

67 BBC, 'Cambodia jails 11 opposition activists for insurrection', 21 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33611441> (last accessed 21 Feb. 2022); Duncan McCargo, 'Cambodia in 2014: Confrontation and compromise', *Asian Survey* 55, 1 (2015): 207–13; Mom Kunthear, 'Protesters urge social justice, barred from Freedom Park', *Phnom Penh Post*, 7 Sept. 2020, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/protesters-urge-social-justice-barred-freedom-park> (last accessed 21 Feb. 2022).

68 Radio Free Asia, 'Cambodian premier wants to evict Freedom Park', 6 Dec. 2016, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58f9c9d513.html> (last accessed 8 Dec. 2022).

69 Fathin Ungku et al., 'Singapore gay pride rally draws thousands amid new curbs', 1 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-lgbt-pinkdot-idUSKBN19M3GD> (last accessed 21 Feb. 2022).