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M. R. Kukrit Pramoj's theory of good governance and political change: the dialectics of *Farang Sakdina*

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M. R. Kukrit Pramoj wrote *Farang Sakdina* in 1957–1958 as both a theoretical critique of western development planners, and the Marxist critics of Thai society like Jit Phoumisak. Kukrit's critique was that both used only European examples to prescribe development policies for Thailand. By this he meant that the Americans insisted on modernization theory, and Soviet theoreticians insisted on Marx's historical materialism. Kukrit responded that data developed from Europe is not applicable to Thailand because European feudalism had different attitudes toward land and labor than the ancient Thai "feudalism" known as *sakdina*. A textual analysis of Kukrit's book *Farang Sakdina* reveals Kukrit proposes a dialectical theory of historical change in which the "contradictions" within society are continually resolved and reconstituted. Kukrit uses this data to analyze politics and kingship in England, Thailand, and implicitly, other countries.

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Introduction

Farang Sakdina is an extended essay written in 1957–1958 to correct what M. R. Kukrit Pramoj¹ states was a translation error that associated *farang* (western) feudalism with the traditional Thai “feudal” system called *sakdina*. Kukrit’s point is that while both words (feudalism and *sakdina*) described systems of politics, loyalty, and governance in the early-modern world, it is not appropriate to assert that the two are equivalent. Kukrit explains that this mistake was made in the 1950s by both Communists promoting their theory of dialectical materialism, and Americans promoting policies rooted in liberal “modernization theory,” which were the basis for supporting democracy and capitalism in Southeast Asia. Kukrit’s thesis is that Americans (capitalist materialists), and Soviets (Marxist materialists) made the same error in assuming that the two institutions—*farang* feudalism, and Thai *sakdina*—were equivalent.

To replace such theories of social action, Kukrit proposes a theory of good governance² and political change rooted in doctrines, which emphasize dialectical tensions, i.e., the “contradictions,” which he says emerge in any political system.³ His point is that the historical contradictions underpinning change in Europe and Thailand were fundamentally different. In particular, in Europe there was a chronic land shortage, and as a result a peasantry was attached to the land. The land (with bound serfs) was owned by the nobles. In feudal/*sakdina* Thailand there was an abundance of rich arable land, and a shortage of labor, and as a result, peasants were personally attached to the nobility in a social ecology in which proximity to power, not control of land rights, was key to holding a kingdom together (see also Scott, 2009: pp. 59–62). The result Kukrit writes is that the dialectic (i.e., thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) is different in Thailand than in Europe, and political change proceeded differently. A textual analysis of Kukrit’s book, reflects how he thought the structures of modern democratic governance in Thailand needed to be rooted in a pre-existing Thai cultural predisposition that reflected pre-existing view of how hierarchy, society, and property ideally worked. The relationship between this cultural predisposition and what Bourdieu calls “habitus” is discussed below.

Writing retrospectively in 2022, it is apparent that Kukrit made a good point. As he hypothesized, things have not turned out the way that the liberal Anglo-American modernization theorists predicted. Thailand has developed, though not always (or even usually) in the context of democratic electoral politics; indeed it was one of the most military coup-prone countries of the twentieth century and perhaps remains so in the twenty-first century (see Farely, 2013). As Kukrit described in 1957–1958, the source of social tension, what Kukrit calls contradictions, continues to have the military at the center of Thai governance in ways that few other countries do in the twenty-first century. The continuing central role of the military in Thailand, which is now guaranteed in the new 2018 Constitution, is a persistent autocratic challenge to pressures by outside promoters of good governance policies. The good governance donors continue to promote issues of efficiency, inclusivity, and especially transparent democratic elections, just as they did in the 1950s when Kukrit wrote *Farang Sakdina*.

The effective failure of American or British advisors to prescribe a policy, which would actually achieve the goals of what the UN would call good democratic governance is a theoretical challenge. Such policies defined Thai patrimonial traditions of hierarchy as corrupt because they violated good governance principles of equity, transparency, and efficiency. This was the case when Kukrit wrote in 1957–1958, and it is the case today. It is also why it is productive to return to Kukrit’s critique of 1950s Cold War politics in Thailand, which might be called “Buddhist dialectics.”

My thesis is that Kukrit is correct, and the social scientific assumptions the many foreign advisors brought from elsewhere to Thailand were flawed, and as a result do not achieve the democratic goals they set for Thailand starting in the 1940s and 1950s. This flaw was pointed to in *Farang Sakdina* (1957–1958), and is why I think the book works today as both post-colonial theory, and a corrective to more western social theory, especially theories rooted in materialism. If this is the case, Kukrit’s approach will provide a more robust, efficient and parsimonious way to understand the development trajectory of Thailand since the book was written in 1957–1958, and indeed perhaps provides a context for the coup of 2014, and the student demonstrations of 2020. Indeed, such utility is the test of a good social theory. Thus, the goal of this paper is to identify a robust understanding of a general theory of “good governance” from a Thai perspective, and contrast this with western assumptions. Notably Kukrit’s methodological approach is rooted in established understandings of comparative historical sociology (see Ragin, 1987; Goldstone, 1991; Waters, 1999: pp. 54–57).

Thailand scholars may find this a strange claim to make about Kukrit whose primary reputation is rooted in literature, politics, journalism, and even film. He is also associated closely with the nationalistic Thainess movement (*khwaam pen Thai*). However, I think too that the “hat” of comparative social theorist can be added to Kukrit’s repertoire on the basis of how he developed his theory of political change in *Farang Sakdina*, using examples from England and Thailand.

Kukrit Pramoj and his times. Kukrit Pramoj was a major figure in the arts and politics in post-World War II Thailand, and his novels were major contribution to Thai literature during the second half of the twentieth century. Politically he was engaged in the post-World War II reconstruction of Thailand and the intrigues of governance as rule shifted between democratic and military figures in the late 1940s. In the 1950s–1980s, he also published a newspaper, *Siam Rat*, penning essays that needled carefully the authoritarian military dictatorship, and promoted the re-emergence of the Thai constitutional kingship under King Phumiphon, Rama IX. This occurred at times when government censorship could be severe; Kukrit was known for not pushing “too far,” and avoiding direct confrontation (and prison), despite his role as a journalist.

In the 1970s when an opportunity for democratic politics opened briefly, Kukrit founded the Social Action Party, and served briefly as Speaker of the Thai House of Representatives, and for 13 months as Prime Minister in 1975 and 1976. During the time he was Prime Minister, the American war in Vietnam ended, and Kukrit asked the Americans to leave their Thai airbases. He also established diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Throughout his career, Kukrit had a reputation among leftists for being a “conservative royalist,” which from a political standpoint was perhaps true (see e.g., Thak, 2018: pp. 2–3, 147; Larsson, 2017: p. 534). Support for the constitutional monarchy was at the heart of what Kukrit did as a newspaper editor and politician, and he was without question a royalist. In my view though his status as a “conservative” is a bit more ambiguous. In a country that has such strong traditions of authoritarian right wing military rule, such a royalist conservative can also be a democrat.

At the heart of Kukrit’s more academic interests was always Thai culture and character, which he usually described in literary, rather than political terms. Among his more popular characters was the dog “Mom” who lived in Bangkok during World War II; and Mother Ploy of *Four Kingdoms* who lived in the palace of

King Rama V (reign 1868–1910), later raising sons who grew up to have different political views. A novel *Many Lives* was about the Buddhist karma of eleven boat passengers who died together in a drowning accident, and another of his earliest books *Red Bamboo* was about an impoverished village, which was torn between the corruption of Bangkok elites, modernizing Marxist ideology brought from outside, and the Buddhism offered by a learned village abbot. Later books included histories of Southeast Asia, stories about his pet dogs, literary translation, Thai history, elephants, the Vietnam War, a history of the Jewish people, commentaries on classic Thai literature, and many others.

Outside of his politics and literary career, Kukrit also played the Prime Minister of “Sarkhan” opposite Marlon Brando in the 1963 film “The Ugly American.”⁴ The film critiqued America’s development role in the fictional Southeast nation of “Sarkhan,” a word that entered the Thai language via the English language film, and in Thai today refers to any weak corrupt nation that is subordinated by one of the great powers.

Kukrit’s newspaper columns in particular are known for their impishness and humor, while his novels are known for the quality of the plot, and entertainment value. *Farang Sakdina* is different than the better-known works of Kukrit, though. *Farang Sakdina* is instead more a work of abstract political philosophy describing the historical origins of political tensions in the mid-1950s as Thailand maneuvered between the Great Powers in the Cold War. Kukrit borrows from Anglo-American concepts—his enthusiasm for English-style democracy is clear—while adopting too a Marxist-style form of dialectical reasoning.

Thai politics and mid-twentieth century social theory. Mid-twentieth century development policy was implicitly theorized by Thailand’s liberal western allies by focusing on the materialism of development. Specifically development planners focused on the role of market capitalism, democratic institutions, and good governance policies. Leftist theorists from the Soviet Union and China meanwhile, were present too, and were explicitly wedded to Marx’s dialectics of historical materialism. Both sides of course assumed that their own views pointed to a scientific technocratic solution to how development policy should work. The Americans and their allies thus prescribed elections, and free markets for Thailand, while the Soviet Union and its allies prescribed class struggle, and state ownership of the means of production.

Kukrit in *Farang Sakdina*, though, is asserting a Thai alternative that both acknowledges dialectics, but also asserts assumptions rooted in concepts of Buddhist karma. In Kukrit’s formulation in *Farang Sakdina*, societies rise, deteriorate, and then rise again from the remains of what deteriorated—as a result the new is always a throwback to the past. In other words, the tensions that led to deterioration in the past, can likely to re-emerge later as the society reconstitutes. Unspoken cultural redispositions and habits (what Pierre Bourdieu would later call *habitus*) do not necessarily disappear just because a regime collapses.

Notably, this is, I think different from the “Thainess” (*Khwan pen Thai*) origins of Thai exceptionalism that Kukrit promoted particularly in his later political writings.⁵ Also relevant perhaps is Herzfeld’s (2010: p. 174) warning that evaluations of exceptionalism should navigate carefully between the idea that any nation is unique, and what he calls “taxonomic reductionism”, which is an assumption that the various characteristics of any country can be reduced to one broader category or the other. As with Kukrit’s approach in *Farang Sakdina*, Herzfeld’s approach is dialectical, i.e., focused on dialectics and tensions, rather than essentialist.

The argument in *Farang Sakdina* does not reduce itself to Thai exceptionalism, but explains Thai and English political

governance and kingship in terms rooted in culture, social ecology, and historical contingency.⁶ If one must seek analogies in western social theory, it is probably closest to what Max Weber proposed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which the ethics of modern capitalist enterprise are traced back to ideologies of the Protestant ascetic Christianity. In other words, Kukrit in *Farang Sakdina*, like Weber, proposes a general theory of social development that is not rooted in the materialism of the capitalist west or Marxist east. Unlike Weber though, Kukrit’s focus is democracy and governance, not capitalist economics.

Kukrit’s social theory and Anglo-American “Good Governance”. I think that over 60 years and 14 Thai constitutions/charters later, Kukrit would likely reach the same conclusions about democracy and governance in Thailand that he did in 1957–1958. The positions of the Thai military and democratic institutions in 2022 are clearly derived from what Kukrit observed in 1957–1958. Despite the country’s rapid economic and social progress since then, the borrowing of democratic institutions and constitutionalism for use in Thailand did not work as promised by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the 1950s, nor does it today, judging from the number of new Thai constitutions promulgated, proposed, suspended, and amended since 1932. What was consistent though were the tensions between urban middle classes/elites, rural peasantry. The tensions continued in the 2010s when yellow shirts confronted red shirts, and the 2014 military coup was a result (see e.g., Sombatpoonsiri (2017); Baker (2016)).

Kukrit explains that when Thailand’s American and European development planners tried to create democratic institutions in Thailand in the 1940s and 1950s, they made the mistake of ignoring the very different historical trajectories of Europe and Southeast Asia. Moreover indeed, western nation-builders even today criticize “feudalism” in places like Thailand, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Iraq because patron-client relationships are inconvenient for the implementation of USAID and UN contracts. Implicitly though they are simply assuming that liberal modernization theory created for Europe reflects universal principals. As Kukrit asserts though, the *farang* advisors from the US State Department and the United Nations in 1957 assumed what is now called modernization theory. Kukrit, writing in Thai,⁷ warns the Thai public that this is a poor model for Thailand where political traditions are rooted not in European feudalism, but in Thai *sakdina*. Here it is in Kukrit’s own words:

This is because Western *Farang* feudalism and Thai *Sakdina* can be seen as being about the same thing. But this implies that they are simply equivalents [which they are not]. But as a description of an ancient society, *Sakdina* describes only Thai society while feudalism only describes the Western *Farang* society. Why do they have to be considered the same thing as the translation of the word *Sakdina* to feudalism implies? (Kukrit: Foreword to *Farang Sakdina*).

Kukrit (p. 145) also offers a way to understand European systems using “Buddhist dialectics” in which the regeneration of a political system occurs only in the context of the contradictions embedded in the dispositions and habits of what there previously. For individuals, this is a reference to Buddhist concepts of karma, a principle that Kukrit asserts applies to any political system.

Thus, Kukrit’s thesis in *Farang Sakdina* emerges from historical comparative sociology, and as such is a precursor to what is now known as post-colonial theory. In making comparisons, Kukrit effectively develops a contingent theory of political change rooted in Southeast Asian dialectical traditions in

which social institutions are assumed to have tensions and contradictions. As a result they go through cycles of growth, stasis, decay, and then return to growth.

The Marxist challenge of Jit Phoumisak and others. Marxist arguments, emphasize “schema of social formations worked out for other societies” of Europe by Marx, Engels and their successors. Under such formula, the practice of history came to be one of searching out the “stages” at which Thai society progressed: slave, feudal, capitalist, and then socialist (Reynolds and Lysa, 1983: p. 80). This led to the publication of works about Thailand in the 1950s that started with a Marxist frame, and sought to explain how the succeeding ruling classes, i.e., the nobility in Thai feudalism/*sakdina*, and the capitalists in mid-twentieth century Thailand, dominated peasants and workers. Typically, the Thai revolution of 1932 was identified as the dividing line between feudal formations, and the beginning of capitalist/business dominance. This is the Marxist formulation that Kukrit is jousting with.

Jit Phoumisak (1930–1967), a student at Thammasat University wrote the most important essay of the genre, “The Real Face of Thai Feudalism” in 1957 for the *Thammasat Year Book*. The book includes, as Reynolds (1987: p. 155, and especially Jit 1957/1987) points out, a grab bag of French Orientalist scholarship, and theoretical Marxism from America and Europe. However more importantly, it includes compilations of data and definitions from Thai sources, which illustrate the nature of labor, kingship, land tenure, slavery, and business in pre-modern and modern Thailand. In developing his argument, Jit’s writing is reminiscent of Karl Marx’s (1867) *Kapital*, but with Thai data, rather than that from English textile manufacturing. However still, underpinning this idea is an assertion by Jit that Thai *Sakdina* and European feudalism were the same (Reynolds and Lysa, 1983: p. 85, and Piyada 2018).⁸

Reynolds (1987) in translating Jit’s book, does dwell on the problematic nature of the word *sakdina*, which he points out came into common usage in Thai only after the 1932 Revolution when democratic forces, as well as the military, needed to explain what was bad about the old overthrown system. In this context, *sakdina* (or *saktina*) became a shorthand in the 1940s and 1950s for describing the noble titles, tributary relationships, social inequality, and absolute kingship resembling, at least in a superficial fashion, feudal England, France, and Germany.⁹

Conservative royalist, and the search for liberalism. Kukrit is traditionally viewed by liberal Thai academics as a “conservative royalist.” Despite having good democratic credentials, his loyalty to a more liberal politics is questioned because of his stalwart support of the monarchy in general, and King Rama IX who across his long reign emerged as a popular “father of the nation,” despite the context of his decidedly illiberal military governments, which emerged after 1948. These military governments of course ruled through force, and frequently engineered coups. They also encouraged a strong Thai nationalist identity in which fealty to the royalty was a central tenet of Thai exceptionalism. In this context, activists, and the more liberal academics question whether it was possible for Kukrit to be both a democrat, and a royalist.¹⁰

Larsson (2017: pp. 536–537) describes Saichon Sattayanurak’s (2014) two volume history of conservative nationalist Thai thought as a “magnum opus.” Saichon used her books (and columns in the periodical *Matichon*) to describe the ten wise men of Thai thought regarding the nature of monarchy and “Thainess” (*Khwaem pen Thai*) that suffused modern Thai institutions and culture for at least the last 100 years. Saichon places Kukrit at

the center of this group of ten, because as Larsson (2017: p. 537) wrote: “Kukrit viewed Thai-style government centered on the king and on the Buddhist conception of freedom as a spiritual matter, superior to anything offered by Western-style liberal democracy.” As many writers about Thailand in Thai and English note, this ideology of Thai exceptionalism underpins today’s modern Thai state (see e.g., Larsson (2017); Connors (2008); Kata (2016): pp. 28–31). However, Saichon (2002, 2014, 2007) in her writing also points out that Kukrit’s writing was generally used to legitimate the present-day class system rooted in the older conservative traditions like *Sakdina*.¹¹

Farang Sakdina as a work of social theory

The basic methodological mistake according to Kukrit. *Farang Sakdina* is a work of Social Theory and Comparative History (see Goldstone (1991); Ragin (1987)). In form and substance, Kukrit’s book involves a deep understanding of English legal and political history, and the nature of Anglo-American democracy. However, Kukrit adds to this comparison an understanding from Thai social and political history, which means his theory is different. This is important because, as Kukrit points out, theories based only on Western data are not necessarily applicable to places that are non-Western. Indeed, Kukrit’s point is one made in any basic social research methods class! Kukrit might have written, “do not make generalizations beyond the parameters of the population sampled!”

As Kukrit complains, making generalizations beyond the population sampled is what happened when Marx, Engels, and others used data from Europe to generalize about a phenomenon in Asia that they called “The Asiatic Mode of Production” (see e.g. Treadgold 1987). This theory asserted that Asia was different than Europe, and had a unique form of despotism, an obviously Euro-centric assertion.

However, the application of European social theory to Asia is what the Western enthusiasts of democratic capitalism, democracy, and good governance do, even today.¹² Writing in a way that anticipates traditions of a modern sociological methods book, Kukrit points out that Europeans apply generalizations derived from European data uncritically to Asian situations which they never studied:

The history book about the rhythms of human society written by Karl Marx that every Communist reads points out that, at one time humans used the right over the land in Europe as the key to domination by the ruling class. But historical books in the past used the European historical events as a standard because Karl Marx wrote and criticized history with a knowledge limited to Europe (Kukrit *Farang Sakdina*, p. 188).

Kukrit’s tedious description of English feudalism in chapter 4 of Farang Sakdina.

Ultimately Kukrit’s main point is that in England, the state was a creation of nobles who came together out of need for mutual protection of their feudal lands, and appointed a King to resolve disputes. As Kukrit notes, the *farang* King in this concept is the product of a proverbial round table, around which equals sit in a system that eventually became Parliament. The King is theoretically the first of otherwise equal nobles, a situation, which leads to a division of power between the central government, and relatively autonomous provinces, bishoprics, duchies, counties, manors, etc. Kukrit points out that this was long the case in England, and indeed formally became the case when the nobles forced King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. However in Thailand, Kukrit writes, *The King* is supreme;

Table 1 Summary of differences highlighted in Kukrit's *Farang Sakdina* between English/farang feudalism, and Thai Sakdina, as specified in *Farang Sakdina*, by Kukrit Pramoj.

Institution and conditions	Thailand	England
Kingship	Rooted in Sacred "Barami," Sovereign	Created by Nobles
Nobles	Serve the King	Sovereign
Parliament	None	
Courts	All courts under King	Only Courts of Appeal report to the King
Priesthood	Independent, but cannot own land, rule, or arm itself	
Peasantry/Serfs	Tied to land, serve manors	Tied by personal loyalty to noble
Armies/soldiers	Serve King	Organized locally
Beginning of formal system	Ayyutthaya about 1454	Magna Carta 1066
Means of Production	The followers	The land
Population density	Relatively low until late in Sakdina	Relatively high
Agricultural land	Relatively plentiful	Relative scarce
Zone of refuge	Difficult—UK are islands	Nearby mountains

there was no round table of equals. The Thai King appointed both nobles and assigned bureaucrats. He could fire them, too.

The [Thai] King was the person who was in the highest position; he, as a result, was the "boss" or "owner" of all the people. Next on down were the servants directly responsible to the King (i.e., the tenant-in-chief of the King) who also had a status as the master of ordinary people, but was also responsible for making the land productive.

The basis of this kind of society was inherited from an ancient world. Before *sakdina*, it was believed that each person was mainly free and that the King was the head of such free people. The army, in turn, was made up of the free (*thai*)¹³ people of the nation who held the weapons of war, and the courthouse was where such free (*thai*) persons came and adjudicated cases. ...

[So] in the ancient societies of Thailand, ever since the Thai people were found in Thailand, the land was the treasure of the whole nation. [In contrast] British society developed into [*farang*] feudalism and developed the concept that the land must be owned. The free [British] people must own the land [as individuals or private corporations] A type of freedom emerged in England in which land ownership was central to the very definition of "free"¹⁴ (see Kukrit *Farang Sakdina* p. 134).

Kukrit then makes a point about Bourdieu (2009) would call *habitus*, meaning the unspoken predispositions and habits underlying social institutions, including those of government.¹⁵ As Kukrit points out, effectively, the *habitus* of English governance have origins in local landlords who elected one of their own as King. In contrast, in Thailand the King asserted control over the local nobles, and then replaced them with his own nobles and bureaucrats who were personally loyal to him. This results in a different set of unspoken predispositions and habits. For example, in the decentralized English system, land is central, and the peasants (*villeins* or serfs) belonged to a specific piece of land, which was owned "in perpetuity." With this came land surveys, and eventually the creation of land as a commodity, which can be bought and sold, with whoever purchases it also acquiring the perpetual rights. Thus, in England, nobles and peasants, and their heirs, had rights to the land "in perpetuity," i.e., forever!

The feudal manor was the English unit on which peasants lived and served a local noble who lived in the large house, and was sovereign. The manor would even have courts and other institutions needed for the government of the peasantry. Only when specific issues involving the "King's Peace" or land disputes

between manors would the King's own judges intervene. As Kukrit emphasizes, there was no analogous system in the *sakdina* world of Thailand (see Table 1 for a comparative summary of England and Thailand).

However, in the traditional Thai system, farmers were personally loyal to a noble who was appointed by the Thai King.¹⁶ The farmland was in turn assigned to the nobles and "their" farmers by the King's servants. As long as the peasants (and their nobles) used the land productively, they *de facto* "owned" it. However, neither noble nor farmer held the land "in perpetuity." Rather, unused or unowned land reverted to the crown for reassignment.¹⁷ And, unlike in England, there was no assumed right of inheritance and perpetual rights—everything in traditional Thailand went back to the King upon death. One result is that unspoken and unwritten predispositions of governance in Thailand are focused on the center and not the geographical sub-divisions such as parliamentary constituencies, counties, bishoprics, duchies, and baronies as is the case in England where all entities were also held "in perpetuity" under the land laws of feudal inheritance and primogeniture.

Thus, Kukrit's *Farang Sakdina* is ultimately several stories in one. First, as described in the Introduction (and in Chapter 16) of the book, *Farang Sakdina* is an assertion that Thailand is different than Europe, because of different historical contingencies. However, the "meat" of the book is still in the detailed description of English feudalism written for a Thai audience.

Thus, much of Chapter 4 in *Farang Sakdina* is a long description of English feudalism and how the legal structure emerged, starting in pre-Roman times, during the Roman times, and the later independent kingdoms of the pre-Norman England. Kukrit then describes how after the Norman invasion when William the Conqueror established in England the formal laws of feudalism that he brought from France. These were eventually extended into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. In describing this change, Kukrit engages in lengthy descriptions of the relative rights and responsibilities of the different ranks within English feudalism, emphasizing that unequal relations are reliant on sentiment between master and servant, who recognize mutual (and unequal) responsibilities.¹⁸ The fact that predispositions and habits endure, i.e., what Bourdieu (2009) later called *habitus*, is also central to Kukrit's argument.

By emphasizing the enduring contradictions (*habitus*) of Thailand, Kukrit implicitly re-emphasizes his ideas about Buddhist dialectics, i.e., the generation, decline and regeneration that underpin a social *habitus*, which also includes fixed ideas of political hierarchy.¹⁹ Kukrit then applies this dialectic approach to the *farang* feudalism he saw in England, noting that since feudalism is not a static system, but one in which contradictions

are always wrestled with. The contradictions in England he writes, started as far back as the pre-Roman times and continued through the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods until feudalism emerged full-blown with the Normans who first arrived in 1066. At that point, Kukrit's analysis gets even more detailed as he describes the tensions between the Norman conquerors and the conquered. This culminates in the insistence of the barons and dukes that King John sign the Magna Carta in 1215, which codified The King's very limited authority to collect taxes without permission of the nobles, except for three specific reasons, as Kukrit emphasizes:

1. The knighthood of his eldest son.
2. The marriage of his eldest daughter.
3. His own ransom.

Kukrit's point is that it would be nonsensical to place such restrictions on the Thai King. The Thai King in Ayutthaya had absolute authority, in a way that an English King did not. The elaborate legal structure of English governance emerged hundreds of years later, but still with particular predisposition and understanding of property in land and humans. The English system is still symbolically elaborated in a heritable system rooted in feudal traditions. Courts emerged at each level, but for most people who were *villeins*/serfs, the only court was the one at the feudal manor. Local courts retained authority over criminal acts (including murder), and the higher-level courts only accepted cases involving land disputes among nobles, appeals from lower courts, and eventually crimes, which directly challenged the King's Peace.²⁰ Power was at the local level, and the English King's authority was restricted—he was the first among equals, not the omnipresent demigod wielding the sacred moral authority of *barami*²¹ found in Thailand.

As Kukrit emphasizes the center of this English system was the land: Control of the land, laws about the land, and the land courts were present primarily at the manors. Only in the event of appeal, did land cases go to the King's court. It was over these limited cases Kukrit writes, that political change occurs—as “contradictions” resolve themselves. English feudalism Kukrit wrote did deteriorate and die, and did so after the English Civil War, and Industrial Revolution. However, even after these events the remnants of feudalism created a new society that would eventually create the democratic principles of twentieth century, while still retaining the habits of feudal law, and decentralized governance and a specific conceptions of private property that remain today in England, remnants of the predisposition and habitus of feudalism. In other words, to mix concepts from Kukrit and western sociology, it might be said that just as the cultural *habitus* reproduces itself from earlier periods, the *karmic* contradictions of previous societies have social consequences today. This logic of habitus/karma has consequences for the present in how Kukrit sought to understand the situation in Thailand in 1957–1958 when he wrote in *Farang Sakdina*.

... the substance in the body is still the preparation for the production of a new body. It is a normal thing. So in a society with any type of ruling system, regeneration [i.e., karma/habitus] must occur. For instance, in an absolute monarchy system, there must be tension with democracy, and within democracy, there must be a tension with communism. Even in the communist system itself, there is such a regeneration that is called a “reaction,” ... (p. 145).

Following through with this logic, Kukrit wrote the following in the Forward to *Farang Sakdina*.

So if the various traditions of democracy are good, the problems in Thailand today must come from another place.

What other unknown traditions [habitus] out there occurred in Thailand's past? The problem must have come from something else, not democracy. ... What is the basis for all these democratic things falling apart? ... Is it through the continuous poverty and craziness of people that constitutionalism has worked only for a short time in the past? This story has been told many times but still happens over and over and over again!, *Farang Sakdina*).²²

Ultimately, then Kukrit asks, why should the British model be a good precedent for Thai democracy even in 1957–1958? His answer in the light of the political machinations of 1932–1958 was that it was not. In fact, English feudalism seemed quite irrelevant to Kukrit, who asks how can principles developed to deal with the historical, geographic, and political contingencies of England be applied to the very different world of modern Thailand? For example, there were few land shortages in Thailand,²³ so the means of production were the people, and not the land. So, when tensions emerged in Thailand in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it was not over land but between the monarchy and democracy. Or rather perhaps monarchy, democracy, and the military.

Kukrit's theory: Buddha, Marx, and Zones of Refuge

In the concluding chapter to *Farang Sakdina*, Kukrit offers an approach focused on dialectical tensions, which also draws on assumptions of Thai Buddhism. In describing how socio-political change occurs Kukrit notes that

The [English] feudal system is a social system. Underpinning [English] feudalism are conditions and doctrines, some of which cause conflicts within the system itself. These conditions and doctrines, if analyzed from a perspective of dialectical materialism, must have “contradictions” ... Such *pratikarn* (contradictions) were tools built into feudalism, which directed and restrained the growth of the feudal system and remained in the proper proportion ...

This is the same as in our body, which is also a *pratikarn*, which is why disintegration of the body occurs (see Kukrit *Farang Sakdina*, pp. 145–146.).

However, Kukrit's points about democracy, governance, and Buddhist dialectics is not Kukrit's only modern social theoretical point in *Farang Sakdina*. Kukrit also points to what Scott (2009) calls “Zones of Refuge” as being important. Kukrit (see *Farang Sakdina* p. 141) notes that the population in Thailand could easily escape until at least the late fifteenth century, because the Ayutthayan courts and police did not have the resources to capture runaways in the sparsely populated countryside. This problem was also described by Ester Boserup (1965), and earlier social theorists (see also description in Waters (2007): pp. 33–57). However, Kukrit also goes on to note that the Thai elite of Ayutthaya (until 1767) and Rattanakosin (after 1783) were less successful than the English in “capturing” the peasantry. “Out-laws” were probably less common on the crowded island of Britain than in Thailand, where the surrounding mountains hid the uncaptured groups of Southeast Asia. Indeed such groups are still found in highland Myanmar today (see Waters and Panyakom (2021)).

Thus, Kukrit points out, that when a landlord/noble became too oppressive in Ayutthaya, the villein/*prai* could slip out of his grasp, stop paying tribute, and ignore levies for soldiers. Kukrit does not write of what the actual destination was of the peasants who escaped from padi agriculture, and the sacred halo (*barami*) of the King. However, how such escapees “hid” in Southeast

Asian zones of highland refuge well-described by Scott (2009) in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

Thai *Sakdina* and the modern day

More recent literature about Southeast Asia points to the role such sparsely populated “zones of refuge” played. Scott (2009: pp. 22–25, 58–59) writes that the nobles and landholders at the center of a Southeast Asian “mandala” had trouble maintaining control over areas distant from the center. In developing this model, Scott emphasized that the authority of the King diminished with distance from the palace in the capital. Or, to borrow Kukrit’s words, the contradictions shifted as distance from the center increased. In large part, this was because it was relatively easy to escape into the mountains where they established settlements and did not pay fees, provide soldiers or corvee labor, and were not subject to the other obligations of *sakdina*. Escaped peasants were free in mountainous “zone of refuge,” but this involved an implicit loss of security. In the highlands, there was room to run, even as escapees were also vulnerable to the torches of sudden raids (see e.g., Chirot (2012): pp. 17–51, 141).²⁴ Kukrit’s insight regarding this of course precedes that of Scott and more recent writers.

Finally Kukrit acknowledges that feudalism and *sakdina*, even though the systems are today archaic both in England and Thailand, are still relevant. The systems were officially dominant for 700 years in Europe (roughly 1066–1789), and almost 500 years in Thailand (roughly 1450–1932). Moreover, while both countries emerged from grain-based kingdoms, they were different, and not equivalent as Kukrit points out. Again, most importantly *sakdina* is not “rights over the land,” but about rights and responsibilities over humans.

It is true that during the time of the great city of Ayudhya, we had the principle of government that referred to rule over the land. Namely, each city governor controlled the land. The villagers (*prai ban*) who rented their land were put under his control and needed to pay a levy to him. This rule was transformed by the system called *Sakdina*—officially set up from the reign of King Trailokanat of Ayudhaya [in 1454] and continued until the current era of the Rattanakosin kingdom. (see Kukrit *Farang Sakdina* 186–189).

As Kukrit emphasizes, the two different systems left imprints on their respective social, political, and legal systems, which effect how they developed modern institutions. England was bequeathed after its Industrial Revolution with a decentralized government emerging from *farang* feudalism, and a representative Parliament more powerful than the King. In this context, four united—but separate—kingdoms of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland federated, even as counties, duchies, bisphorics, etc., all retained some local rights. Regional political identities persist today in Great Britain in ways that, for example, the Lanna Kingdom of Chiang Mai does not. In particular, UK sub-units have their own parliaments and councils, while governors appointed from Bangkok rule the modern Thai provinces.²⁵

And like England, Thailand expanded into neighboring regions, incorporating kingdoms in the north (Lanna after the eighteenth century), and principalities in the northeast, south, and central parts of the country (see Chaiyan, 1994: pp. 17–33). However, in doing this, local institutions were co-opted by the center in Ayutthaya (before 1768) or Bangkok (after 1783). Thai *Sakdina* also spread the principles of social order founded on loyalty to the King and central state, and obedience to a centralized hierarchy. Landholding was less important. Today’s *habitus* of personal loyalty to the Thai King are seen in the Thai national rituals undertaken by schoolchildren, the playing of the

national anthem at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. on radio and television, the emphasis on “Thai-ness” in school curriculum, insistence on the central Thai language, and the truly national mourning after the passing of King Rama IX in October 2016.

Thus, today in Thailand there are rules rooted in what Locke’s version of natural law called “pursuit of estate” are weaker than in the Anglo-American world.²⁶ In Thailand, hierarchy is still rooted in personal proximity to the King and the political authorities. In the case of Thailand such traditions are rooted in Buddhism with its karmic cycles. Again to quote Kukrit.

This is the same as in our body, which is also a *pratikarn*, which is why disintegration of the body occurs. But the substance in the body is still the preparation for the production of a new body. It is a normal thing. So, in a society with any type of ruling system, regeneration must occur. (see pp. Kukrit, pp. 145–146).

Personal loyalty continues to bind in Thailand, including at election times, perhaps more so than the material economic interests highlighted by the Marxist or capitalist theorist. Such personal loyalty can trump property rights, and party loyalty, which tend to be emphasized to a greater extent in the Anglo-American world. Even today in Thailand, the King’s government can reassign land to a follower most likely to use it well for the benefit of the kingdom as a whole.²⁷

The word *sakdina* was used in Thai demonstrations against the authoritarianism of the military in the Thai government in 2020. The word *sakdina* was used not only to critique the role of soldiers in Parliament, but also put focus on the visible symbols of deference that permeate Thai society. Civil servants, including teachers, police officers, district officials, and other authority figures, still receive deferential treatment from common people, and a level of corruption and opacity expected. When issues of equity and transparency are challenged in the name of good governance, there are inevitably a contradiction with older habits of deference and hierarchy.

In this context, regulations involving university and secondary school uniforms and haircuts for students were highlighted in the 2020 demonstrations. As in Kukrit’s day, the word “*sakdina*” was used as one of derisive critique—a complaint by the protestors that the habits of hierarchy and deference that ostensibly disappeared with the pre-1932 Revolution, were in fact real and persistent in twenty-first century. In the same way, demonstrators in 2006 wore shirts asserting identity as a *Prai/Villein* (see Naruemon and McCargo (2011): p. 1006). This is of course the same point that Kukrit is making in *Farang Sakdina* about how contradictions drive history. Cultural habits are persistent, and deep within Thai culture, and set the stage for the democratic reforms possible decades or even centuries later.

Conclusion: the dialectics of Sarkhan?

Farang Sakdina is one of the many books, articles, and columns that M. R. Kukrit Pramoj wrote during his long career. A textual analysis of what makes *Farang Sakdina* special are Kukrit’s clear statement about social theory and political change. As such a work, *Farang Sakdina* reflects a distinctly Thai Buddhist look at how political change occurs creatively, mixing in theories of karma, contradictions, and dialectics. This mixture is both unique to Kukrit, but also a statement that can be thought of as a progenitor to latter day post-colonial theories even though Kukrit’s book pre-dates Said’s *Orientalism*, and Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. Like Post-Colonial Theory, *Farang Sakdina* is an explicit statement in response to the American, British, and Soviet advisors peddling theories rooted in the materialism of European philosophers.²⁸

Another difference though is that Kukrit wrote in Thai, for Thai people. Said and Fanon used the colonial languages of French and English, and as their own post-colonial approach would predict, were more widely read as a result. Kukrit was also not writing about the effects of western culture, and the types of hybridity, which is described well in the crypto-colonial literature that Herzfeld (2010, 2012) develops about Thailand. Rather *Farang Sakdina* is asserting that due to ancient historical trajectories in which the west played little role, the nature of political change is fundamentally different.

In writing *Farang Sakdina*, Kukrit is not addressing an English-speaking audience at all. Had they read it, how would a global audience have reacted? Would USAID have developed different policies? The answer can perhaps be found by re-watching “The Ugly American” (Burdick and Lederer 1958) the 1963 Marlon Brando film in which Kukrit Pramoj played the supporting role as the Prime Minister of Sarkhan. The themes of *Farang Sakdina* and “The Ugly American,” are surprisingly similar despite very different approaches. The shared message was that opposition to American policies about a particular type of democracy, does not equate with Communism, or any other bogey man, but are legitimate expressions of national political *habitus/karma*. Using the sharpness of Kukrit’s scholarship, *Farang Sakdina* actually proposes a way to understand countries like Thailand, where a “feudal” history, which includes a strong kingship and weak property rights, is a different type of country than the “models” of *farang* feudalism, and on to the present day where it is called “good governance.”

Data availability

This is not applicable to this paper.

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Notes

- 1 M. R. Kukrit Pramoj is one of the most important Thai writers of the twentieth century. However, only three of his scores of books, the novels *Four Reigns* (1953), *Red Bamboo* (1954), and *Many Lives* (1955) have been translated into English. M. R. Kukrit Pramoj is also well-known in Thailand for being the publisher of the *Siam Rat* newspaper, classical *khon* dancer, actor, and a major political figure in the 1970s. He was briefly Prime Minister of Thailand in 1975–1976. During his brief time as Prime Minister, he normalized relations with China, and had the United States military bases in Thailand closed (see Waters, 2019a).
- 2 Good governance has many modern definitions by agencies (among others) from the UN, EU, USAID, etc. One such idealistic definition is from UNESCAP is: “Good governance has eight major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.” The conduct of open elections, with universal suffrage is taken for granted in such a definition (UNESCAP, 2022). During 1957, at the time that *Farang Sakdina* was published in the *Siam Rat*, there were two elections in Thailand, under the guidance of the Americans who were pursuing at times contradictory policies of anti-Communism and democracy. The elections, in February and December, solidified military control over the government. Civilian parties won substantial portions of the vote, but were pushed to the side in opaque machinations, which were far from consensus oriented, and led to a dark period for Thai democracy in which freedoms of the press, speech, assembly etc., were muzzled in the interest of an American-centric anti-Communism. The dictatorship was to last from 1958 until 1973 under the leadership of Generals Thanom and Sarit.
- 3 See e.g., Engels (1880/1978). Engels contrasted the German dialectical system of reasoning of Hegel and Marx, with the “metaphysical” reasoning system of Aristotle, Locke, etc. which emphasized cause and effect. Kukrit is explicitly writing in the dialectical tradition (see Kukrit, p. 188).

- 4 The 1963 film “The Ugly American” was based on the 1958 novel *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer. *The Ugly American* was published in 1958 in response to an earlier book, *The Quiet American* published by Graham Greene (1954). Hollywood made Greene’s book into a movie in 1957, and again in 2002. As with Kukrit’s 1957/1958 *Farang Sakdina*, these works were created in response to American anti-Communist policy in Southeast Asia.
- 5 See discussion of Kukrit and his role in the Thainess movement is in Larsson (2017), Connors (2008), and also Saiphon (2007). Thongchai (1994: p. 5) writing about the nature of Thainess, cites and quotes Kukrit. Thongchai writes “even though [Kukrit] confessed that he was not quite sure what identity means” Kukrit wrote... “The identity belonging to the people of a nation... is ascribed to oneself at birth. Thainess for the most part arises together with Thai people. Being a Thai means having such and such feelings, having a certain character....” Kukrit did not raise the particular issue of identity in *Farang Sakdina* in 1957–1958. Rather *Farang Sakdina* relies on comparative historical sociology to make its case that Thailand and English politics are fundamentally different.
- 6 Larsson (2017: p. 534, 536–537) notes that literature on the modern political thought of Thailand divides along lines of “socialism vs. conservatism” in which there is no liberalism. Be that as it may, he then notes that Kukrit’s broader writings place him in a nationalistic conservative camp; Kukrit certainly is not in the socialist camp! However, the strength of *Farang Sakdina* is I think that the book is not squarely in either camp—unlike some of Kukrit’s later political writings, which Larsson refers to.
- 7 Post-colonial efforts starting with work of writers like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said are of course important correctives to Euro-centric perspective, but this literature was written after *Farang Sakdina* was published in Thai in 1957–1958. *Farang Sakdina* is explicitly a corrective to the Euro-centric perspective, albeit not one written in French (like Fanon), or English (like Said), and therefore inaccessible to the European literature. I suppose one may quibble about whether the work is “post-colonial” or not—after all Thailand was never colonized in a formal sense, and had only what Herzfeld (2010) called “a symbolic as well as material dependence on intrusive colonial power.” But Kukrit is explicitly responding to what is today called neo-colonialism. The United States directly (and the Soviet Union more indirectly) established neo-colonial institutions via the UN and US State Department in Thailand. The American policies eventually led to the basing of tens of thousands of US soldiers in Thailand during the American war in Vietnam, and the “secret” was coordinated by the CIA in Laos and northern Burma in the 1950s–1970s. This tradition continued when the CIA center for prisoners in the War on Terror was established outside Bangkok in 2001.
- 8 *Farang Sakdina* and *The Many Faces of Thai Feudalism* were published at about the same time. Both books use what for the west was an older form of scholarship, in which the authors master a wide literature, but write without the modern conventions of citation and attribution. This leaves the reader guessing about how much the two writers knew about each others’ thoughts and approaches to similar questions regarding feudalism and government. Key to understanding the context that the two writers provided each other is their shared concern with the nature of *sakdina* the Thai word that of course features in the title of both essays. Both Jit, as well as Jit’s American sponsors who ironically sponsored Jit’s early translations, uncritically translated *sakdina* “feudal” in the sense understood by both Marx, and the planners at USAID. Kukrit and Jit were though in the same small Bangkok literary circles, and knew of each other’s work. *Farang Sakdina* is undoubtedly in part a response to Jit *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism*, which was published within months of *Farang Sakdina*. Indeed, the two works make reference to some of the same incidents of English feudal governance. However, in 1957 Kukrit was already a major literary and political figure in Bangkok, while Jit was a much less well-known student leader. Jit’s work, including *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism* did not become well-known until the 1970s and 1980s, after his 1966 assassination in the remote highlands of Thailand (see Reynolds and Lysa (1983): pp. 87–88). Craig Reynolds interviewed Jit Phoumisak’s employer, the American William Gedney, in 1980. Gedney recalled seeking help from Kukrit to protect Jit from harassment by right wing students following a demonstrations in 1952. Kukrit was at first sympathetic to Jit’s situation, and offered to help. However in the end, Gedney remembered that Kukrit weathered the controversy by retreating to his mountain home in northern Thailand, presumably Khun Tan (see Reynolds (1987): p. 31).
- 9 Larsson (2017) develops this point in his paper “In Search of Liberalism: Ideological Traditions and Troubles in Thailand.”
- 10 In this respect, Kukrit is also similar to Max Weber who wrote excellent social theory during his career, and also wrote nationalistic endorsements of German war policy for newspapers during World War One (see Waters and Waters (2015): pp. 19–28).
- 11 I think placement of Kukrit into this category as a “conservative nationalist” reflects his newspaper columns in *Siam Rat* later in his career, rather than specifically *Farang Sakdina*, or for that matter his earlier book *Red Bamboo*, which both evaluate Thai political traditions without specific reference to the later emerging “Thainess” movement. Indeed, in the case of *Farang Sakdina*, Kukrit focuses largely on English political traditions. He analyzes English history in *Farang Sakdina*, in a fashion that permits generalization about underlying political change in England, which is what high-quality comparative historical sociology does. *Farang Sakdina* is also the

- opposite of the celebration of “Thai-ness” Kukrit sometimes wrote about in his later popular writings.
- 12 See critique by Henrich et al. (2010); Waters (2019c).
 - 13 Kukrit in this section uses the old Thai word “Thai”, which refers to the free state of the people relative to the King. This is spelled the same way as the modern word “Thai,” which since 1939 is the name of the Thai nation, and it is the basis for the modern word “Thailand.”
 - 14 John Locke describes such a land ownership scheme, which he asserts emerged out of the natural right to fence and own land. See Locke’s “Theory of Property and Labor,” as described in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1689). This theory asserts that by natural rights, he who exerts labor has a right to the product of that labor. This includes rights to land that become “property” when fenced, improved, and claimed. This principle was the basis for British law and became the basis for the description of property rights described in the United States founding documents, as well as those of other countries. Notably, this definition is fundamentally different than what was found in the *sakdina* system of Thailand. Karl Polanyi (1944) also described well the process of the commodification/enclosure of land, which took place under this English doctrine between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in England, Scotland, and elsewhere.
 - 15 Max Weber made the same point about *habitus* in 1920 in his essay “Charisma and Discipline.” See Weber (1920/2015: pp. 6–7).
 - 16 See also Baker and Pasuk (2014: pp. 180–181, 193) regarding Thai policy regarding ownership of land, and humans.
 - 17 Scholars have since the time of Marx wrestled with the “Asiatic Mode of Production,” seeking to adapt something that was to them obviously different, to the pre-existing models they brought with them from the west (see e.g., Currie (1984)). Kukrit understands well Marxist reasoning, but explicitly asserts that it is not applicable to the Thai situation.
 - 18 Reid (1983) has written about bondage systems in Southeast Asia, which reflected the complexity of inter-personal relationships between people who were unequal. In the Thai language, there are at least three terms for bondage (*Tat*, *Kha*, and *Phrai*), which were embedded in law and custom (see Baker and Pasuk (2014): pp. 190–193). Reid (1983: p. 8) writes that these unequal relationships, or “vertical bonds of obligation” were rooted in concepts of debt, anticipating the argument that Graeber (2014) would make later. Reid (1983: p. 7) also notes that it takes effort for modern westerners steeped in the predispositions and habits of a culture of equality, to understand. For modern Thai of course, these bonds are very apparent, focus of modern demonstrations against “sakdina-like” inequality in schools, universities, and many government institutions. Such institutions maintain distinctions regarding rank and deference through requirements for uniforms, ceremony, dress codes, badges, and language. As a result the word *sakdina* was again used by students in the 2020 demonstrations against the government in Bangkok. Indeed, the reference to inequality between government officials, workers, and peasants was similar to that seen in earlier demonstrations as well, particularly in 2006 (see e.g., Naruemon and McCargo (2011)).
 - 19 Saichon (2014) in her critique of Kukrit focuses on such descriptions of karma found in the this and other parts of Kukrit’s writing. It is true as she points out that such ideologies are justification for the inequality, which underpin Thai Society, or for that matter all societies. It seems to me though that in the case of *Farang Sakdina*, Kukrit’s work is descriptive of first English feudal inequality, and secondly only Thai inequality. Kukrit’s writing is descriptive, and in *Farang Sakdina*, he does not have an explicit political point to make about Thainess, though of course *Farang Sakdina*, and that of others, can be used that way (see Saichon (2007)).
 - 20 English-speaking peoples in the modern United States inherited the underlying logic of this English system. Thus there are still today similar levels of courts, and typically local courts try normal murder cases in the United States. Until recently this even applied to the murder of the President. Only after the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, was the assassination of the president made a federal crime. Put in the type of reasoning Kukrit proposes, the statute defining presidential assassination as a unique threat to the “King’s Peace” and therefore a federal crime (see 18 U.S.C. section 1751) is notable. This statute was first passed in 1965.
 - 21 *Barami* is a central concept in Thai Buddhism justifying and legitimating the moral responsibility of the King to rule (see Jory, 2002). King’s are assumed to possess the halo of authority that is *barami* as a result of an inherent goodness, and moral superiority. Embedded in this word are the Thai concepts that Kukrit and his Thai readers take for granted. *Barami* is often translated as “charisma,” though in my view it loses the Thai Buddhist character that Kukrit was communicating when translated this simply. Jory (2002) writes specifically about the relationship between Buddhism, and *barami*. The title of the King’s Anthem which is sung alongside the national anthem in schools, government offices, and at public events is “Sansoen Phra Barami,” or roughly “Glorify the Royal *Barami*.”
 - 22 *Habitus*, when used in the fashion of Bourdieu and Weber, and karma when used as in Kukrit’s *Farang Sakdina*, refer to the persistence of old social habits within social systems. Kukrit’s point is that habits which the Romans, Franks, Normans, and others brought led to the uniquely British type of democracy of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Kukrit attributes such assumptions to contradictions, and the karmic cycles of regimes. Karma of course also has much broader meanings in Buddhism. However, as it is used by Kukrit to describe political change, it is indeed similar to what Bourdieu and Weber wrote based on their experiences in Europe. For another example of how concepts of karma are used in Thai literature, see Rong Wongsawan’s book *On the Back of the Dog* (described in Waters (2019b)). Max Weber describes a similar process in Europe where the older habits of the Protestant Ethic of Martin Luther and John Calvin, eventually gave birth to the *habitus* that is the “Spirit of Capitalism.”
 - 23 James C. Scott (2009) highlights the importance of the relative abundance of land in his study of highland Southeast Asia in *The Art of Not Being Governed*. See also Baker and Pasuk (2014): pp. 174–181.
 - 24 Chirot (2012: p. 141) writes about rural farmers wrestling with this “terrible dilemma of the modern era beginning with the first state five thousand years ago” when describing the relationship between the agriculturally productive rural areas, which needed the protection of the urban areas, at the same time that those urban areas became tyrannical in their exactions.
 - 25 And yet not every remnant of feudalism was pushed into the dustbin of history by the French Revolution and England’s Industrial Revolutions. As Kukrit notes, the content of today’s British democracy still reflects distinctions and categories first established in feudalism. This applies to the nature of British democracy and its social system. Regional and class distinctions remain important in England, as do the ties of affection that continue to bind together those who share a regional accent, schooling, ethnic background, profession, and other non-economic loyalties that Max Weber (see original essay in Waters and Waters (2015/1921): pp. 37–58) referred to as status groups or “*Stand*,” Weber would I think write that today’s British governance is the remnant of the disintegrated “*caput mortuum*” of a persistent feudal *habitus* reflected in the nature of the House of Commons, the House of Lords, monarchy, system of local government, and patterns of landholding (see Waters and Waters (2015): pp. 32–33). In respect of class interests, these distinctions have implications for how the British continue to govern themselves, whether via the bureaucratic system that is Whitehall (and the National Health Service), delegated powers to local councils, or the system of winner-take-all parliamentary elections.
 - 26 Jefferson glossed the “pursuit of ‘life, liberty, and property’”, which Locke wrote about in his Two Treatises of Civil Government (1689) into the “pursuit of life, liberty and happiness” in the American Declaration of Independence (1776).
 - 27 This principle of usufructuary rights is being applied to the 2017 legal case against the former Prime Minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra. The decisions she made about rice subsidies led to the loss of billions of baht—in effect a poor investment. In Thai court, she is being held *personally* responsible for the loans in a system where there is no limited liability even for former prime ministers. The government has a right to seize her personal assets to cover the losses. As of this writing, she is personally liable for over \$1 billion of the \$8 billion in losses and faces up to 10 years in prison. The government has already frozen her assets to pay for the judgment. Notably, the accusation is for incompetence not dishonesty. The crime is that she in effect did not use “The King’s Assets” well. Under the Thai traditions inherited from *sakdina*, this is enough to hold her personally liable. See e.g., news story from 2017 (Chravarty, 2017), and Bangkok Post (2021) regarding a 2021 appeal of her case.
 - 28 Adam Smith in the 1770s and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century proposed theories of social change rooted in an assumption that economic activity is what generates social change. For Smith, this emerged out of his insight in how free markets could generate capital, which could drive material improvement and innovation. In Marx’s theory of “historical materialism,” it was also assumed that economic production drove social change—it is not surprising that Marx cited Smith’s writings repeatedly.

Appendix

Was Kukrit a Conservative Partisan Hack, or an Independent Social Theorist? In preparing this manuscript, I have occasionally been accused of being a conservative, a militarist, or at best an apologist for promoting the social theory of Kukrit Pramoj. My sense is that this accusation is levelled because of Kukrit’s history in the Thai politics, rather than an evaluation of the social theory presented in *Farang Sakdina*. In the 1940s, Kukrit and his brother Seni were in opposition to Pridi Panomyong, the much-admired democratic politician. In the context of this opposition, the Thai military factions pushed out the squabbling democrats, and brought back the military dictatorship, which sustains a hold over the Thai state apparatus ever since.

Kukrit was also an active politician and party leader between 1973 and 1976, a period of democratic flowering in Thailand, which only led to yet another military coup and a relatively dark political period in the late 1970s. Students and others were imprisoned, and the Thai Communist Party in highland forests flourished as a result. This did much to reinforce the “Royalist/

militarist right vs. Communist/left” political division in Thailand. In this bipolar situation, Kukrit as an active royalist was often placed on the right, despite his democratic credentials. Moreover, as a journalist he trod very carefully around censorship law in a fashion, which meant he never went to prison, unlike many others.

During his long career, Kukrit maintained close relationships with the Thai King Rama IX and his court. King Rama IX's influence increased as he established the power of the constitutional Thai kingship, which became more clearly defined in the 1950s. This too was regarded by some on the left as “right wing” position casting Kukrit as conservative relative to leftists who were often subject to arrest for *lese majeste*.

Does any of this qualify his book *Farang Sakdina* as either a conservative, or militarist? This seems to me to be an outdated conversation in 2022. The Cold War is long over, and while Thailand certainly continues to wrestle with the problems of democracy in the context of military rule, Cold War classifications seem beside the point. What seems on point though is Kukrit's dialectical analysis, which is even similar to the argument that the ultimate leftist, Karl Marx, makes in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” about the unintended consequences of the French Communist revolts of 1848, which resulted in Louis Napoleon's conservative coup of 1852.

For Kukrit, the unintended consequences of English feudalism were a particular type of democratic governance found in the United Kingdom and United States today. Neither country would be what it is without the inherited traditions from England described in *Farang Sakdina*. This, is, as Kukrit writes, also true of Thai *sakdina* traditions, which resonate even today as the Thai polity struggles to find the type of governance that fits with Thai traditions. For both the United Kingdom and Thailand, Kukrit seem to claim that

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793–95. In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue. (Marx, 1852).

So is *Farang Sakdina* a conservative or radical book? Ultimately, I do not think that this is an important question for 2022. Rather the question should be, does Kukrit Pramoj's writing help us to think about enduring questions regarding democracy and governance in Thailand and elsewhere? And in the case of this question, I think that the answer is “yes.”

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The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

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Informed consent

Informed consent is not applicable to this paper.

Additional information

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