




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Siblings, comrades, friends: Kin(g)ship, hierarchy, and equality in Thailand’s youth struggle for democracy

Giuseppe Bolotta 

Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy
Email: giuseppe.bolotta@unive.it

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Abstract

This article provides an innovative anthropological analysis of youth activism in contemporary Thailand by examining its past and current manifestations through an unusual theoretical nexus—that between (cosmological) politics and kinship tropes. Against the backdrop of the Buddhist kingdom’s long-standing cult of the ‘Father-King’, the article focuses on the 2020 Thai democracy movement in relation to student demonstrations in the 1970s. It aims to explore the ambiguous permutations in the meanings of kinship that have marked Thai young people’s democratic engagement in a range of social fields—including friendship, siblinghood, and comradeship. Drawing upon archival material, oral histories of student revolts, and extended ethnography with today’s youth activists in a number of political sites—anti-government rallies, universities, and private homes—the article reveals how kin relationships, hierarchies, and affects are entangled in diverse political formations of youth dissent. Through a detailed reading of these complex entanglements, it shows how relationships of ‘equal friendship’ and ‘hierarchical siblinghood’ substantiate the symbolic grounds of Thai youth activism, as conflicting instantiations of ‘filial insubordination’ to monarchical parenthood. While youth activists advocate for an egalitarian, ‘friendship-based’ polity, explicitly questioning the democratic viability of Thailand’s Buddhist kin(g)ship, they are simultaneously caught up in (seemingly inescapable) hierarchical sibling relationships that validate the latter’s ontological legitimacy in practice, generating subtle tensions. It is argued that attention given to the varied cultural shapes of these tensions can make it possible to unearth the deep, kinship-based core of Thai social conflict that is concealed beneath public forms and straightforward political stances.

Keywords: Kinship and politics; kingship; hierarchy and equality; siblinghood, comradeship, and friendship; youth activism in Thailand

Introduction

On 16 January 2023, two girls, Tawan and Bam, aged 21 and 23 respectively, stand in front of the Bangkok Criminal Court. Just one year prior, they were charged with

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lese-majesty for organizing an opinion poll on royal motorcades in one of the Thai capital's major shopping malls. Their stern, precociously adultized look sits uncomfortably in modern imaginaries of juvenile light-heartedness, emphasizing the gravity of what is going to happen. A small crowd of youth activists, progressive journalists, and curious bystanders gather around the site, holding smartphones and camcorders, ready to capture a demonstrative gesture that had been previously announced on social networks as the last, desperate act of the two young women's pro-democracy activism. In religious silence, the audience awaits in trepidation for the girls' move; the atmosphere is loaded with tension, desire, and expectation. In a dramatic epilogue, Tawan and Bam pour red paint over themselves and raise three fingers in the air, after solemnly declaring their decision to give up their bail, return to prison, and go on dry hunger strike until all their 'friends' (*phuean*)—imprisoned youth activists awaiting trial for the same crime—are released. Protest signs and placards reading 'free our friends' (*ploi phuean rao*) pop up everywhere as the youthful audience suddenly breaks the silence in support of Tawan and Bam's peremptory move.

'Free our friends' has become one of the Thai democracy movement's most recognizable public demands since the government began cracking down on rampant youth dissent in 2020, with hundreds of monarchy reform advocates—including several child protesters—being charged with insulting the royal institution, sedition, and a range of additional public order offences. Two months earlier, I had attended a flash mob against the judicial harassment of student activists at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, in the business heart of the Thai capital city. A group of angry youths were holding the same protest sign. 'We call our fellow activists "friends" (*phuean*) [instead of *phi/nong* (elder/junior siblings)] because we are all equal,' said Nut, a 25-year-old student I spoke to. This was not a casual statement but the result of consciously designed political rhetoric, whose objective was to disarticulate Thailand's normative social hierarchy, which—as in many other Southeast Asian contexts—is inextricably tied to, and performatively indexed by, kin terms, including the hierarchical elder/junior sibling relationship.¹ Yet, in spite of such frontstage pronouncements of equality (as supposedly inherent in friendship), backstage interactions among demonstrators were mediated by routinized kinterm usage, with the (formally) asymmetrical sibling relationship most commonly invoked as a model for fellow activists. Notably, while Nut was explaining to me the political significance of the youth movement's '*ploi phuean rao*' slogan, his younger friend kept referring to both Nut and myself as '*phi*' (elder brother). And on top of that, the language of kinship that the courageous protesters were purposively expunging from their public utterances resurfaced continuously on the internet in the form of emotional social media posts by concerned (non-kin) adults, calling for the government and the police to stop intimidating 'our children and grandchildren' (*luk lan khong rao*). Emblematically, that afternoon, an elderly Thai citizen wrote a message of encouragement on a detained boy's Facebook page which was similar to a thousand others. It read: 'Cheer up, my son! Keep strong! How far will they [government officials] go in bullying our children?'

¹Kathryn Howard, 'Kinterm usage and hierarchy in Thai children's peer groups', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2007, p. 208.

Scholars have looked at the recent eruption of protests in Thailand through the lens of intergenerational political conflict—an ideological clash between a new, progressive generation of digital natives, determined to fight hierarchical values and traditional institutions, and an old, conservative elite that hinders democracy and popular sovereignty through military authoritarianism and hyper-royalism.² This article integrates these (often dichotomic) readings by foregrounding a largely overlooked dimension of political struggles in Thai contemporary history: the role of idioms, feelings, and experiences of relatedness, such as ‘equal friendship’ and ‘hierarchical siblinghood’, in enabling or constraining political resistance at multiple scales, from the microlevel of personal ties to forms of broader affective identification, such as the nation, which is often invoked through the intimate register of kinship.³ Acts of dissent, indeed, can involve the making and breaking of specific attachments of kinship, friendship, and solidarity, just as much as commitments to high principles.⁴ Here, I explore how manifold constructs of (family-like) relatedness shape pro-democracy activism, and the private/public arrangements of youth dissent, in the context of militarized Thailand’s royal paternalism. Revisiting recent anthropological theories of kin-based politics, I look at the ambiguous permutations of kinship-related meanings, hierarchies, and morals in various fields of political engagement. As I show, although Thai youth activists act out of a public commitment to abstract ideals of democracy and egalitarian friendship, they are simultaneously caught up in (seemingly inescapable) hierarchical kin-based relations and affects, generating apparent contradictions.

Over the past two years, I have attended multiple anti-government gatherings in Bangkok, and conducted formal and informal interviews with several dozen youth activists. I met my informants in both public and private venues, and undertook ethnography across a range of political sites, including universities and high schools, art exhibitions, commemorative events, and private homes. In these spaces, I have focused on how reciprocal kin terms, identities, and moral affects are variously entangled in diverse political formations of hierarchy, equality, solidarity, and activism, including friendship, siblinghood, and comradeship. I have also drawn upon archival material and oral histories of student revolts in the 1970s, the heyday of the Thai student movement, whose deeds and unfinished struggle are brought back to life by today’s youth activists through politically contentious acts of public remembrance. As I show, in the past, as in the present, the languages of politics, friendship, and kinship are enmeshed with each other, albeit in different ways.

²See, for example, Anusorn Unno, Samchai Sresunt, Saowanee T. Alexander, Asama Mungkorncchai and Chaiphong Samniang, *Hai man chop thi run rao: khabuankan yewachon thai nai boribot sangkhom lae kanmueang ruam samai* (Let’s finish it in our generation: Thai youth movements in contemporary socio-political contexts) (Bangkok: Seangdao, 2023); Duncan McCargo, ‘Disruptors’ dilemma? Thailand’s 2020 Gen Z protests’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2021, pp. 175–191; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, ‘The white ribbon movement: High school students in the 2020 Thai youth protests’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2021, pp. 206–218; and F. Ferrara, *The political development of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³M. Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy: Social poetics in the nation-state*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁴Harini Amarasuriya, Tobias Kelly, Sidharthan Maunaguru, Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Jonathan Spencer (eds), *The intimate life of dissent: Anthropological perspectives* (London: UCL Press, 2020), p. 4.

Politics of friendship and kinship

In Western thought, friend and kin are cognatic notions, with philosophical roots stretching back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Greek term *philia*, often translated as friendship, designates (non-erotic) love, which is best epitomised by kin relationships. Until recently, however, social scientists have ethnocentrically set family and friendship apart as distinct analytical orders, respectively ascribable to the realms of prescriptive (public) norms and spontaneous (private) behaviour. In these functionalist readings, kinship was construed as a social institution, subject to the culturally varied rules of descent, filiation, marriage, and the economy. Friendship, in turn, is most commonly thought to reflect voluntary choice and individual sentiments—idiosyncratic variables that would defy sociological analysis. But a rapid assessment of historical and ethnographic records is enough to acknowledge the inadequacy of such dichotomies. On the one hand, current investigations of friendship reveal that it is not necessarily exempt from instrumental ends, institutional constraints, or politicization,⁵ and that its situated forms are always performed according to specific cultural conceptions and historical temporalities.⁶ On the other hand, post-Shneiderian anthropological theory—with its constructionist accent on how people *do and signify* family—has detached kinship from its supposed natural givens (for example, procreation or biological filiation), while simultaneously annexing friendship into an expanded notion of 'relatedness', broadly understood as 'mutuality of being'.⁷ Unlike kinship for procreation alone, in fact, people might feel each other to be 'real relatives' through a variety of post-natal conditions of relatedness, including (but not limited to) sharing food, co-residence, adoption, ritual initiation, common memories, shared suffering, *friendship, and political activism*. The Malays studied by Janet Carsten, for example, think to share the same 'blood' when they live in the same house and eat from the same hearth, even if they are not biologically related.⁸ In Amazonian non-anthropocentric cosmologies, kinship might even come about as a more-than-human experience, since animals, plants, and divinities can all be addressed as kin.⁹

An equally elusive disjunction, entrenched in Eurocentric paradigms of twentieth-century scholarship, is that between kinship and politics. Here, 'traditional' or 'segmentary' kin-based societies are juxtaposed—in an explicitly teleological fashion—with 'modern' state-based polities, the latter conceived of as rational evolutions of the former, having been purified of kinship's (and religion's) primordial distortions. Yet, when kinship is epistemologically decoupled from biogenetic logics, and the attending micro-politics of procreation and filiation, its symbolic productivity

⁵P. E. Digeser, *Friendship reconsidered: What it means and how it matters to politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). See also Graham M. Smith, 'Friendship as a political concept: A groundwork for analysis', *Political Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2019, pp. 81–92.

⁶Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (eds), *The anthropology of friendship* (Berg: Oxford, 1999). See also S. Coleman, 'Making friendship impure: Some reflections on a (still) neglected topic', in *The ways of friendship: Anthropological perspectives*, (eds) A. Desai and E. Killick (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 197–205.

⁷Marshall Sahlins, 'What kinship is (part one)', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, N.S., no. 17, 2011, pp. 2–19.

⁸J. Carsten, *After kinship* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), p. 40.

⁹Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Images of nature and society in Amazonian ethnology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1996, pp. 179–200.

for societal formation, state legitimacy, or social activism becomes apparent, even in supposedly modern nations.¹⁰ Politically inflected notions such as ‘motherland’, ‘founding fathers’, ‘brothers in arms’, or ‘revolutionary fraternity’ punctuate global modern history, either as affective metaphors of the ‘nation as family’¹¹ or as intentional boundary crossings between politics and kinship. Across time and space, in short, cultural constructs of family relatedness travel into various (religiously grounded) political fields and are therein translated in myriad ways.¹²

Saya Shiraishi’s work on ‘familyism’ in New Order Indonesia, to pick up a Southeast Asian instance, showed how Javanese constructions of patriarchy, elders’ moral authority, and children’s due obedience to parents were reinvested in post-colonial projects of state-building, modern education, and ethnic assimilation. As part of this, Suharto imposed himself as the ‘Father’ (*bapak*, in Bahasa Indonesia) of the developing nation, while *bapakism* became the country’s all-encompassing ethos and hegemonic reference for socio-political, economic, and religious relationships alike.¹³ Similarly, in the Thai case, (royal) paternalism and political authoritarianism are two sides of the same coin. The king is historically portrayed as the nation’s benevolent father (*pho*), the Buddhist genitor of Thainess, who knows what is best for his children/citizens by virtue of his *phra barami* (royal charisma, righteous knowledge, and unmatched morality).¹⁴ Yet, today’s youth activists, such as Tawan, Bam, and Nut, are no longer willing to act as good, obedient ‘children’ (*dek*). Even though they are intimately—and, sometimes, ambiguously—imbricated in hierarchical sibling relationships, they publicly profess a friendship-based equality in order to overthrow Thailand’s family regime and bring about full democracy in their country. The Thai military government and the ultra-royalists, on their part, are determined to protect the integrity of the Thai national family’s generational hierarchy from what is presented as undisciplined children’s desecrating ingratitude. The lese-majesty law is the straightest arrow in their quiver.¹⁵

This tension between hierarchy and equality—*barami* (royal charisma) and *ratsadon* (will of the people)¹⁶—is a recurrent theme in contemporary Thai political struggles.

¹⁰Tatjana Thelen and Erdmute Alber (eds), *Reconnecting state and kinship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). See also Erdmute Alber, David W. Sabeau, Simon Teuscher and Tatjana Thelen (eds), *The politics of making kinship: Historical and anthropological perspectives* (New York: Berghahn, 2022).

¹¹G. Lakoff, *Moral politics: What conservatives know that liberals don’t* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹²T. Thelen and E. Alber, ‘Introduction: Politics and kinship’, in *Politics and kinship: A reader*, (eds) E. Alber and T. Thelen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), p. 14.

¹³S. S. Shiraishi, ‘Children’s stories and the state in New Order Indonesia’, in *Children and the politics of culture*, (ed.) S. Stephens (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 169–183.

¹⁴Placed at the top of Buddhist Thailand’s social hierarchy, the king is traditionally assumed to have accumulated massive amounts of positive karma or merit (*bun*) through virtuous actions performed in past lives. His attainment of moral perfection, which reflects his apparent status as *bodhisatta* (Buddha-to-be), is often referred to as *phra barami*. See, for example, Patrick Jory, ‘The Vessantara Jataka, barami, and the bodhisatta-kings: The origin and spread of a Thai concept of power’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2002, pp. 36–78.

¹⁵According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, as of April 2023, around 2,000 individuals have been subject to criminal charges for their involvement in the Thai youth movement since 2020. Among these, at least 237 have been charged with lese-majesty, including 18 minors.

¹⁶Claudio Soprzanetti, ‘La “ruota della crisi” e le due opposte narrative della società thailandese (The wheel of crisis and Thai society’s two opposing narratives)’, *Rise*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021, pp. 8–11.



Figure 1. George V. Smith Thai Posters Collection, 'Right to Education', 1960–1969, US Information Service. Source: Southeast Asian Digital Library, Northern Illinois University.

During the 1950–1980s, American-backed military juntas conflated student activism with (Vietnamese-inspired) communism, which—in Cold War Southeast Asia—was demonized by the Thai government as the antonym of Thainess: a disruptive force, threatening the monarchy, Buddhism, and—ultimately—Thailand's moral order.¹⁷ In the following anti-communist propaganda poster (Figure 1), most likely funded by the US Information Agency in the late 1960s, Thai students' gracious submission to their teacher (on the right) contrasts with the communists' brutal assault on authority (on the left). The caption reads: 'We, Thai people, respect adults (*phu yai*) [...]'.¹⁷

Yet, since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy, pro-democracy students have not dared to publicly criticize the royal institution as openly and vociferously as today's youth activists are doing. This is, after all, an exceptional time in Thai history, since the great Father is dead. Thailand's highly revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX)—worshipped as the nation's father for seven decades—passed away in 2016, just a few years before the democracy movement erupted. According to many protesters I spoke to, Bhumibol's heir and Thailand's current king, Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), is less worthy of filial devotion because of his alleged indulgence in mundane

¹⁷While this article focuses on mass anti-government demonstrations led by young people in the contemporary period, tensions around conflicting notions of hierarchy, equality, and democracy in the Thai socio-political order emerged, in a different form, as early as the 1920s. See, for example, Nakharin Mektrairat, *Khwan khit khwan ru lae amnat thang kanmueang nai patiwat siam 2475* (Thought, knowledge and political power in the Siamese Revolution of 1932) (Bangkok: Fa Diaokan, 2003); Matthew Phillip Copeland, 'Thai anti-colonialism: Economic nationalism and the end of the Chakri imperium', *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–22; and S. Barmé, *Woman, man, Bangkok: Love, sex, and popular culture in Thailand* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

affairs, extravagant habits, and visible distance from the Buddhist ideal of the virtuous ruler and benevolent father. This, I argue, opened up an unprecedented symbolic-affective space for the reconfiguration of the Thai social body's kin-based hierarchies, although the situation is not as straightforward as it might appear to be. In fact, while some youth activists publicly call for an egalitarian, 'friendship-based' polity, explicitly questioning the democratic viability of Thailand's Buddhist kin(g)ship, others appear to simultaneously—if often unwittingly—validate the latter's ontological legitimacy in practice, through their backstage bonding as senior and junior siblings.

In the subsequent sections of this article, I shall examine how pro-democracy activism in Thailand operates through the reproduction, contestation, and/or transformation of specific kinship notions, hierarchies, and affects. These attempted transformations have clear socio-political implications, for 'any such change in a [kinship] category, however contingently motivated, enters into relations with coexisting categories as well as with the world; hence the effect, though it be altogether novel, is also likely to be a culturally relevant form'.¹⁸ As Sahlins correctly observed, the assessment of such implications 'depends on just who is innovating, under what circumstances, and with what powers'.¹⁹ In the next section, I delve further into Thai kinship hierarchies and the historical cult of the Father-King. Then, I explore how student protesters in the 1970s struggled with such hierarchies, torn as they were between friendship and comradeship. I then return to the ethnographic analysis of today's youth movement, and examine its innovations and political achievements in light of its seemingly contradictory relationship with siblinghood. Finally, I discuss the unresolved tension between hierarchy and equality in contemporary Thai kinship-based politics, and suggest that giving attention to the varied social and affective shapes of this tension can make it possible to unearth the deep, cultural core of political conflict in Thailand, as elsewhere in modern Asia, beyond dominant politological frameworks.

'I already have a father'

Much has been written on the Thai king's Indo-Buddhist aura, as either *deva-rajā* (God-King) or *dharma-rajā* (Buddhist ruler), both in the past and the present.²⁰ Here, I want to foreground a different but related political dimension of the monarchy's (symbolic-affective) power: fatherhood.²¹

In November 2021, during a pro-democracy sit-in at Bangkok's Ratchaprasong shopping district, a child protester next to me is waving a sign: '*ku mi pho laeo*' (I already have

¹⁸Sahlins, 'What kinship is', p. 16.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰S. J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); P. A. Jackson, 'Virtual divinity: A 21st century discourse of Thai royal influence', in *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*, (eds) S. Ivarsson and L. Isager (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), pp. 29–60.

²¹The idea that a Buddhist king should rule like a father who governs his children is an ideal that goes all the way back to Indian emperor Ashoka, credited with playing a crucial role in spreading the *dharma* across ancient Asia. As the Ashokan Rock Edicts state: 'All men are my children [...]'; 'they may learn that Devanampriya [that is, Ashoka] is to them like a father, that Devanampriya loves them like himself, and that they are to Devanampriya like (his own) children'. E. Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka: Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, new edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 95–100.

a father). The message is subversive in both content and grammar. It is deliberately scurrilous, as the informal first-person pronoun *ku*—commonly banned in schools as it is considered rude—is used in place of kin terms (for example, *luk*, son/daughter; *nong*, junior sibling) or standard subject pronouns. This indecency of language becomes even seditious when one considers its implicit semantics: ‘We do not recognize the monarch as our father.’ In declaring so, the ‘nation’s children’ are apparently refuting a cultural dogma that sustains the family basis of Thai power since, at least, the Sukhothai period: the king as *pho khun* (greatest father), protector of and provider for his infantilized subjects—an autocrat, yet uncorrupted, caring, and loving.²²

At the turn of the twentieth century, Prince Damrong, one of the kingdom’s most influential intellectuals and founder of Thai modern education, emphasized with great care this benevolent tenet of Thai kingship, underscoring the contrast between father-child and master-slave modes of governance, the latter presented as typical of foreign (that is, non-Thai) absolutisms.²³ Even King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) referred to it on the eve of the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy, before capitulating to the demands of the short-lived People’s Party (*khana ratsadon*):²⁴ ‘The King is the father of his people, [...] he treats them as children rather than subjects. [...] The obedience that the king receives is the obedience of love, not of fear.’²⁵ While George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* referred to the Party-state’s totalitarian ruler as Big Brother, in Thailand it is the *pho khun* the family figure to whom royalists and dictators have turned to encourage in their children-citizens’ ‘obedience of love’.²⁶

²²The ‘king as *pho khun*’ tradition is traced back to the Sukhothai kingdom (1279–1298), as the title made its first appearance in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription, a stone regarded as the earliest example of Thai script. Discovered in 1833 by King Mongkut (Rama IV), the initiator of Siam-Thailand’s (Western-style) modernization, the inscription paints a picture of a rich kingdom ruled by a benevolent father-king. It had enormous influence over the development of mainstream Thai historiography and royalist nationalism, although its authenticity has recently been questioned by critics. See Thongchai Winichakul, ‘Siam’s colonial conditions and the birth of Thai history’, in *Southeast Asian historiography: Unravelling the myths. Essays in honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, (ed.) V. Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), pp. 33–35.

²³Prince Damrong’s theory of paternalistic kingship drew, at least in part, on the Traiphum Phra Ruang, a fourteenth-century Buddhist treatise which played a significant role in entrenching the ruling Chakri dynasty’s legitimacy in the modern period: ‘Love [...] the holders of successively lower ranks, and the common people, the slaves and the free men. Do not choose certain ones to love and certain ones to hate—love them all equally.’ F. E. Reynolds and M. B. Reynolds, *Three worlds according to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist cosmology* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1982), p. 148.

²⁴The ‘Siamese Revolution’, as the 1932 bloodless coup that ended Siam’s centuries-long absolute monarchy came to be known, was far from being a complete victory over (royal) paternalism. The coup-making People’s Party (*khana ratsadon*), a small group of educated civilians and military officers, lacked a popular foundation, and rapidly broke apart into factions. While the constitutional system was maintained, the party’s military wing eventually prevailed, and by 1939 the country had gone back to being a dictatorship—not by chance thanks to the supportive royalist aristocracy in the bureaucracy. See Arjun Subrahmanyam, ‘Education, propaganda, and the people: Democratic paternalism in 1930s Siam’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, p. 1124.

²⁵Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Kings, country and constitutions: Thailand’s political development 1932–2000* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 22.

²⁶Since the May 2014 military coup, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, youth activists have been staging public readings of George Orwell’s *1984* as a form of protest against the military government’s authoritarian profile.

The *pho khun* system, and its father-children ethos, shaped moral hierarchies in all sectors of Thai society, connecting—through a downward spiral—the greatest father (the king) to smaller parental figures in various religious, educational, economic, and socio-political fields. Monks, teachers, landlords, and politicians are thus often viewed, and referred to, as ‘parents’ by laymen, students, tenants, and voters respectively: kind patrons who know what is best for their ‘children’, and to whom the latter owe gratitude, obedience, and loyalty. In this, they are the intermediary moral authorities in whom the principles of kinship and politics intersect, while the *phi-nong* (elder/junior) sibling relationship is the building block of the overall hierarchy, as well as the most common way of organizing social relationships within and beyond the family. Minors and students, for their part, are the quintessential children (*dek*)—the smallest of ‘children’, located at the bottom of all hierarchies.²⁷

Until the abolition of the absolute monarchy, *rabop upatham* (patron-client system) and *sakdina* (Thai feudalism) were other ways to refer to this web of hierarchies:²⁸ academic terms re-popularized by today’s activists, who claim that patrimonialism has never disappeared from Thai political landscapes. After a three-decade long eclipse, in fact, Marshal Sarit Thanarat’s regime (1957–1963), tellingly qualified as ‘despotic paternalism’,²⁹ revitalized the king’s fatherly role in the post-1932 era, drawing extensively on royal *barami* to entrench its ‘benevolent’ autocracy. Sarit’s own words on this could not be clearer: ‘The one who governs is nothing but the chief of a big family who must look at the population as he would at his children and grandchildren.’³⁰ It was the beginning of King Bhumibol’s long-lasting reign as head of state in Thailand’s constitutional monarchy. On paper, his was a purely representative, non-political role, but with Sarit, the monarch’s public interventions and symbolic power saw a dramatic expansion. Remarkably, the dictator reinstated the terms ‘Army of the King’ and ‘Government led by the King’, and established 5 December (King Bhumibol’s birthday) as Thai Father’s Day and Thailand’s National Day in place of 24 June (the day of the 1932 abolition of the absolute monarchy).

In these televised years of an increasingly Westernized royalty,³¹ the king toured up and down the country to initiate development projects, launch charitable programmes, and meet impoverished peasants, especially in those areas that were lured by the subversive siren calls of the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Not by chance, one of the most iconic representations of King Bhumibol’s ‘universal fatherhood’ was crafted during one such royal visit. It is a 1950s bestseller

²⁷G. Bolotta, *Belittled citizens: The cultural politics of childhood on Bangkok’s margins* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021), pp. 23–26.

²⁸On Southeast Asia’s patron-client system, see James C. Scott, ‘Patron-client politics and political change in Southeast Asia’, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, 1972, pp. 91–113. On Thai feudalism, see Jit Phumisak, *Chom na khong sakdina thai nai patchuban* (The real face of Thai feudalism), 9th edn (Bangkok: Sripanya, 2007).

²⁹Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007).

³⁰C. Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 176–177.

³¹M. Peleggi, *Lords of things: The fashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s modern image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).



Figure 2. King Bhumibol greets one of his subjects in the central region of Thailand. Uploaded 5 December 2022. Source: @RetroSiam's Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/RetroSiam/status/1599602940045824001/photo/1>.

photo—featuring in virtually all state hagiographies of the late monarch³²—that portrays him bowing compassionately to a poor elderly woman in an act of supreme tenderness (Figure 2).

³²Irene Stengs, 'A kingly cult: Thailand's guiding lights in a dark era', *Etnofoor*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1999, pp. 41–75.

Rama IX was following in the steps of his grandfather King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the ‘great modernizer’,³³ who used to visit his subjects during unofficial trips to the kingdom’s peripheral provinces. A superb art exhibition on ‘Decoding Thainess’ (*thot rahat thai*), which I attended at Bangkok’s Siam Museum in January 2023, had a dedicated installation on this. ‘King Rama V’s incognito visits to his people reflected the system of benevolent paternalism in which the father governs his children’ stated the caption of a National Archives of Thailand’s historical illustration of Rama V.

These are by no means the exotic remnants of a distant past that resists change, as some unwary modernists would argue. Tatjana Thelen’s study of social security in post-socialist Europe—hence, in the heart of the modern West—highlights how state care provision is explicitly designed to blur the boundaries between public policies and idealized experiences of private family life.³⁴ State-funded caregivers (for example, teachers, nurses, social workers) reach out to their vulnerable clients as the nurturing offshoot of a ‘parental government’ that is quite distant from the cold, impersonal apparatus of bureaucratic practices and legal rationalities of the sort discussed by Max Weber. In the Thai case, King Bhumibol came to embody, not only metaphorically, politics, kinship, and religion, far surpassing Sarit’s plan. As the most potent symbol of fatherhood, Buddhist merit, and national development, the monarch captured the hearts of the nation’s ‘infantilized’ citizens. Since the 1960s and culminating in the 1990s, he was invoked everywhere: for supernatural blessing, to encourage children to behave, and prominently in political demonstrations, where each side often held high banners with the sacred image of the king.³⁵

Importantly, fatherhood acts here as an affective state process, loaded with emotional qualities: for the myriad Thais who inundated the capital wearing yellow shirts (the king’s astrological colour) in mid-2008, as for the millions in tears when the beloved monarch passed away in 2016, King Bhumibol was not just the ‘palladium of the nation’, as Sarit once claimed, he was their *pho* (dad). Theirs was an intimately felt, yet collectively shared, political emotion of filial sorrow, something close to what Bilgin Ayata called ‘affective citizenship’.³⁶ Clearly, it was also the result of precise governance policies, such as the military-orchestrated king’s charity work: a formidable counter-insurgency strategy during Thailand’s communist guerrilla war (1965–1983), which proved effective in regulating social conflict and national feelings towards an imagined (royally blessed) Thai collective self.

During the 1973 and 1992 political crises, in particular, the king’s paternal intervention into politics—following political assassinations, military brutality, and peaceful protests that turned bloody—was credited by most observers as having reunited the nation’s opposing factions, like a loving father seeking to prevent his children from fighting. But national reconciliation in the name of the father reveals some dark sides as well, for the king has not always shown public concern for his ‘children’ (although

³³Ibid.

³⁴Tatjana Thelen, ‘Care as social organization: Creating, maintaining and dissolving significant relations’, *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2015, pp. 497–515.

³⁵Andrew A. Johnson, ‘Moral knowledge and its enemies: Conspiracy and kingship in Thailand’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 4, 2013, p. 1063.

³⁶B. Ayata, ‘Affective citizenship’, in *Affective societies: Key concepts*, (eds) J. Slaby and C. von Scheve (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 330–339.

one cannot speak of this in public in Thailand). Notably, the monarch did not prevent the 6 October 1976 massacre of Thammasat University students by the army, police, and hyper-royalist paramilitary forces: a mass murder that remains unpunished and shrouded in mist to this day, in spite of the youth movement's recent attempts to recompose its 'unforgotten memory'.³⁷ Nor did the king intervene in 2010, when the military cracked down on the 'Red Shirt' United Front for Democracy and Against Dictatorship (UDD), killing 85 demonstrators. In the immediate aftermath, an anonymous sign, written in red spray, appeared on the street. It read: 'Dad, where are you?'³⁸ In relation to this counter-history of unpunishment, forced silence, and censorship, Tyrell Haberkorn noted scathingly, but consistently with my argument, that 'reconciliation Thai-style is like the father who tells his children to go to bed and get some sleep after brutally punishing them for disobedience. The crime was a family matter. Good children are not supposed to cry for being abused.'³⁹

These pivotal points in contemporary Thai history have impacted on youth activism's 'politics of kinning' in various ways, as I demonstrate below. Public discussion of their implications was, however, unimaginable a few years ago. While anti-royalist, sacrilegious sentiments had already begun to spread among Red Shirt supporters in the wake of the 2006 army-led overthrow of Thaksin Shinawatra's government, and especially after the 2010 military crackdown on the UDD, those who questioned the legitimacy of royal power could afford to do so mainly through ambiguous 'lips whispering' (*pak krasip*) and disguised forms of dissent (for example, satirical jokes, graffiti, poems).⁴⁰ It was only after Rama IX's death that the monarchy's sacred fatherhood started to be openly questioned on a massive scale. As mentioned, the current four-times married king, Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), is considered by many commoners to be unfit to uphold his father's paternal virtues. Hence, the establishment's choice to bolster the new king's *barami* by underscoring his filial (as opposed to parental) position: he is a grateful son, acceded to the throne through King Bhumibol's convinced imprimatur. This placed both the new king and the people of Thailand in a parallel situation of all being the late king's 'children' and, according to Thai Buddhist morals, as being ethically obliged to show respect for their deceased 'royal father':⁴¹ a profound fracture with previous decades, which the nation's youngest generation is now filling with filial insubordination.

³⁷Today's youth-led movement is not only generating intense debate about the country's future. It is also sparking collective interest into the past's darkest events, taboo topics for a long time. The 6 October Massacre, in particular, is increasingly referenced in demonstrations, student dramas, and protest songs as a key symbol of Thailand's modern history of blood-splattered authoritarianism. On the 'unforgetting' of the 6 October Massacre, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of silence: The unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2020).

³⁸Khorapin Phuaphansawat, 'Anti-royalism in Thailand since 2006: Ideological shifts and resistance', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, p. 375.

³⁹T. Haberkorn, *Revolution interrupted: Farmers, students, law, and violence in northern Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. x.

⁴⁰Khorapin, 'Anti-royalism in Thailand since 2006'; Serhat Ünalı, 'Working towards the monarchy and its discontents: Anti-royal graffiti in downtown Bangkok', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2014, pp. 377–403.

⁴¹Peter A. Jackson, 'A grateful son, a military king: Thai media accounts of the accession of Rama X to the throne', *ISEAS Perspective* 2017, no. 26, 2017, p. 4.

Yet, in King Bhumibol's Thailand, challenging the monarchy's divine parenthood in public was inconceivable and out of reach for the vast majority of Thais, until the new millennium. In its place, the elder/junior sibling relationship became a more attainable target of contestations. It is against this micro-level of kinship hierarchy that political activism manifested itself during the 1950s–1980s, when student activists, impoverished farmers, progressive intellectuals, and communist insurgents attempted a radical reformation of the Thai national family. As I show in the following section, 'comradeship' took centre stage here, in opposition to the perceived immorality of Thai siblinghood's institutional arrangements and clientelar ramifications in politics and society.

The Party as mother

At the various 'Free our friends' protests that I attended in early January 2023, I experienced an uncanny feeling of *deja-vu*—the impression I had seen similar slogans before—until I realized it was in 2021 at the Thammasat University Archives, where I was examining primary and secondary sources on Thai student activism in the 1970s. In early October 1973, Thirayuth Boonmee, leader of the National Student Centre of Thailand (NSTC), was arrested with 12 other activists for distributing anti-government leaflets in Bangkok. On 13–14 October, in response to their detention, hundreds of thousands of students marched to Bangkok's Democracy Monument to demand the release of their *friends*. This is the Thai popular uprising that ended with King Bhumibol's intervention, after 77 demonstrators were killed and hundreds injured by the army. The 'three tyrants' at the head of the post-Sarit junta—Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn; his powerful son, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn; and the latter's father-in-law, Marshal Prapas Charusiathien—were persuaded by the king to flee the country. Yet, only three years later, other unsentenced students were in jail: 18 survivors of the 6 October 1976 massacre, who had co-organized demonstrations at Thammasat University against the (royally endorsed?) return of Thanom. Accused of 'communist activities aimed at destroying the democratic system of government with the monarch as head of state', they were released and given amnesty after two years of detention (and a mock trial), following national and international campaigns for the liberation of political prisoners in Thailand (Figure 3)—reconciliation Thai-style.

At least to a certain extent, therefore, Thai history repeats itself, proposing ever-recurring cycles of protest and suppression. Friendship, kinship, and politics intersect, in different ways, throughout these waves of dissent. Like Tawan, Bam, and Nut, activist students in the 1970s appeared to be aware of this entanglement, as shown by their militant choice to replace the use of *phi-nong* (elder/junior sibling) with *phuean* (friend) as a way to refer to each other in public. In fact, one of the first targets of student mobilizations on the eve of the 1973 uprising was the so-called 'Seniority Order Tradition Unity Spirit' (SOTUS) university system, a semi-official set of (often violent) initiations aimed at the hierarchical subordination of junior to senior students' moral guidance.

Probably imported from the United States, SOTUS—also known in Thai as *kanrap nong* (reception of junior siblings)—enforces junior students' mandatory participation in ritualized displays of submission to and respect for elder authority, which are led by senior students cast in their role as *phi* (elder siblings). As for other public rituals and informal practices across Thai institutions—from the military to the justice



Figure 3. Free Sutham [Saengpratrum, former secretary general of the National Students Centre of Thailand (NSCT)]. 20 July 1977, International Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Thailand (ICROPPT). Source: Thammasat University Archives (E.9.1).

system, from business to law enforcement—SOTUS is a cultural infrastructure for the reproduction and sustenance of kin-based hierarchical relations over generations, the purported core of Thainess.⁴² Yet, in the early 1970s, student agitation cracked this elder/junior sibling system. On 27 September 1971, at Thammasat University, protests induced Chancellor Sanya Thammasak to take a firm stand on the issue:

I'd like to make it clear [...] that all Thammasat students are equal and have the same value, regardless of whether they are freshmen or senior students; *they are all friends (phuean)* [...] Therefore, at Thammasat University, participation to student activities does not entail any form of coercion. Students taking part in such activities do so out of their own free will.⁴³

This was a significant symbolic achievement for the Thammasat student movement which was to involve, within a few years, other major anti-SOTUS universities, schools, as well as labour and farmer organizations, to become the driving force of democracy in the military-dominated country.

⁴²Thongchai Winichakul, 'The hazing scandals in Thailand reflect deeper problems in social relations', *ISEAS Perspective* 2015, no. 56, 2015, pp. 1–9.

⁴³'Cheer rally 1968–76', Chancellor's decree on cheerleading rules at Thammasat University, Thammasat University Archives (2.10.1).

In her account of the French Revolution's kinship dimensions, Lynn Hunt saw in the 'family romance of fraternity'—a collectively shared fantasy of a family of equal siblings, held together by affective bonds instead of paternal authority—an essential symbolic condition for any democratic project and egalitarian aspiration.⁴⁴ In Thailand, as across Asia, conversely, fraternity acts historically as the premier institution for the reproduction of hierarchy, which ties the microsocial level of moral affects, both within and outside the family, to the macro politics of power. The Thai term closest to the concept of fraternity, '*khwam pen phi nong*' (being elder and junior siblings), is indeed inherently hierarchical, as for siblinghood to be intelligible it must be necessarily articulated through seniority-based relations. Friendship, in turn, is a relational concept that has a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance' with siblinghood,⁴⁵ but—contrary to the *phi/nong* dyad—it does not imply any ranking. So, by fighting against SOTUS and addressing each other as *phuean* (friends), activist students sought to use friendship as a political tool to neutralize siblinghood's hierarchical prescriptions, even in the past. Paradoxically, however, the publicly ostracized *phi-nong* system facilitated the student movement's organizational expansion and emotional integration in the wings. As a former member of the NCST told me during a recent interview, new activists were often co-opted by *phi* among their *nong*, especially during the high school to university transition:

We were all friends (*phuean*). We fiercely opposed institutionalized forms of siblinghood such as SOTUS, and everyone—no matter their rank—contributed equally to decision making. Yet, at a deeper level, senior siblings (*phi*) would usually continue to feel morally responsible for their former juniors. *Nong*, in turn, would keep looking at them as important reference points.

Here we are importantly reminded that the *phi/nong* sibling relationship is not only a political conduit for the imposition of hierarchy, or a relational instantiation of Thai Buddhist ontology, but also an affective foundation for social action that may reproduce as well as undermine social order—a point to which I shall return further below.

Notwithstanding, the 6 October 1976 Thammasat University massacre, a new military coup, and the advent of ultra-rightist Judge Thanin Kraivichien's brutal dictatorship persuaded many students that 'nonviolent friendship' was no longer enough to fight oppression. While in the early 1970s, (Maoist) communism was just one among many (both left-wing and right-wing) credos in student activism's political culture, the bloody 6 October event was a game changer.⁴⁶ A radical switch to 'armed comradeship' was then embraced by many. More than 3,000 (urbanized and middle-class) university students retreated to the country's peripheral jungles to join ethnic Chinese, rural farmers, and upland peoples in the CPT's revolutionary insurgency.

⁴⁴L. Hunt, *The family romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴⁵Digester, *Friendship reconsidered*.

⁴⁶Tikan Srinara, *Lang hok tula: wa duai khwam khatyaeng thang khwam khit rawang krabuankan naksueksa kap phak khommiunist haeng prathet thai* (After the 6 October: Ideological conflict between the student movement and the Communist Party of Thailand), 3rd edn (Bangkok: Siam, 2019).

Here, under Maoism's orthodox egalitarianism, *sahai* (comrade) replaced *phi/nong*, and even *phuean*, as the new, imperatively normative, reciprocal form of address. But the 'thaification of communism' was soon to bring kinship, hierarchy, and Thai Buddhism back into the picture.⁴⁷

Communist equality was indeed more theory than practice. In the jungle, as in training camps across Thai borders—in China, Laos, as in Cambodia's Khmer Rouge outposts—new hierarchies came into place: *sahais* were not all the same. As 'newcomer comrades' (*sahai phu ma mai*), fugitive students were often placed at the bottom of the CPT's social ladder, under the care of higher-ranking *sahai*: farmers and (non-Thai) highlanders, usually looked down on by city people, but here playing leading roles as supposedly authentic interpreters of the 'proletarian dictatorship' ideal. Suddenly confronted with a social world that turned upside down Thailand's reviled class structure, many students struggled to adapt. Farming was a tough job for these young bourgeoisie, who also experienced the CPT's uncritical reception of Chinese Maoism at odds with their layered understanding of leftist political philosophy. Some thus made conspicuous efforts to provide greater intellectual heft to the movement. Of particular interest, in this respect, are the cultural politics aimed at making Maoism compatible with Thai culture in fields as diverse as music, art, literature, and publishing.

Remarkably, an outcome of these endeavours was the emotional representation of the Communist Party as 'Mother'.⁴⁸ If the Viet Minh's and Khmer Rouge's communisms prospered under 'Uncle Ho' (Ho Chi Minh) and 'Brother Number One' (Pol Pot) respectively, the CPT's politics of kinship turned to motherhood. Originally conceived of by Ruam Wongphan, a Chinese-trained CPT member who was executed in 1962 under the Sarit regime, the party-as-mother construction was proposed as an alternative reference to the military dictator's oppressive fatherhood. An example of the growing significance of this motherly rendition of Thai communism in the years that followed is the song 'The Merit of the Mother' (*bun khun khong mae*), composed by Kunsak Reuangkongiaradi in the 'Songs for Life' movement.⁴⁹ This song was an adjustment of a previous propaganda motive, 'Let's Not Forget the Merit of the Party' (*mai luem bun khun khong phak*), which was written in 1978.⁵⁰ The maternalization of communism observed here was designed to promote in affiliates a 'moral internalization' of Party discipline similar to that required for children in relation to parents, as per Thai Buddhist tradition.⁵¹ The merit (*bun khun*) of a mother, who has given birth to and cared for us, needs to be reciprocated through obedience, gratitude, and—in the case of sons—Buddhist ordination. Analogously, Party members must think about the Party, no matter what they do, and accept unreservedly its teaching and rules with

⁴⁷Tikan Srinara, *Rak lae patiwat: kanmueang wathanatham wa duai khwam rak khong panyachon fai sai thai yuk songkham ien* (Love and revolution: The cultural politics of love of Thai leftist intellectuals in the Cold War period) (Bangkok: Siamparitut, 2021), p. 14.

⁴⁸Kasian Tejapira, "'Party as Mother": Ruam Wongphan and the making of a revolutionary metaphor', in *Traveling nation-makers: Transnational flows and movements in the making of modern Southeast Asia*, (eds) C. S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira (Kyoto: Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies 3, 2011), pp. 188–208.

⁴⁹'Songs for Life' (*phleng pheua chiwit*) is a Thai folk music genre that emerged in the 1970s as part of the broader 'Art for Life' movement. Focused on rural life and class struggle in military-led Thailand, *phleng pheua chiwit* gained popularity as the soundtrack of anti-junta demonstrations.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Tikan, *Rak lae patiwat*, p. 16.

the awareness that a mother knows what is best for her children, as a '*phra nai chai*' (a monk located in each child's heart).⁵²

The CPT's all-seeing motherhood was thus originally fashioned as an affective counterbalance to military paternalism. On the other hand, King Bhumibol's developing fatherhood not only remained uncontested, but grew considerably over the decades, gaining an unprecedented value even among anti-government students.⁵³ The king's abovementioned intervention during the 1973 Thai popular uprising, in particular, had projected the monarchy as the bastion of democracy. In the midst of turmoil, as the 'three tyrants' were about to flee the country, the royal family appeared in casual dress alongside the demonstrators, who had sought refuge inside the palace grounds. One of the monarch's royal guards emphatically reported that 'the King did not sleep for straight seven days as he was concerned for the safety of the students'.⁵⁴ The army's paternalistic dictatorship was (only apparently) waning, but a new, more potent, father was emerging on the horizon: King Bhumibol—perceived as the true repository of Buddhist *barami*, superior morality, and paternal love.

Royalist nationalism then became the military's chief ideological tool for counter-insurgency in the post-1976 period.⁵⁵ In addition, (royal) motherhood was deployed in the symbolic battlefield of Thailand's politics of kinship, with the goal of challenging the CPT's party-as-mother construction and turning its affective image into that of a wicked stepmother. In 1976, Queen Sirikit's birthday (12 August) was designated Thai Mother's Day, an occasion on which Thai pupils across the country were henceforth required to bow before both their own mothers and a portrait of the queen, the Mother of all mothers.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Royal Mother, Princess Srinakharin, King Bhumibol's mother, became a supplementary icon of motherly care and Buddhist compassion via royal projects of agricultural development, education, and welfare aimed at Thailand's upland regions, where communism found fertile ground.⁵⁷ In the process, the emotional tropes of kinship have undergone a process of mimetic reconfiguration, transiting from one political field to the other as disputed symbolic capital in the quest for cultural hegemony.

With the fall of the Saigon government and the Sino-Vietnamese split, the CPT experienced a steep decline. The Thai government seized the opportunity: in 1980 an amnesty was granted to defectors and a parliamentary democracy established. Ripped by internal conflicts, the Thai communist movement fell apart. Many disillusioned

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae laeo khwam khlueanwai ko pratok* (Thus, the movement emerged) (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005), pp. 464–485.

⁵⁴'Late king's peacemaking role remembered', *Bangkok Post*, published online on 15 October 2017, available at: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1342463/late-kings-peacemaking-role-remembered>, [accessed 7 December 2023].

⁵⁵D. Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political conflicts in Thailand: Reform, reaction and revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981).

⁵⁶Bolotta, *Belittled citizens*, p. 79.

⁵⁷Amalia Rossi, 'Turning red rural landscapes yellow? Sufficiency economy and royal projects in the hills of Nan province, northern Thailand', *ASEAS—Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 275–291.

'Octobrists' returned to the big city and resumed their careers.⁵⁸ Student radical activism disappeared. Yet, the cult of King Bhumibol's fatherhood persisted to hold up 'royalist democracy' in the following decades.⁵⁹ On television, as in malls, hospitals, and universities, giant portraits of the king were placed centre stage. Heartfelt gratitude for his paternal dedication permeated public culture. Old royal rituals were revived, and even magnified by visual technology. Virtually everyone, whether politically inclined to the right or left, felt—or were aware of their obligation to feel—that the king was their *pho* (dad).

It is no wonder then that on 20 May 1992, after days of pro-democracy uprisings and a military crackdown that left nearly a hundred civilians dead, coup-maker General Suchinda Kraprayoon and protest leader Chamlong Srimuang were both shown kneeling humbly before King Bhumibol, cast as the final arbitrator of the dispute. Reconciliation eventually ensued, but not before—it goes without saying—Suchinda and the perpetrators being granted full amnesty. It is also possible to observe the lingering presence of royal fatherhood, this time, however, as a sinisterly silent absence in the Yellow Shirt-invoked military interventions that toppled Thaksin Shinawatra's government in 2006, and that later brutalized its Red Shirt fandom in 2010. Inasmuch 'as Thaksin implemented populist policies, his attention towards Thailand's poor was perceived to tread upon ground already occupied by royal projects', Andrew Johnson rightly noted. 'He [Thaksin] was perceived by royalists to be acting as a father towards rural Thai "children", and as such attempting to replace the king as "father"'⁶⁰—a fatal error for the Shinawatra clan.

Interestingly, in these same years, youth and student groups did not play any major role in people's movements—not in the 1992 bloody May agitation nor as part of the Yellow Shirt/Red Shirt conflicts of the 2000s. But then, following yet another military coup in 2014, the Buddhist Father died, shaking the symbolic foundation of the Thai national family. Thailand's rebellious 'children' have been back on the scene since then, this time as siblings/friends battling against a de-paternalized monarchy, that of the late monarch's son, King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X).

Fatherless friends, non-kin siblings

Unlike previous generations of activists, today's youth protesters come from quite different backgrounds, political mindsets, and gendered positionalities: high school and university students, LGBTQIA+ and feminist activists, working class youths, and slum children. They were born in the technological era of Thailand's enchanted capitalism, enveloped by cosmopolitan mediascapes of transnational pop culture, and lived through a military coup, a critical interregnum, and multiple lockdowns. Their (extensively digital) criticism of 'state parents'—teachers, soldiers, and especially the king—demonstrates their determination to escape political paternalism and to

⁵⁸Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, *The rise of the Octobrists in contemporary Thailand* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2016). Kanokrat designates former student activists from the 1970s, who were involved in either or both the 14 October 1973 uprising and the 6 October 1976 event as 'Octobrists'.

⁵⁹Thongchai Winichakul, 'Thailand's hyper-royalism: Its past success and present predicament', *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 7, 2016, pp. 1–36.

⁶⁰Johnson, 'Moral knowledge and its enemies', p. 1074.

extricate themselves (and the entire Thai citizenry) from their position as ‘obedient children’. Royalists and conservatives see in their rebellion an aberrant foreign import, the pernicious effect of (Western-driven) globalization on local cultural values, to be fought decisively in order to safeguard the supposed purity of Thainess. #We-are-adults-and-we-can-choose-for-ourselves was one of the top trending Twitter hashtags after the youth-led movement erupted nationwide in early 2020.⁶¹

On 3 August 2020, to mention an example that captured international attention, hundreds of these ‘grown-ups’ gathered in central Bangkok to cast a ‘democratic spell’. Disguised as Harry Potter, they waved their chopsticks (standing in for magic wands) towards the Democracy Monument. ‘Thailand has been dominated by the dark power of the Death Eaters,’ some explained. They held up portraits of evil wizard Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter’s archenemy, otherwise known as ‘he who shall not be named’. Clearly, the reference was to the uncriticizable king of Thailand, Rama X.⁶² Anti-monarchy parades of this kind have been staged by different youth groups in 62 provinces since then.⁶³ ‘The unsayable’⁶⁴—that the monarchy should be reformed—was repeatedly and openly verbalized in the public sphere. Lese-majesty charges against, and judicial intimidation of, the nation’s ‘children’ followed, with the latter’s ‘friends’ on the barricades, fighting for their rights. And this is where we come full circle, back to the cry of ‘*ploi phuean rao*’ that Tawan, Bam, Nut and many other unknown youngsters shout out.

Today, as yesterday, friendship can work as a subversive discourse, with the potential to disarticulate the Thai national family’s entrenched hierarchies. Yet, unlike in the past, it is straightforwardly mobilized against royal fatherhood; it does not come about as compulsory comradeship, nor does it necessarily exclude the enactment of family-like relationships. I spoke about that with many activists, among whom Choy, a 23-year-old Thammasat University student, monarchy reform advocate, and convinced proponent of the youth movement’s ‘*ploi phuean rao*’ public strategy. I met her at a major Bangkok slum, where she was invited by a common friend to attend an anti-eviction campaign in early 2023. Just released on bail, she was quite popular among locals as a leading public face of the youth movement, and was greeted by a cheerful group of Red Shirt old-timers: ‘We were so worried about you, daughter. Be brave, we think of you!’ With her hands held palms together, a slight bow of the head, and a generous smile, she saluted the crowd with an accurately performed *wai*—a near universal gesture of hierarchical respect in Buddhist Thailand. ‘Thanks, mother!’, ‘I appreciate that, grandpa’, Choy was careful to respond to everyone, visibly touched. This appropriately Thai demeanour of reverence to older adults, cast as (grand)parents, was mainly displayed off camera, and reserved only for would-be allies. Through an

⁶¹A. Sinpeng, ‘Twitter analysis of the Thai Free Youth protests’, *Thai Data Points*, published online on 29 August 2020, available at <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/twitter-analysis-of-the-thai-free-youth-protests>, [accessed 7 December 2023].

⁶²G. Bolotta, ‘Parenthood versus childhood: Young people’s generational rebellion in Thailand’, in *The Emerald handbook of childhood and youth in Asian societies*, (eds) D. Bühler-Niederberger, X. Gu, J. Schwittek and E. Kim (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2023), p. 290.

⁶³McCargo, ‘Disruptors’ dilemma?’, p. 188.

⁶⁴Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (eds), *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010).

impressive alternation of situational adjustments, the contradictory implications of which even she appeared unaware, Choy's manners—one of hierarchy's most elementary forms⁶⁵—at once reproduced and defied the intergenerational grammar of Thai power's kinship language. Without mincing words, she went straight to the point, as if I—a Thai-speaking *farang* (white person)—would naturally be on her wavelength:

We refer to each other as friends because we want to promote democracy and equality among Thai people. Only Thailand has the *phi-nong* system; only Thailand has SOTUS. This has created problems even for the youth movement... There is conflict, sometimes, both within and between different youth groups. In the backstage, some leading activists can act as bossy *phi*. Some feel wiser than the rest. This doesn't do any good. We've been brainwashed into thinking about that man [the king] as father. Everything starts from there. So, we now need to act as equal friends.

The ideological content of her position was subversively clear, but her way of looking at and talking to me—with a good deal of deference—struck me as normatively conservative. Particularly remarkable was her self-deprecating use of *nu* (literally, mouse) for 'I' (*nu* is a first-person pronoun that children may use when speaking to adults). 'You don't need to be so ceremonial with me,' I told her teasingly. 'Why do you address yourself as *nu*?' 'Have I really done that?,' she responded half-jokingly, caught by surprise. 'Well, this is bad! I don't notice when it happens... It's a habit (*tid pak*).'

While some youth activists firmly reject Thailand's (kin-based) hierarchy on an ideological level, as supposedly incompatible with full democracy, they might nevertheless enact it unwittingly, as an internalized structure of feeling, knowledge, and sociality—a 'habit', to use Choy's words—acquired over years of cultural socialization into Thainess, which 'comes out' in intimate, relaxed, and/or comfortable social settings. Michael Herzfeld described it as 'cultural intimacy': 'those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality'. Everyday intimacy and state ideologies, family and (religious) politics, are in fact revealingly similar, so much so that people can be fiercely conservative and rebellious at the same time.⁶⁶ Thai kinship hierarchy, in other words, not only works as a totalizing state doctrine or religious discourse, imposed top-down on brainwashed citizens. It is also embodied—hence creatively revisited—as an affective formation, cultivated in the intimate domain of family environments, where the warmth of brotherhood and sisterhood offers the possibility of scaling up into bigger forms of political relatedness.⁶⁷ Choy admitted to me that sticking to Buddhist hierarchical etiquette and its kinship patterns had served her well during her time in prison: 'Unlike other imprisoned youths, I chose to be very polite with the guards [namely, to be submissive and deferential]. In turn, day after day, they grew fond of me as their *luk* (daughter).' At her final bail hearing, in contrast, the judge referred to her as *nong* (younger sister), but this presumed intimacy came

⁶⁵D. Graeber, *Possibilities: Hierarchy, rebellion and desire* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007).

⁶⁶Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy*, p.3.

⁶⁷Amarasuriya et al., *The intimate life of dissent*, p. 7.

across as a blatantly arrogant exercise of power, since it had not developed from everyday emotional interaction. Hence, it did not involve what Sahlins called ‘mutuality of being’.⁶⁸

Activist ‘friends’, however, do not only revert back to kinship hierarchy as an involuntary cultural reflex or, on the contrary, based on intentional political calculations and situational strategies to mitigate harsh prison conditions, stir guards to pity, or strengthen emotional bonds with non-kin sympathizers. A *phi-nong* relationship can also come about spontaneously, as a tie of mutuality, or as a mark of affective proximity between protesters. Fa, a 16-year-old member of an anti-government high school network, did not find it at all strange that those fellow activists referred to as *phuean* (friends) in public gatherings could also be felt as *phi* or *nong* in more informal venues and intimate circumstances: ‘Of course we are all equal friends. We call *phuean* our fellow activists, who are in prison, even though we don’t know them personally. But with my “true friends” I have a *phi-nong* relationship, because we are always together like a family.’

So, what is the difference between *phi* and *phuean*?, I asked.

Well, the *phi* in our circle is a bit older than me. But this doesn’t mean that he doesn’t value my opinions. When we have an important decision to make, everyone is involved. It’s not like school or in SOTUS, where the *phi-nong* system is mandatory and unfair, she responded.

So, why call him *phi* and not *phuean*?, I insisted.

It would be weird to call him *phuean* because we are really close to each other. He always takes care of me. When I have an issue with my boyfriend, for example, he advises me and helps me understand my own situation... and besides, he is the one who made me realize the importance of us joining the youth movement.

In advocating for ‘equal friendship’, youth activists draw on a number of modern political and historical references, which, differently than in the past, are now easily available in Thailand (especially online). These range from liberalism and republicanism to socialism and critical Thai historiography, often mixed with (social media-based) pop culture. In the springtime of the protests, some of the activists I interviewed described the youth movement’s key gestures—especially the three-finger salute—as symbolic of the French Revolution’s values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Fraternity, however, as discussed above, does not work as an appropriate synonym for equality in the Thai context—hence the strategic choice of friendship as a replacement. And yet, in intimate situations, even the lexicon of friendship might feel odd.

Modern ideas of friendship, often associated with (Western) liberal individualism,⁶⁹ are clearly ill-suited to explain Fa’s experience. Her words complicate any dichotomic distinction between friendship and siblinghood, individuality and dividuality, equality and hierarchy, affection and (religious) politics in Thai youth activism. Within her group, sibling hierarchy operates as an ‘insurgent ground that enables

⁶⁸Sahlins, ‘What kinship is’.

⁶⁹Bell and Coleman, *The anthropology of friendship*.

new possibilities', rooted in the affective labour central to political action,⁷⁰ rather than a hindrance to participation. Siblinghood, in fact, does not necessarily involve the enforcement of authority (as is the case in state educational institutions), but can express itself as care and emotional intimacy. Its affective, partible register might feel more 'familiar' than friendship's status-neutral sociality, and hence takes over when activists are not mere acquaintances but 'true friends' to each other. Non-mandatory *phi-nong* relationships, as a result, can forge political commitments and turn into 'engaged siblinghood',⁷¹ especially when state parenthood is perceived as lacking (Buddhist) righteousness and (royal) *barami*.

The issue of family morality acquires particular importance here, for youth activists' subversive resignification of kin-based hierarchies might entail a moral repositioning of *barami* from the sovereign father to his coalized children, in a sort of Buddhist transmutation of the Freudian myth. In Thai Buddhist hierarchy, higher beings (for example, royals and parents), who possess *barami*, have supposedly greater merit (*bun*) than lower ones (for example, commoners and children), but—unlike European feudalism or India's cast system—the Thai social order roots individuals in no permanent rank or karmic position, at least in theory. People can always gain or lose merit based on their everyday actions towards others. The emphasis lies here in compassionate selflessness: instead of using his effectiveness in action to tend to his own wants, the selfless father (like the virtuous ruler), feeds his children before turning to his own meal and feels compassion towards creatures of greater suffering.⁷² King Vajiralongkorn is perceived by many youth demonstrators as precisely the opposite of this. His luxury holidays in the Bavarian Alps, reportedly with a harem of 20 mistresses, are often cited as a paradigmatic example of the monarch's lascivious enjoyment of taxpayers' money. Rama X, then, would not uphold the charismatic standards and moral dignity of (royal) fatherhood. In contrast, Tawan and Bam's firm decision to go on dry hunger strike and sacrifice themselves for their friends' freedom is there to typify what selflessness is truly about (Figure 4). Their sacrifice would then demonstrate that the youths, not the king, are the source of *barami*. When questioned on the subject, several young activists I spoke to admitted that their protest would hardly have been thinkable had King Bhumibol still been alive. This admission might suggest that, at least for some protesters, Thai Buddhist kin(g)ship is not a problem per se—insufficiently virtuous rulers are. It follows that if 'parents-rulers' (from the king to the military junta and its successor) fail to live up to moral ideals of selflessness, righteousness, and benevolence, and do not care for all their 'children-subjects' equally, they should be replaced by leaders who embody these (Buddhist) parental virtues.⁷³ In this instance, rather than a rejection of moral hierarchy as such, we observe an

⁷⁰S. Hartman, *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), p. 227.

⁷¹Bolotta, 'Parenthood versus childhood', p. 293.

⁷²Lucien M. Hanks, 'Merit and power in the Thai social order', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 64, no. 6, 1962, p. 1247. *Barami* is thus a moral quality that—theoretically—anyone can accumulate, including virtuous commoners of recognized value who are not *phra* (monks or royals), such as prominent statesmen, (populist) politicians, national heroes, or democracy martyrs.

⁷³This was the realization of the Red Shirts: King Bhumibol should love everyone equally, but he clearly loved the Yellow Shirts more. See Khorapin, 'Anti-royalism in Thailand since 2006'; and Ünaldi, 'Working towards the monarchy and its discontents'.



Figure 4. Youth protesters express their solidarity with Tawan and Bam in Bangkok, 14 February 2023. Source: Thalufah's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=487382893599123&set=pb.10069822504330-2207520000.&type=3&locale=hi_IN.

'infrapolitical' critique that is launched from within the hegemonic Thai episteme thereof.⁷⁴

As Rama IX's death left the nation fatherless, the notion of family itself, reworked by the protesting youths, expanded its semantic boundaries well beyond (Thainess-infused) biogenetic logics. Bui, a 25-year-old prominent activist I met in Bangkok in 2022, fought with his royalist parents when they found out he was in the street rallying against the monarchy. Ready to keep going through anything, he did not back down and was kicked out of his house as a result. He then joined a group of other disowned anti-monarchy protesters in an apartment that was made available to them through a citizens' support network. At public rallies, Bui claimed that all imprisoned youths were his friends (*phuean*), articulating concepts not dissimilar to Choy's. Interestingly, however, when I followed him home, his 'new family' revealed a clear structure of sibling hierarchies. This counter-family of fellow activists comprised a number of *nong* (junior siblings) and a few *phi* (elder siblings), to whom a certain respect was accorded as per Thai protocol. But the 'elder siblings', strikingly, were not older than Bui (as is the case in educational institutions). Instead, they were recognized by the group as *phi* for their track-record of activism: unlike their 'juniors', they had already spent some time in prison, and had hence proved their selflessness in challenging state authorities for the common good. Here, once again, youth activists appear to implicitly, if somewhat subversively, embrace 'traditional' Thai Buddhist conceptions of hierarchy that recognize morally superior individuals—selfless and prone to sacrifice themselves for

⁷⁴J. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcript* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 84.

others⁷⁵—as ‘elder siblings’. This would seem to contrast with their public repudiation of these same conceptions and their claims to equal friendship. But different forms of youth dissent can coexist along a continuum of possible arrangements, revealing the great diversity of positions within the movement.⁷⁶ The often uncharted tension between the political ideology that demonstrators profess ‘on stage’ and their intimate affective/social practice further adds to this complexity. Thai young protesters seem capable of following ostensibly incommensurable codes of conduct and mentalities in the different situations of their lives, demonstrating a cultural plasticity and situated sensitivity for the right ‘time and place’ (*kala-thesa*) for which, after all, Thailand is long renowned.⁷⁷ In the context of Thai youth activism, equal friendship and hierarchical siblinghood are thus entangled as affective bonds that crisscross pro-democracy activism’s public–private divide, giving shape to new ways of imagining the Thai (national) family’s possible outlines.

Conclusion: Revised kin hierarchy in Thailand’s quest for democracy

In *Chom na khong sakdina thai nai patchuban* (The Real Face of Thai Feudalism)—first published in 1958, banned after Sarit seized power, and reprinted in the aftermath of the 1973 popular uprising—Thai Marxist Jit Phumisak chose to illustrate Thai feudalism (*sakdina*) through the image of an intimate familial relationship, that between a nobleman, Bamrung, described as a ‘*sakdina* Land-Lord’, and his wife, Si, a ‘poor farmer’ who labours in the fields while Bamrung ‘lies around the house wiggling his feet’.⁷⁸ Reflecting upon the same image’s political parallels, Haberkorn observes that Thai landlords accused of labour exploitation in the 1950s used to respond that they viewed themselves as the ‘older brothers’ (*phi*) of the farmers and therefore could not be considered their oppressors⁷⁹—‘obedience of love’ at work, in other words. These kin-based analogies reveal that the web of meanings on which state legitimacy rests, and that binds the military, the monarchy, and Buddhism together, reaches far beyond the register of the material.⁸⁰ The affective, apparently private, domain of family life, in particular, is where *sakdina* rules are first felt and the *rabop upatham* (patronage system)

⁷⁵Interestingly, similar claims to moral authority based on selflessness, self-sacrifice, and benevolence are made by veterans of Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) in Buddhist Burma. See T. Wells, *Narrating democracy in Myanmar: The struggle between activists, democratic leaders and aid workers* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 119–146.

⁷⁶Alongside youth protest groups that uphold a secular, vehemently anti-religious world view, others continue to identify as Buddhists, even if they can be equally critical of institutional religion’s alleged complicity with the status quo. Still, others explicitly co-opt inherently conservative cosmological notions and divination practices to advance progressive political agendas. See E. Siani, ‘Co-opting the stars: Divination and the politics of resistance in Buddhist Thailand’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2023, pp. 200–219.

⁷⁷Peter A. Jackson, ‘The Thai regime of images’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2004, pp. 181–218. See also G. Bolotta, “‘Invisible worldings’: Image and reality in the Thai seafood industry’s humanitarian engagements”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2021, pp. 171–196.

⁷⁸C. Reynolds, *Thai radical discourse: The real face of Thai feudalism today* (New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1987), p. 45.

⁷⁹Haberkorn, *Revolution interrupted*, p. 57.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

put in place. It is no surprise then that in September 2020, anti-government student groups held activities to mark Jit Phumisak's birthday at Chulalongkorn University, showing their gratitude to the late writer for having illuminated Thai power's intimate workings. Unlike their Cold War-era predecessors, however, these protesters have taken Jit's ideas to extremes: royal paternalism would be behind everything.

In King Bhumibol's Thailand, this was not conceivable. In the 1970s, student activists-turned-insurgents recognized Thai siblinghood's institutional abuses and political perversions—their struggle against SOTUS and military dictatorship was an abortive attempt to promote democratic equality in the Buddhist kingdom. Yet, the monarch's sacred fatherhood was outside their scrutiny. Rama IX's death, in turn, unleashed a paradigm shift that now sees the nation's youngest generation lead the assault on the monarchic fortress, taking previous forms of Red Shirt (disguised) anti-royalism to a whole new level. The royalist establishment's repressive reaction, by means of lese-majesty charges, has met with the youth dissidents' public deployment of friendship as a synonym for equality, while sibling hierarchies continue to sustain their endeavour backstage, giving rise to subversive 'families' of fellow protesters. In the process, conflicting notions of kinship, moral hierarchy, and politics collide, sending tremors through the affective fibre of the Thai nation. Proposals for constitutional change, legal battles, and electoral manifestoes are just the emergent properties of this deeper, kinship-based cultural core.

Politics, kinship, and religion are, after all, historically intermeshed in a variety of cultural forms, well beyond Thailand.⁸¹ The position of children within the family and towards elders, what is meant for 'good' parental care, brotherhood, or friendship reflect wider power arrangements, moral (dis)orders, and hierarchical regimes. (Neo)Confucian politics of filial piety; right-wing conflation of 'natural family' with racial nationalism; fraternity-based revolutions; past's and present's civilizing and humanitarian paternalisms—the list would be endless. In spite of (Western) modernity's know-it-all denials, kin tropes continue to provide the affective glue that holds polities together at the intersection of intimacy and governance, rebellion, and keen obedience. As for Thailand, a cultural disarticulation of the mytheme of the *pho khun* (the king as greatest father) seems to be under way, while the Thai social body's kin hierarchies are reinvented by youth groups through recurrent oscillations between siblinghood and friendship. This enduring tension—that between hierarchical and egalitarian impulses, which anthropologists have documented in various forms throughout the Southeast Asia region⁸²—is now producing strikingly innovative features. In Thailand's youth struggle, proved (Buddhist) selflessness, sibling mutuality, and solidarity with 'friends' constitute the moral barycentre of these oscillations. Arguably, a mature democracy is the system that best accommodates such tensions, for it reduces the possibility of political fixations, whether as fraternal anarchy or parental

⁸¹See Thelen and Alber, *Reconnecting state and kinship*; and Alber et al., *The politics of making kinship*. In the context of Asia, see G. Bolotta, P. Fountain and R. M. Feener (eds), *Political theologies and development in Asia: Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁸²See, for example, E. R. Leach, *Political systems of highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954); and Hjørleifur R. Jonsson, 'Revisiting ideas of power in Southeast Asia', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–19.

despotism. Thai youth prisoners on hunger strike, at least, appear to be convinced that this is the case.

Interestingly, over the past few years, the old and new generation of Thai pro-democracy activists established a contact point to confront their experiences and put together the various pieces of the jigsaw. The yearly commemoration of the 6 October 1976 Thammasat University massacre, in particular, has become a (surveilled) meeting space for exchange and dialogue.⁸³ In October 2022, the Kinjay Contemporary Gallery's photo exhibition '6 Oct: Facing Demons' provided such a space of intergenerational confrontation. Featuring enlarged photos and interviews with witnesses of the massacre, the exhibition also included a rich programme of side events that involved activists from both yesterday and today. One of these events was a workshop evocatively entitled 'The children of that day and the children of today: Thai youth karma in the age of dictatorship'. Survivors taking part in the event thanked their *nong*/'junior siblings' (many of whom were on bail for lese-majesty), applauding their courageous commitment to democracy. Several youth attendees I spoke to, in turn, explained: 'We feel the activists who were killed during "the 6 October event" (*hetkan hok tula*) as our "elder siblings" (*phi*). We feel emotionally connected to them. [...] We have to finish the work they started.'⁸⁴ Their engagement with the past went even deeper than that, since many of them were also members of the so-called *khana ratsadon* 2563 (People's Party 2020), a network comprising disparate student and youth groups—a reincarnation, of sorts, of the original People's Party, the revolutionary group that overthrew Siam's absolute monarchy in the early 1930s.⁸⁵

While important differences exist between different generations of pro-democracy activists,⁸⁶ resurfacing memories of a previously censored past can work as affective conditions of political relatedness. Today's youth protesters are kinning with the past's martyrs of Thai democracy, recognized as mentor *phi* for their sacrifice. In doing so, they demonstrate that engaged siblinghood might be performatively operative not only synchronically but also diachronically.⁸⁷ Such extended temporality of kinning is, once again, connected to the death of the nation's sacred father, King Bhumibol, whose passing made it possible to create once unthinkable spaces of critical discussion over the role of the monarchy in Thailand's modern history. As a demonstration of this, the Kinjay Contemporary Gallery's visual journey through the horrors of the

⁸³The 14 October 1973 Thai popular uprising, in contrast, generates ambivalent sentiments among today's protesters, since many of those involved in the 1973 fight against the 'three tyrants' became fierce royalists. The key difference between the two events, on 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 respectively, lies in the role played by the monarchy. As mentioned above, King Bhumibol intervened in the first uprising but not in the second.

⁸⁴Bolotta, 'Parenthood versus childhood', p. 292.

⁸⁵On 20 September 2020, pro-democracy youth protesters installed a *khana ratsadon* 2563 plaque at Bangkok's Sanam Luang to replace the original one, which had vanished mysteriously three years earlier under Prayuth Chan-o-cha's military dictatorship. The new plaque read: 'This country belongs to the people; it is not the property of the king'. Khaosod, '*pak mut khana ratsadon mut thi song an pratat rat-sadon 2563*' (The People's Party's second plaque and the 2020 people's announcement), Khaosod, published online on 20 September 2020, available at: https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_4946331, [accessed 7 December 2023].

⁸⁶Kanokrat, 'The white ribbon movement', pp. 209–212.

⁸⁷Bolotta, 'Parenthood versus childhood', pp. 291–293.

'6 October event' reached its climax on the top floor, set up as a sinister summary of Thailand's history of political violence. There, the caption to a giant photograph of then-Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, labelled "'His majesty" (*phra barami*), the King of Thai Politics', read:

There is a widely propagated belief in the country that Thai society is merely just a large village. The 'villagers' remain humble and are free from conflict and hardship. [...] If an adverse event occurs the 'adult' will come down to mediate. [...] The events of October 6 stand in stark contrast to this belief. Yet that evening, the then-Crown Prince appeared at a Village Scout gathering [a paramilitary militia that participated in the assault on the students] at Government House. After wishing the people good luck, the assembly was ended.

As I completed writing the first draft of this article, the youth-led Move Forward Party won a landslide in the Thailand general elections, held on 14 May 2023. Thai voters crushed army-backed parties after nine years of semi-dictatorial rule and a critical interregnum. While the victorious formation, known to have made the abolition of the lese-majesty law one of its key objectives, has been prevented from forming a government, its impressive success gives a clear sign of a turning point. Young people's political friendship is seemingly rewriting the national family's future—a future that contemplates the possibility of a more inclusive democracy, along with the moral and epistemic primacy of (citizens') 'siblinghood' over (state) 'parenthood'.

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