

**FEUDALISM AS A TROPE OR DISCOURSE FOR THE ASIAN PAST
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THAILAND**

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Feudalism in Asian Historiography

The problem that will interest me in this essay is the existence of terms for feudalism in Asian-language discourses about past and present society and what the writer in English - anthropologist, literary scholar, historian, linguist, whatever - is to do with these feudalisms. Why do native speakers of Asian languages term their own societies "feudal" (feudal = term in language X) and how do they come to employ this term? Generally, Western writers dismiss these Asian-language feudalisms as too culture-bound to be of use in writing objective history. Such usage, so the argument might run, is too embedded in internal debates within Asian societies about who should - or should not - hold power. That is, "feudalism" is a category of social evolution that serves revolutionary or official nationalist interests, and such interests so skew its usage that the term cannot tell the disinterested observer anything illuminating about the political economy of a particular society.

Western academic historians more or less agree that while Asian social systems functioned with ties of bondage, subordination, and even vassalage, the lack of parcellized sovereignty, the absence of a fief system, and various other elements deemed critical to European feudalism have all disqualified Asian societies from being knighted with this term so essential to the evolution of Western society and the emergence of the capitalist economic system. Moreover, use of the term feudal for Asian societies violates a principal of cultural relativism for most students of Asia, because it assimilates Asian societies to the Western evolutionary schema, thereby denying those societies uniqueness and autonomy. To put the matter slightly differently, I suspect that most supervisors of dissertations on Philippine, Thai, Chinese,

Vietnamese, or Burmese history, written in Western universities, would want to scrub the term feudalism from early drafts. The term is too problematic and begs too many questions. Yet many Asian historians writing in the vernacular insist on using the term precisely because it does hook Asian development onto an historicist or universal evolutionary sequence.

There are exceptions to these generalizations, particularly Japan and India. Japanese society, it is argued, experienced a feudal period, meaning that Japanese society at one time bore resemblances to Western feudal society, resemblances strong enough to make the term illuminating as a category.¹ It is no coincidence that the exception of Japan is also the one case of an Asian society approaching "parity" with Western countries in terms of industrialization, economic growth, hegemony of its commercial and business organization, and so forth. The parity even extends to such Westernisms as competence in playing Beethoven, making "Scotch" whiskey, and collecting Rembrandts. Indeed, the feudal element in the Japanese past is deemed to help account for Japan's economic, industrial, and cultural prowess and its successful modernization.

Feudalism in the historiography of India is a slightly different kind of exception, because so much Indian history is written in English, thus clouding the distinction between feudalism (in English) as applied to Indian history by Indian historians and feudalism (in English, French, Dutch, whatever) as applied to Europe in the Middle Ages. I would argue that the signifieds of these two feudalisms are quite distinct, and that the evidence for this may be found in the preference among Western historians and social scientists, who are not much enamored of the idea of an Indian feudal past, for other terms, such as segmentary state, to characterize pre-modern Indian society.² But it must also be recalled that for more than a half century after the Rebellion of 1857-58 feudalism played a part in constructing a theory of Indian society that the British in their colonial historiography used to answer the important question, "how are we going to keep India?"³ The feudal theory of Indian society served the British as a sociology, a classificatory system in which the British monarch and the "natural leaders" of India were placed in relation to one another as the dominant and the subordinated. In this discourse the feudal classification inscribed relations of domination in the legal language of "obligations", "rights", and "duties". Moreover, such a classification labelled local society and its power-holders as reactionary and passé, thus preparing the way for interference with them in the name of progress. Other Western colonial powers used the feudal classification in similar ways. As independence movements gained momentum, young nationalists picked up the classification as a convenient way of "reducing" old leaderships and high culture in favor of a modern outlook.

When it is found in the English-language historiography of India written by Indian historians today, the term feudalism is

really quite close to the Asian vernacular feudalisms that concern me in this paper: its usage is bound up in a debate about the colonial past as well as the nature and direction of present society. Here "feudal" refers to a specific social formation in a Marxist historicist schema (as in the work of R.S. Sharma) or more generally to relations of domination in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period (as in the work of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group).⁴

Most, possibly all, Asian languages with historiographies linked to Western historiography have vernacular equivalents of European-language "feudalism": Bengali *samantatantra* alternating with *samantabad*; Burmese *padei-tha-ya-za* (current usage) and *ahmu-dan-sa-myei* (in use from about 1940-1960); Thai *sakdina*; Indonesian *feodal*; Tagalog *piyudal*; Chinese *feng-chien*; Japanese *hoken*; Vietnamese *phong kien*. Far from being a construct that tyrannizes, Asian-vernacular feudalism is a construct that essentializes. It can be found as the name of a period or social formation prescribed by party thinkers in the centralist historiography of socialist states (China, Vietnam, Burma) and as the name for relations of domination in a seditious discourse propounded by radical, marginalized, or disenfranchised groups (in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand). The obverse of pronouncements on the term in party cant is its appearance in a discourse of subversion. Thus, a military elite (Burma) may seek to explain its role by objectifying past society as feudal and highlighting its own modernist, non-royalist, anti-colonial policies, while at the same time a radical urban intelligentsia (Malaysia) attacks as feudal the dominant ideology which retains remnants of a monarchist political system by appealing for loyalty to the sultanate.⁵

In many cases the vernacular terms (Indonesian and Tagalog excepted, as they borrowed the European-language term) delve deep into the past by drawing on terms of great antiquity to translate European feudalism. Official Burmese histories after 1962, for example, retranslated the term, rooting feudalism more deeply in Burmese language and history. The impulse here was to plant feudalism firmly in Asian soil. Yet the activity of analyzing Asian feudalism (Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese, whatever) also involved an act of discovery, not simply translation. Feudalism was already "there" to be found, excavated, and inserted into contemporary language via ancient words. It is such an activity and act of discovery that I want to discuss here by means of Thai material.

Metaphor and Proper Meaning

Since the late 1940s the Thai term for feudalism, *sakdina*, has come to be used in radical discourse to characterize past society and its present-day remnants, a radical discourse in which the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the urban intelligentsia participates. A particularly interesting example of a non-communist

radical treatise appeared in 1982, the year of the Bangkok bicentennial celebrations, entitled *Nine Reigns of the Chakkri Dynasty*. In its arrangement of events in regnal sequence from 1782 to the present-day (the incumbent monarch is the ninth in the line), the format of this history was patterned after "proper" history, but in fact this book is a counter-history, and counter to the brouhaha over Chakkri accomplishments celebrated during 1982.

The proper format is filled with refutations of Chakkri claims and achievements, and it candidly discusses one of the tabooed subjects of modern Thai history, the 1946 regicide of the eighth king. This counter-history, which provoked the political police to arrest some people presumed to be involved in its publication on charges of lese-majesty, begins: "Thailand was ruled by the śaktina system for many centuries. The śaktina lord ruled the land, establishing himself as the owner of all land, though he himself had expended no labor to clear it."⁶ This mention of śaktina did not itself provoke the arrests, but I raise the example to illustrate how the term śaktina now belongs to a discourse aimed at subverting the proper meanings of such legitimizing institutions as the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood.

The front cover bears a stamp declaring the work to be approved for the study of Thai history by the Fine Arts Department's Division of Archaeology in the National Library (no such division exists), and printed on the inside back cover is what appears to be the official logo of the Bangkok bicentennial year. These signs undo the fixed, legitimate, proper meanings of absolute authority by stating that one thing (the irreverent, scandal-ridden history that follows) is something quite different (an officially-approved text). As metaphors, these signs make an improper analogy and imply the possibility of transformation and change, questioning the absoluteness of legitimate authority and proper meaning and thus of law. In Michael Ryan's words, "Metaphors lead astray Metaphors arouse passion by inciting feelings that may not be compatible with a political institution whose laws require a rational acceptance of unequivocal definitions of words."⁷ There is a direct connection between the unsanctioned transfer of meaning and resistance to sovereign authority, and Ryan goes on to show how metaphor - "characterized by transformation, alteration, relationality, displacement, substitution, errancy, equivocation, plurality, impropriety, or nonownership" - and sedition are interrelated.

Improper meaning is a material force, says Ryan. Writers such as novelists, poets, and essayists are often in trouble with authoritarian governments because they play with the proper meanings: what is seditious is the meanings that writers construe in their figurations of the world. In the following discussion of why there should be contention over the proper meanings of śaktina I will trace the activity of translating European feudalism as Thai śaktina, particularly in a 1957 text. After 1958 there was a distinct

reaction against the *śaktina* = feudalism equation, a reaction which signalled a conflict about the nature of political authority. In my reading of the evidence, this reaction constituted a "war of interpretations" - not an academic debate, but a political war whose stakes were the terms in which reality was to be defined and indeed constructed.⁸

History of the Term Saktina

The Thai term for feudalism, *śaktina*, has been used commonly in Thai historical studies for the past ten years. But it is also found in the speech of educated people, not necessarily radical or anti-royalist. Convincing myself that I was engaging in harmless sociological observation, I eavesdropped on a conversation in Bangkok's Erawan Hotel Cafe in early 1982 and listened to a banker and his client discuss "the *śaktina* manner" of another person, a woman not present, who evidently had a haughty, aristocratic air. The semantic range in spoken and written Thai includes: old-fashioned ideas and reactionary thinking; archaic institutions that linger on (the monarchy, the Buddhist monkhood); the perquisites and corruptions of clientship; corruption in the bureaucracy. If technological backwardness and landlordism are added to this list with the necessary changes being made the terms for feudalism in other Asian languages share a similar semantic range.

For uneducated, low-income Thai speakers *śaktina* might indicate a sense of class difference: they (the *śaktina* with wealth, power, rank) vs. us (poor, powerless, low status). The derogatory, pejorative connotation is no more than thirty or forty years old; indeed, the term used to have auspicious connotations. A young Thai historian, born in 1954, whose father named him *Saktina* out of the best of intentions, told me ruefully that he is probably the last person in Thailand so named. He is the butt of much teasing from his university friends who have grown up with the ironic usages of the term in their speech.

Saktina rama, a witty novel published in 1980 by a doctor at Bangkok's Ramathibodi Hospital, pokes fun at the favoritism and status-climbing of staff and patients.⁹ Even the name of the hospital in the novel, Ramathipatai (combining Rama with the term "sovereign" that occurs in the Thai word for democracy), is word-play, tweaking the social pretensions of the novels' characters. An anesthetist sees his noble rank raised after he assists in the successful treatment of one of the royal white elephants, an auspicious beast which itself holds noble rank. If the anesthetist had demonstrated similar skills in healing a pauper there would be no cause for celebration. Part of the joke here is that the monarch's power to confer noble ranks was abolished in the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy. In the novel the referents of *śaktina* / feudal are not only royal approval and prerogative but also the injustices and inequalities that derive from class differences.

In academic discourse today *śaktina* refers to a social formation, the *śaktina* system: the political, economic, social, and cultural order that characterized Thai society for some five hundred years. By no means do all historians and social scientists use "the *śaktina* system" to signify past Thai society. Some emphasize patron-client relations, the *corvée* system, and monarchy, and reserve *śaktina* for its ancient, technical meaning: rank quantified in terms of land or labor. But for historians who do use *śaktina* it is part of a discourse about Thai society, past and present, a discourse that stands in critical relation to the present order and may even aim to displace it, particularly such *śaktina* remnants as the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood.

The modern meanings for *śaktina*, as outlined above, arise out of an Old Thai term, *sakdina*, found in the Thai civil and administrative code of the fifteenth century. There the term refers to positions in a socio-political hierarchy underpinned by economic relations. The positions were differentiated by amounts of land allocated, e.g., from 100,000 units for the highest-ranking prince, to 10,000 units for a noble, and down to 25 units for a commoner and 5 for a slave. The Old Thai term is a Sanskrit-Thai hybrid: Skt. *sakti* (power, the power of the god) bound to Thai *na* (ricefield). In the twentieth century there has been an ongoing debate about whether the units refer to actual plots, rather like fiefs, or whether they refer to units of manpower (e.g., one unit = one person), with some historians arguing that the social system evolved from one in which power was quantified in terms of land to one in which power was quantified in terms of people. Although the two terms are written and pronounced the same in Thai language, in English I transcribe the Old Thai term as *sakdina* and the Modern Thai term as *śaktina* to distinguish them and to emphasize the new meanings created in the past thirty or forty years.

There is no evidence to my knowledge that the social system of pre-modern Siam was called the feudal / *śaktina* system until the twentieth century, and in its earliest appearances, in 1935, for example, the trope was simply a loanword (*fiwdalit*), glossed something like "a system of dispersed centers of power."¹⁰ The objectification of past society as *śaktina* society or the *śaktina* system would seem to be a post-World War II development. As late as 1942-43, the Thai word proposed for feudal was a Sanskrit neologism, *phakdina*, and the author mulling over the problem of equivalent terms concluded that "we have never had feudalism as the Europeans understand it, so we do not have an exact word for it."¹¹ The sentence might well be reversed: "Since we do not have a word for it, we have never experienced feudalism."

There is some evidence that the term *śaktina* with its modern, ironic meaning was spoken in leftist circles before the end of World War II. One of the early union organizers has left a vivid account of a conversation at lunch in the publishing house where he worked. Kulap Saipradit, a prominent socialist author of the

time, leaned over the table and called Prince Sakon, the "Red Prince" in the royal family, a *śaktina*, and the prince took the opportunity to explain the term as a graded register of rights to exploit.¹² Such exploitation as existed in the mid-1940s, the Red Prince argued, derived directly from the rights to exploit exercised by the *śaktina* of old.

In the decade or so following World War II the Old Thai term *sakdina* became fixed as a translation for European "feudal". *Mahachon*, the newspaper of the (CPT), contributed to the semantic shift by translating "feudalism" in the Marxist-Leninist corpus as "*śaktina*;" its articles in 1947-48 sought to educate Thai readers about Marxist social formations. In 1950, in a work which remained the centerpiece of CPT theory until the 1970s, Thailand's social formation was labelled "semicolonial, semifeudal" along the lines of Mao's "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party" of 1939.¹³

But interest in Marxism - and the *śaktina* and semi-*śaktina* social formations - among Thai intellectuals in the post-war period cannot be tied only to CPT proselytizing. The 1947-58 decade was the first real heyday of Marxist study and writing, encouraged by the *relatively* open forums for thought and debate allowed by the political circumstances. The progressives of the time wanted to undermine the periodization of the Thai past according to conventional historiography, and they used the Marxist unilinear sequence of social formations - primitive commune, slave society, feudal / *śaktina* society, capitalism, socialism - to do so.¹⁴

At this stage Thai intellectuals interested in analyzing the political economy of their society did not have Marx's long-unpublished *Grundrisse* available to them, and they knew nothing of the Asiatic mode of production. Asian society had to fit into a feudal or a semifeudal category. The analysis of social formations that first emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s adhered to a rigidly unilinear schema that had its origins in prevailing Sino-Soviet theory. In the Soviet Union the Asiatic mode had been written out of the Marxian sequence following a vigorous debate in the late 1920s and early 1930s as Stalinist historiography took hold. Whereas Thai political economists in recent years have begun to free themselves from a theoretical strait jacket, the post-war writers labored under an orthodoxy made all the more imposing by the fact that China had not yet distanced itself from the Russian revolutionary model; the Sino-Soviet dispute was to begin only toward the end of the 1950s.¹⁵

The Real Face of Thai Saktina / Feudalism Today

However common the unilinear sequence of social formations may be in a certain body of Thai writing after World War II, the formations were rather like shells as yet unfilled with Thai content. As if to take the incompleteness of the earlier analyses as a challenge, Jit Poumisak wrote *The Real Face of Thai Saktina Today* in 1957, toward the very end of the open post-war period.¹⁶

In the reprintings of this work since 1973, 'Today', which gave the work a contemporary thrust, was dropped from the title, presumably so that the work would not seem outdated. What remains today are "śaktina remnants" in consciousness: the monarchy and the Buddhist religion deemed essential to Thai identity and indispensable to proper government.

Since the mid-1970s, Thai political economists have gone far beyond Jit's analysis in their investigations of Thailand's social formations, but the 1957 work is still powerful because of the way it configures śaktina in consciousness. More than any other text of the period, it created new meanings for Old Thai *sakdina*, and the activity of creating these meanings is visible in language. The text demonstrates how and why the term comes to mean "backward agrarian order", "authoritarian rule", and "exploitative relations of production", transforming the Old Thai term into a trope. By a process of substitution and displacement Old Thai *sakdina* becomes Modern Thai śaktina. Moreover, this improper transfer of meaning had seditious implications. The text was unavailable and unread from 1958 until 1973, it was banned by government decree in 1977, and its author was a political prisoner from 1958 until 1964.

Early in the text the following definition is given for śaktina:

"Saktina" literally means "power in controlling the fields", and if we expand on this meaning to clarify the term we can say that śaktina means "power over the land which was the crucial factor in agriculture, and agriculture in that age was the principal livelihood of the People". By explaining the term in this way we are able to see roughly that the śaktina system was a system bound up with "land".

This definition occurs in the first third of the work, the section that sets out the universal evolutionary schema, the structure of the social order, and the socio-economic transformations that propel society forward. In this early section the term does not mean graded ranks (*sakdina*) in the hierarchy. It means power. Jit's words for power here are *amnat* or *kamlang*, i.e., physical strength, the power to command, a pushing-shoving kind of power that lies behind the light, heat, ceremony, ornate clothing, and Sanskrit mumbo-jumbo of royal rituals.

The text anchors the term in ancient texts and simultaneously shakes it loose from its moorings in them. A number of devices accomplish this liberation of the term, such as assertion of a backward agrarian order and the naming of this order the śaktina system, a social system that rests on landed power. The śaktina is a class of Land-Lords (*chaothidin*), lords of the land who wielded political, juridical, and cultural power and did not simply collect rents. The text juxtaposes features of this backward agrarian order against categories in the Marxian lexicon which are given in English, in roman typeface. These features are thus "hooked" onto Marxian correspondences, wrenching *sakdina* away from

its Old Thai moorings.

The text subverts the Thai language by refusing to use royal language that standard Thai (proper discourse) prescribes for the ruler and his immediate family. The requirement to use royal language with the names of kings is avoided by using shorthand forms and by using such generic terms as *kshatriya* or committee chairman. Proper royal language isolates the ruler and consigns him to the category of which there is (almost) only one: himself. The ruler is not to be touched by ordinary language and is thereby made pure and sacred. By refusing to use royal language, Jit's text defies these linguistic conventions and recasts "king" as the "committee chairman" who safeguards the profits of the *śaktina* class.

The text mocks the behavior and habits of the *śaktina* class and attributes to this idle class the motivation not to create beauty or enhance culture but to satisfy its appetites self-indulgently. In proper discourse during modern times the appetites of Thai rulers for power, wealth, sex, or sensual pleasure should be modulated and suppressed in discourse. Here they are brought to the surface and exposed.

Finally - and this device is particularly important in the remaking of Old Thai *śaktina* - the *śaktina* system is hooked onto European FEUDALISM. The Old Thai term is taken from its ancient context and *identified with* European feudalism by pairing: "The *śaktina* system (FEUDAL SYSTEM) was the system of production in society that succeeded the *that* system (SLAVE SYSTEM)". On the face of it, such an identification of Thai society and European or ancient or South American societies is preposterous. Yet it is by insisting throughout on a foreign signified that the text seeks to make *śaktina* identical to FEUDAL and attaches the evolution of Thai society to a sequence of social formations that transcends the individualized experience of any one society. The foreign signifiers paired with *śaktina* make *śaktina* an essential stage in the evolution of human society, not just Thai society.

The Thai terms and examples hook onto the foreign term FEUDAL and pull it into the language; simultaneously, the foreign term clasps the Thai term and pulls it away from its Old Thai moorings. This capacity of the foreign term to pull *śaktina* to itself is exemplified in the following statement: "Here is the origin of the word FEUDALISM, the term for the English *śaktina* system, or FEUDALISME [sic] in French". Note that this is the reverse of "*śaktina* is the term for the Thai feudal system", which is what we might expect. Here Europe is made "the other". The way Jit's sentence represents the issue, only language makes *śaktina* and FEUDALISM different. Yet far from eliding the differences between the two signs, the typography actually heightens the alienation inherent in the pairing of them.

The stuff of cultural borrowing is labelling, naming, and renaming, but appearances to the contrary, this labelling does

not create semantic identity. Although such pairs as *śaktina* / feudalism are used interchangeably in the text to give the impression of identity, the real relationship between *śaktina* and feudal is one of metaphor rather than one of identity. With Thai signifieds constantly intruding and driving a wedge between the Thai term and the European term, a space is created for metaphor to play in and beget more metaphor.

By means of this metaphoric play *śaktina* springs free of its moorings in the ancient texts and is set in motion, acquiring a kind of motility. Yet because the phonological container is the same for *sakdina* and *śaktina*, the new meanings created are rooted deep in Thai history. And Old Thai *sakdina* now becomes but an element, one of many manifestations, of Modern Thai *śaktina*, the backward agrarian order vestiges of which persist to the present day. In other words, the text takes the supernatural stuff out of *sakti* and realizes the term's (real) economic content.

Jit Pouisak's 1957 text did not itself create the new sign *śaktina*; any number of previous writers referred to *śaktina* society. What I claim for this text is that the mechanics of creating the new sign, if I may put it that way, are observable: the "play" with the term, the toying with the rules of Thai grammar and proper discourse, are visible. The high language appropriate to sacral kingship is subverted by folksy idioms and ironic asides. The substitutions and displacements as well as the mocking sarcastic wit all serve to push aside proper discourse.

The metaphoric use of *śaktina* marks an epistemological break and a change in the semantic code. To explore these matters is beyond the scope of this brief paper, and I will just say here that Jit and his confrères were constructing a new sociology, a new classificatory knowledge against the sociology upheld by such people as Luang Wichit Watthakan (1898-1962), for many years director-general of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand and a prolific essayist and historian. Wichit was instrumental in explaining the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy. He assigned the proper meanings to 1932 that are with us today by braiding together the plot of *dynasty* and the plot of *nation-state*.¹⁷ Jit's *The Real Face* is a rewriting of the works of Luang Wichit and others in terms of a different epistemology, a different sociology, and a restructured historiography.

Jit's attack on proper meanings by means of metaphoric play had internationalist and political meanings that were seditious. It is through the assertion of proper meaning that absolute authority exerts itself, and the assertion of improper meanings in such texts as Jit's entered into the *raison d'être* of the 1958 coup of Field Marshal Sarit Thannarat. Improper meaning - the displacement of proper meaning - is a material force, as Ryan says, and it was met by material force: incarceration. Jit Pouisak and other writers who had toyed with the proper meanings and asserted an alternative sociology were jailed, and the pluralism of the

1950s came to an end.

A Different Historiographic Paradigm Comes to Dominate

The publication of *The Real Face* in 1957 came at the end of a period in post-war history that I described earlier as open in relation to the period that followed. The American alliance that was building throughout the 1950s (American technical and economic aid began in 1950; the SEATO pact was signed in 1954) was inevitable only by hindsight; the Phibun governments of 1947-58 played both sides of the street, and Thai delegations of students and writers travelled to Russia and China as late as the end of the 1950s.¹⁸ Through the writings of Jit Poumisak and others in the literary-journalist world, an articulate element of the Thai intelligentsia was trying to forge an internationalism inspired by the Russian and Chinese revolutions, especially by the Chinese communist victory in 1949. The way that *śaktina* operates in Jit's text - the way that *śaktina* hooks onto FEUDAL - is a sign of these internationalist ambitions. Thus I relate the *śaktina* = feudal equation to a movement, an ideology, and a cast of mind that had liberating and utopian aspirations.

When Sarit took power in 1958 he imposed a monolithic hold on the military and the bureaucracy and propounded a political philosophy emphasizing indigenous values and institutions at the expense of foreign models and ideologies.¹⁹ A paradigm congruent with Sarit's political philosophy came to dominate Thai studies, a paradigm which drew a sharp distinction between European feudalism and precapitalist, premodern Thai society. Emphasizing the control of manpower rather than land as the basis of political power, the paradigm saw patron-client relations rather than class as the determining factor in Thai social relations. Thailand was unique, so the argument went, and an historicist theory of development was not applicable to Thai society.

There are several key texts that exemplify this new paradigm in Thai studies. Of particular interest in relation to Jit's 1957 work is Khukrit Pramote's *Farang śaktina*, which appeared serially in late 1957 and early 1958.²⁰ This text mocked the characterization of Thai society as *śaktina*. The preface stated:

I have titled this book *Farang śaktina* for the sake of having a convenient expression, not because the meaning of *farang fīwdalit* (European feudalism) and Thai *śaktina* is the same, or because they are the same phenomenon. They are comparable only insofar as they occur at the same time. The Thai social system in ancient times was Thai, the ancient European social system was European. They had no connection with each other whatsoever.

It is difficult to read these sentences without seeing Jit and the others behind every one, although Khukrit never lowers himself to identify his targets on the left. The book is filled with cartoons of knights jousting, coats of arms, and the mediaeval baron receiving

his loyal retainers. The book ostensibly explains the terms that appear in roman typeface: VASSAL, EXCOMMUNICATION, WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR (these familiar to us all) plus a host of obscure terms from heraldry and Vulgar Latin. Written with Khukrit's customary verve and wit, the book obfuscates as much as it explains. What is a Thai reader to do with QUAS VULGAS ELEGERTLES QUUIELS LA COMMUNAUTE DE VOSTRE ROIAUME? Indeed, what is anyone! By consigning European feudalism to the exotic, by caricaturing it, by packing the lot off to Camelot and Hollywood, Khukrit alienated FEUDALISM from *śaktina*. He denied the sign that Jit's text helped to create. In so doing, he also denied that socio-economic processes play a fundamental role in the evolution of human society, and this is why his thought is characteristic of the old sociology. Khukrit is a real *śaktina* intellectual.²¹

Another text that speaks to Jit's analysis but keeps Jit offstage is Khachorn Sukkhanij's *The Status of Phrai*, the first edition of which appeared in December 1959 just after the Sarit period began. This text argued that manpower, not land, lay at the base of Thai political power. There are passages in this text that seem to be explicit refutations of Jit's thesis; and Khachorn appends a note of his historian's "proof" of the proper meaning of Old Thai *sakdina*.²² He puts Old Thai *sakdina* back where it belongs, so to speak, in the Old Thai law code, with the meaning of ranks graded and quantified according to putative land allocations. He too denies the new sign *śaktina*.

The most important analysis in English of Thai society, Akin Rabibhadana's *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period* (1969), also dates from the period after the 1958 Sarit coup. The period delineated by the title notwithstanding, Akin's representation of Thai society has been taken to cover the fourteenth through the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Akin assumed that premodern mainland Southeast Asian states were underpopulated, an assumption that is explicit but never really tested in his exposition. This demographic assumption had two significant implications for the nature of rule in premodern Thai society: 1) as there was an abundance of land and a shortage of population, the key to the ruler's power was his ability, by means of compulsion or incentives, to acquire manpower; power was manpower; 2) The shortage of manpower was a deterrence against tyranny, for any oppressed subject could always flee an unjust ruler, resettle on the unclaimed land that lay about in abundance, and start a new life.

Akin's understanding of Thai social organization may be traced to both Western and Thai antecedents. On the one hand was the social and cultural anthropology he studied at Cornell University where he did his Master's degree in the mid-1960s. His structuralist-functionalist and systems-maintenance model, never made explicit in the study itself, owes much to a course he took on African studies, where he found an emphasis on labor,

patron-client ties, and segmentary kinship, and a debate among African scholars on the importance of land vs. people.²³ On the other hand, the Thai text at the core of Akin's work is Khachorn's study which Akin rewrites and extends. Akin, too, denies the new sign *śaktina* and seeks to restore its proper meaning: "The *sakdina* (dignity marks) system was a device which served as the most accurate guide to the different statuses of the whole population".²⁴ In this assertion of the proper meaning of *sakdina* Akin follows Khachorn and Khukrit. The dominant Thai historiography converged with American anthropology in Akin's analysis of premodern Thai society. His paradigm is congruent with the historiographic mode of the Sarit era that had come to dominate Thai studies after 1958.

The very categories - religion, the state, law, custom, kin relations, values, norms - that fill Akin's analysis as explanations for this patron-client system "enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in precapitalist social formations".²⁵ These are the extra-economic sanctions by which the mode of production operates. Yet in Akin's analysis, these sanctions, which he has described in persuasive detail, remain unconnected to the productive base. What is missing in the study is the link between these sanctions and how the economy worked. Akin ignored the very thing Jit had focused on: labor-power and the means of production, especially land. It is possible to read Akin's entire study without realizing that the majority of Thailand's population in premodern times was a rice-cultivating peasantry.

In its neglect of economic matters Akin's study comes close to what one writer has termed "the religious-structural" approach to the economy.²⁶ Scholars who adopt this approach do not pay attention in their studies to the economic aspects of society, because when the Thai monarch ruled virtuously, there would be a natural and smooth flow of resources from clients to patrons. Clients would willingly cooperate in bringing their society closer to the ideal Buddhist state. In such a picture peasants are never disgruntled at the economic exactions made of them, and while Akin's study allowed for conflict and client discontent at corvée demands, the conflict was not economic. He stresses that the relationship between client and patron was voluntary, "dyadic and contractual".²⁷ In contrast to Jit and other writers of the 1947-58 decade, Akin as well as Khukrit and Khachorn deemphasize economics and highlight norms, values, and individual choice as checks on tyranny by the patron.

Furthermore, what underlines the differences between Jit et al. and Akin, Khukrit and Khachorn after 1958 is a debate over the nature of political authority. For Jit, royal absolutism, the political system of the feudal / *śaktina* period, was exploitative and created class antagonisms. For the latter writers, royal absolutism in premodern times made "the system" work. But I believe this post-1958 paradigm must be seen in relation to the way Sarit's military regime revived the monarchy from the low

prestige that had been its fate since the 1932 coup. Sarit changed the monarchy in Thai politics from a passive object to the active subject that prevails today. The paradigm of a unique Thai social system with a monarch as head of state served to underpin the adjustments that were being made to the way the military legitimated its dominance.

In their writings, Khukrit, Khachorn, and Akin denied the new sign by denying the metaphoric relationship between *śaktina* and feudal. The terms could no longer stand for one another. As we saw, Khukrit stated that the terms were unrelated, though they were synchronous (they lay alongside each other in time), and he asserted the differences between *śaktina* and feudal over and against similarities and identity. He sought to deny the new sign and restore the proper meaning of Old Thai *sakdina* as a quantified, graded hierarchy of ranks. Modern Thai *śaktina* lost its motility and was stripped of its meanings, and the metaphoric possibilities of Old Thai *sakdina* were declared illegitimate. In Ryan's language, they constituted an unsanctioned transfer of meaning.

The Return of Saktina

In the explosion of Thai-language historical studies touched off by the dramatic and sometimes violent events of 1973-76, Modern Thai *śaktina* returned as a configuration for premodern Thai society.²⁸ After fourteen years of oblivion as a censored book, Jit's text was rediscovered along with the earlier studies of Thai political economy and social realist literature dating from the 1950s. Students and lecturers who read *The Real Face of Thai Saktina Today* for the first time in that three-year period found in it a discourse on past society that gave voice to the political consciousness awakened by the mass protests of October 1973. The naming of premodern society as *śaktina* was and is a way of leaving that society behind, of objectifying it and distancing it from present consciousness.

Today, *śaktina* is a term used by academics as well as political dissidents. With a more sophisticated understanding of Marxism, knowledge of the Asiatic mode of production, and availability of *Grundrisse*, Thai scholars are trying to determine the special Thai characteristics of *śaktina* which some writers now refer to as the Asiatic mode of production. Thus the dilemma of Jit's analysis - *śaktina* is the same as feudal but something Thai makes it different - continues today in Thai socioanalysis that seeks to define the country's social formations. How is it possible to describe Thai social formations (past, present, future) in such a way that the Thai particulars are individualised and interact within a scheme of universal evolutionary change? In their endeavors, Thai university economists find themselves at odds with the CPT which for years insisted on a Macist semicolonial, semifeudal formation. Yet the debate about the real nature of Thai social formations is a shared one: academics, urban thinkers,

returnees from the jungle, and revolutionaries still in the jungle all participate in this debate.

Faced with the return after October 1973 of *śaktina* as a trope for premodern society, some writers have continued to insist on the non-equivalence of *śaktina* and feudal, very much in the mode of Khachorn, Khukrit, and Akin. Writing in 1975, a prominent novelist and essayist reacted against the new political consciousness by arguing for the proper definition of *śaktina*: status as reflected in certain rights and duties. And she emphatically resisted the characterization of modern society after 1932 as partially *śaktina* or containing *śaktina* elements. These had all been eliminated by legislation, she argued.²⁹ This writer's defense of the proper meaning of *śaktina* / *sakdina* was aroused by the attacks of students and young lecturers on classical Thai literature. It was, they said, *śaktina* literature.

An even more striking example of how the debate over *śaktina* = feudal continues to be polarized may be found in a thesis submitted to the Thai Army College in 1980, "*Saktina*" and *Subversion by the Opposing Side*, by Colonel Sihadet Bunnag. The author argues that the *śaktina* system has long since faded away, but "the opposing side" (i.e., the CPT) uses the *śaktina* characterization to attack Thailand's legitimizing institutions: "Saktina retains great significance for the opposing side. The attack on *śaktina* has an impact on our highest institutions and the work of the contemporary state".³⁰ The military officer is concerned about the use of *śaktina* in the speech of students and in the lyrics of popular songs which find their way into the heads of today's youth and give them distorted ideas about the history of their forefathers.³¹ He finds that the new sign, *śaktina* = feudal, is predominantly Marxist-Leninist and is propagated by the CPT, and his thesis is an argument against this new sign. He insists on the proper meaning of *sakdina*, and he refers with approval to Khachorn and Khukrit and the "rights and duties" interpretation of the Old Thai term while rejecting the emphasis in Jit's text on land as the basis of *śaktina* power.³² As in the case of *Nine Reigns of the Chakkri Dynasty*, the link between *śaktina* - the transformation of Old Thai *sakdina* - and sedition is direct. *Saktina* is improper transfer of meaning. It is metaphor. The military author wants to take steps to minimize the usage of improper transfer of meaning which he deems to be a threat to the state's well-being.

Conclusion

There are scarcely any Western historians who find feudal or feudalism a useful category for analyzing Thai society.³³ Yet Thai scholars have turned increasingly to the term to characterize the premodern social formation. Over the past ten years Thai thinkers - inside the universities and outside, in the world of journalism, and in the resistance movement in the jungle - have

debated the *śaktina* = feudal equation and the particularistic Thai elements that are manifested in "Thai feudalism".³⁴ In Thai language feudal along with such terms as semicolonial, semicolonial capitalist, dependent capitalist, and so forth, are crucial coordinates on a grid of contrasting positions. They stand in dialectical relation to one another.

I began this essay by asking what notice should be taken of this debate. In order to answer this question I sketched the history of *śaktina* = feudal in the post-World War II period, tracing Modern Thai *śaktina* back to Old Thai *sakdina* and arguing that while the new sign *śaktina* depends on the Old Thai term, it also represents a liberation and transformation of the ancient term. The 1958 coup of Field Marshal Sarit marks a sharp break in Thai consciousness as signalled by reactions after 1958 to the assertion of *śaktina* = feudal by Thai radical thinkers before 1958. Such thinkers after 1958 as Khukrit, Khachorn, and Akin rejected the feudal characterization of Thai society and proposed that *śaktina* and feudalism were unrelated. This position belonged to a historiography shaped by a monolithic, authoritarian regime that brought the Thai monarchy back to politics and asserted the uniqueness of Thai society. And the uniqueness paradigm served as a foil against the internationalist aspirations of the progressive thinkers between 1947-58.

In the Thai case, among the signifieds in the "vernacular term = feudal" sign are the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood which today are regarded as *śaktina* remnants. The debate about *śaktina* = feudal at some point touches these legitimizing institutions, as the thesis presented to the Thai Army College makes clear. In a state whose legitimacy continues to derive from the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood the *śaktina* = feudal sign can, under certain circumstances, be deemed a danger. The different positions that people take over the proper meaning of *śaktina* / *sakdina* issue from strong feelings about the nature of legitimate authority. No one has ever been arrested for writing or speaking about *śaktina*, but the term exists in a discourse that has subversive and seditious intent. The metaphor has material force.

NOTES

1. For a recent discussion see David L. Davis, "Hokensei and Feudalism" in A.R. Davis and A.D. Stefanowska, eds., *Austrina, Essays in Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Founding of the Oriental Society of Australia* (Sydney, Oriental Society of Australia, 1982), pp. 383-400.
2. To the immensely varied political order that was medieval South India, says Burton Stein, "the terms 'centralized', or 'bureaucratized', or 'feudal' are widely and inappropriately applied". See his "The Segmentary State in South Indian History" in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1977), p.5.

3. Bernard S. Cohn, "African Models and Indian Histories" in *ibid.*, pp. 105-109.
4. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism, 300-1200* (Calcutta 1965); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
5. For Malaysia see Chandra Muzaffar, *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society* (Pinang: Aliran, 1979), chap. 1.
6. Raktham Rakthai [pseud.], *Kao ratchakan haeng ratchawong chakkri [Reigns of the Chakkri Dynasty]* (n.p., n.d.), p. 7.
7. Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction, A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 4.
8. The phrasing is Ryan's, p. 49.
9. Nai Phaet Phunphit Amatyakul, *Saktina rama* (Bangkok: Bannakit, 1980).
10. Nakkharin Mektrairat, "Kanplianplaeng kanpokkhong 2475 khong sayam: phromdaen haeng khwamru [Siam's Change of Government in 1921: The State of Knowledge]", *Warasan thammasat*, XI, 2 (June 1982), p. 24.
11. Prince Wanwaithayakon Worawan, *Chumnum phraniphon [Collected Writings]* (Bangkok: Thammachedi, 1951), pp. 129-130.
12. Interview with Rawi Buranachai in *Sangkhomsat* (Chiangmai University), VI, 1 (Apr.-Sept. 1982), pp. 225-26.
13. Udom Sisuwan [Aran Phrommachomphu, pseud.], *Senthang sangkhomthai [The Path of Thai Society]* (Bangkok: Akson, 1979). Reprint of *Thai kungmuangkhun [Thailand, a Semicolony]* (Bangkok: Mahachon, 1950).]
14. Craig J. Reynolds and Hong Lysa, "Marxism in Thai Historical Studies", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLIII, 1 (Nov. 1983), pp. 80-81.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
16. Jit Poumisak [Somsamai Srisudravarna, pseud.], "Chomna khong saktina thai nai patchuban [The Real Face of Thai Saktina Today]" in *Nitisat 2500 chabap rap sattawatmai [The Faculty of Law Yearbook of 2500 to Greet the New Century]* (Bangkok: Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 1957), pp. 356-491. Reprinted many times, most recently in 1979 by Saeng-ngoen Press.
17. Craig J. Reynolds, "The Plot of Thai History", unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies, Bangkok, 22-24 August 1984.
18. Reynolds and Hong, p. 78.
19. Thak Chaloeattiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand and Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, 1979), pp. 152-71).
20. Khukrit Pramote, *Farang saktina [European Saktina]* (Bangkok:

- Kaona, 1961).
21. On the heels of his satiric treatment of śaktina Khukrit wrote at least two "scientific" or "rationalist" refutations of the new sign: "Rabop śaktina nai prathetthai [The Śaktina System in Thailand]" in his *Khvamru khu prathip chut kao [Knowledge is Illumination of the Past]* (Bangkok: 1964), pp. 4-39; and "Sangkhom ayutthaya [Ayutthaya Society]", a lecture he gave in 1957, printed in Khukrit Pramote et al., *Prawattisat lae kanmuang nangsu anprakop wichaphunthan arayathamthai [History and Politics: A Reader on the Fundamentals of Thai Civilization]* (Eangkok: Thammasat University, 1975), pp. 45-67.
 22. Khachorn Sukkhanij, "Thanandon phrai [The Status of Phrai]" in Khukrit Pramote et al., op. cit., pp. 115-20. Note the subtitle of the university text in which Khukrit and Khachorn (but not Jit) were published: A Reader on the Fundamentals of Thai Civilization. In other words, how past Thai society really worked.
 23. Conversation with Akin Rabibhadana, Bangkok, 27 January 1984.
 24. Akin Rabibhadana, *The Social Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873* (Ithaca: Cornell University, Department of Asian Studies, 1969), p. 98. Southeast Asia Program Data Paper No. 74.
 25. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974), p. 403.
 26. Hong Lysa, "The Evolution of the Thai Economy in the Early Bangkok Period and its Historiography" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sydney, 1981), pp. 10, 11, 17.
 27. Akin, p. 89.
 28. Reynolds and Hong, pp. 86-90.
 29. Binlua Thepphayasuwan, "Śaktina kap khwammai khong kham nai phasathai [Śaktina and the Meaning of the Word in Thai]" in her *Chumgthan phasathai [Thai Language at the Crossroads]* (Bangkok: Krungthep, 1975), pp. 19-24.
 30. Phan-ek Sihadet Bunnag, "'Śaktina' kap kanbonthamlai khong fai trongkham ['Śaktina' and Subversion by the Opposing Side]" (Thesis, Army College, 1980, p. iii.
 31. Ibid., pp. 56-57.
 32. Ibid., pp. 37-38. In view of the polarization and oppositions reflected in the debate over śaktina = feudal, it is of interest that Sihadet Bunnag was instrumental in the 1953 incident that led to Jit Poumisak's suspension from university; see Reynolds and Hong, p. 83.
 33. An exception is Georges Condominas who uses feudal in studying early Thai state formations; see his "A Few Remarks about Thai Political Systems" in F.B. Milner, ed., *Natural Symbols in South East Asia* (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), p. 111.
 34. For additional discussion of śaktina as a problematic in Thai

historiography see the report of a Bangkok seminar I gave in January 1982, "Banha khamwa sakdina: sakdina farang or fewdalit thai [Problems with the Term Saktina: European Saktina or Thai Feudalism]", *Loknangsu*, V, 7 (Apr. 1982), pp. 10-14.

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