

Anna and the king: digesting difference

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between food and national identity in ancient Siam and modern Thailand, as represented in the texts and films linked to Anna Leonowens, particularly *Anna and the King* and *The King and I*. While the fictional romantic relationship between the Indo-British governess and King Mongkut (Rama IV) has been critically analysed, little attention has been paid to the state banquet organized by the king. In 1860s Siam, state banquets provided an opportunity to demonstrate the civilized status of the Siamese monarch, and hence the kingdom. Developing and building on the concepts of political commensality and culinary colonialism, the paper explores the importance of demonstrating civility through food.

Keywords: state banquets; colonialism; nutritional anthropology; Western film performance; Siam

Many readers have no doubt seen one or more of the films, *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946), *The King and I* (1956) and *Anna and the King* (1999), and it is equally likely that many readers have eaten some variety of Thai food. This paper draws these two experiences together by discussing the state banquet depicted in the texts and films related to Anna Leonowens's diaries of her years in Bangkok (1862–67). To do this, I will look briefly at 1850s and 60s Siam during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r 1851–68), and then examine the textual and film representations of that historical period in twentieth century Thailand. History and its representations – we choose our fictions.

For Westerners who have never visited Thailand, their image of the country may well come from seeing *The King and I* on stage or screen. The plays and films are roughly based on Margaret Landon's book, *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944), which was based on Anna

Leonowens's 'fictional' autobiographies recounting her experiences as governess in King Mongkut's court (*The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, 1870; *Siamese Harem Life*, 1873).

Landon's text became image in the 1946 film, *Anna and the King of Siam*, starring Rex Harrison and Irene Dunn. In 1951, Rodgers and Hammerstein recreated the splendid wicked oriental court in the form of a Broadway musical play, *The King and I*, using the screenplay from the 1946 movie. The 1956 musical film of the Broadway play version starred Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr. A short-lived TV series and the 'more explicitly feminist' Broadway revival of the musical followed in 1972. In 1999, a popular cartoon version was produced and moved quickly to video, circulating widely from children's libraries. In the same year, Twentieth Century Fox remade the 1946 version, *Anna and the King* starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun Fat. The texts and the 1946, 1956 and 1999 films are of particular concern to this discussion.

Landon's 1944 text translated very well into stage play and film, and indeed the film, *The King and I*, is much better known than either Anna's or Margaret Landon's books. Unlike books that fail as films, the romantic plot and exotic setting of old Siam were very appealing to North American audiences in their filmic form. Both books and films provide a superficial and alluring story of 'East meets West'. Neither addressed the underlying complexities of Anna's life as a well educated, poor but opinionated widow living in South East Asia, and King Mongkut's very real dilemma of being a God-king threatened by European colonialism, caught between old and new, tradition and science (cf Thongchai Winichakul, 1999).

In this paper, I would like to draw attention to the state banquet held in 1865 depicted in the films and texts, where King Mongkut entertained visiting British diplomats and merchants from Singapore, along with members of Bangkok's expatriate community. However, it is sex and what Donaldson (1992, p 48) calls 'the phallogocentric and ethnocentric motifs of romance' that attract Western viewers to *The King and I*. Advertisements and film clips inevitably include the scene of Anna teaching a clumsy King Mongkut to waltz. It is the sexual tension of this waltz that attracts both the romantic fans of the *King and I* and the 'anti-Anna' sentiment thriving in Thailand, and emerging when new film versions such as the 1999 *Anna and the King* are launched. As discussed below, various versions of texts and films, including the 1956 version, have been officially banned in Thailand. The video recording,

Anna Leonowens: Getting to Know You (1999), includes snippets of Anna-bashing by historians, including references to Anna as a sex-starved widow. This element of romance was a Broadway and Hollywood invention. The theme of romance was deliberately developed by Richard Rodgers, who wrote of the attraction between teacher and king, and the doomed love affair of the King's new Burmese wife for the Broadway musical version of *The King and I* (Morley, 1981, p 187). In fact, her granddaughter felt that Anna, completely lacking in vanity and conceit, would have been scandalized by the representation of Anna in the film, '...dressed up in frills and furbelows. Dancing with old King Mongkut!' (Fyshe, 1962, p 64). But filmic attention continues to focus on the unlikely romance around 1864 between the 60-year-old King Mongkut and the 33-year-old Indo-British governess, the sexualized exotic court, the harem with the wives and concubines of the king, and the king's gift to Anna of the diamond ring from his finger.

This paper argues, however, that it is the banquet and not the dance that deserves closer scrutiny, and explains more about the Thai rejection of the 1999 film. By analysing the banquet and not the romance, I am reinforcing a point made in the 1930s by one of the first nutritional anthropologists, Audrey Richards – that food is more basic to shaping social relations than sex (1932). From the point of view of an anthropological analyst, then – not 'shall we dance?' but 'shall we dine?'

This exoticized, sexualized yet infantilized Siam is the stuff of Hollywood movies and Broadway shows. But in the midst of the romance, between teaching the King's children and the much analysed Siamized performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – lies the state banquet – a short scene in all the films and plays that has totally escaped analysis by both Western and Thai commentators. I suggest that Thailand's banning of the most recent film, the 1999 Twentieth Century Fox remake of the 1946 version of *Anna and the King*, starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun Fat, and the back-projected disdain for the earlier films, have more to do with the dinner than the dance.

In order to provide a richer context for the analysis of the state banquet given by King Mongkut for visiting British dignitaries, as represented in the films, I will first develop and weave together two concepts, culinary colonialism and political commensality, and then return to the representation of the banquet in texts and film. The concluding section argues for the essential significance of the banquet,

and why Anna, given her background, could not have made any significant contribution to the event.

Culinary colonialism

Colonial rule shapes how the past is represented. Thailand's narrative of nation is framed by colonialism – made conspicuous by its absence. As the only South East Asian nation to remain free of direct European control, Thailand approaches representations of its past with an unselfconsciousness lacking in other South East Asian nations. Thailand has had no experience of dismantling colonial states and institutions, and as a nation state, has been interpreted by historians as demonstrating a continuity of social, political, economic and cultural structures uniquely Thai. Thus nationalism must have a different rationale in Thailand, one based on avoiding colonization rather than experiencing it. As a non-colonized but 'informally colonized' nation, Siam benefited from not having to fight old enemies who were now under colonial rule (Burma, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). Their old enemies were too weak to fight and their new enemies, too strong. This allowed Siam to be more selective and open to Western and European influence than its neighbours whose exposure to the West was structured and controlled through colonial institutions. In practical terms, this eased the adoption of things foreign and their redefinition as Siamese or, since 1939 when Siam became Thailand (meaning the 'land of the free'), as Thai.

Recent research on colonialism has used sexuality and race to explore political domination, but neglected food (cf McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995, 2002). Consider how important food must have been as an index of the colonial experience. New processing techniques invented in England provided industrial foods that made long sea voyages possible – tinned biscuits, preserves, canned meats (cf Goody, 1982). Colonial troops and their families would miss the foods of home, but could make do with tea and tinned biscuits as markers of their familiar meal formats. Without full colonial institutions in place in Siam, Europeans brought from Singapore what foods they could ship in, or ate local food. Culinary colonialism operates in more than one direction; today, Thai cuisine has more appeal than British cuisine for dining out in North American restaurants. (The evolution of Thai as the favoured flavour in urban Euro–American restaurants is a topic for another paper.)

Colonial encounters also brought transformed foods of the exotic other to the motherland – ketchup, chutney and curries – while at the same time, the food of the colonized was disparaged and insulted. In an early encounter with foreigners, for example, the Siamese meal format was ridiculed. Gervaise, a Catholic missionary from France, wrote in 1688:

‘... there is no good meat that their stupid cooks do not spoil with the sauce they make. They mix with all their stews a certain paste made of rotten prawns ... which has such a pungent smell that it nauseates anyone not accustomed to it... At banquets the dishes are served higgledy-piggledy and in no particular order, with fruit and rice in vessels of gold, silver and porcelain placed on bandages... They have no napkins or tablecloths and no forks and they only use their spoons, that are shaped very differently from ours...’ (1688[1989], p 88)

Yet the colonial traveller may also return home truly appreciative of the diversity of tastes of the world, and find his own cuisine bland and boring in comparison. A 1911 compilation of meals served at the Cap and Gown Club in Edinburgh for returned colonial administrators (university men) reminded them of the advantages of foreign travel. However, the preface reveals that the colonial administrator is not permanently transformed by eating foreign food: ‘The Scotsman remains a Scotsman, whether he lives on dough nut or damper, on bread-fruit or birds’ nest soup; and he will be a Scotsman still when he is reduced to pure nectar and ambrosia’ (Christie, 1911, p ii).

But this unusual Scottish cookbook reveals a greater appreciation for the Thai meal format than Gervaise:

‘Many different kinds of salads and sweets, besides fish and meats were served. The sauces are a great feature in the cooking these being exceedingly rich and varied. All the dishes are placed on the table at once. No knives are used, only spoons and forks. All fresh fruit are stoned and peeled before being served. It is considered the height of bad manners to put anything on the plate which has been in the mouth. A small dish is placed on the floor at the side of the diner’s chair to receive that which is uneatable.’ (Christie, 1911, p xiii)

While *The King and I* can and has been read as a colonial, orientalist representation of Thailand (Donaldson, 1992; Manderson, 1997), such critiques ignore the paradox of how deeply the Siamese elite assumed the superiority of their own country over others in the region, and even the colonizing countries, yet how completely and easily they absorbed and internalized the presentational style of Victorian England.

Love of country and the assumption of its superiority over others were not new in Siam (nor are they absent in modern Thailand). Marcelo de Ribadeneyra, writing in 1601 (of events in 1582) observed that: 'The Siamese reportedly loved their country loyally and would do anything to prove that Siam was better than any other kingdom or nation' (cited in Cortes, 1984, p 424). Thus the quest for the *siwilai* [civilized] was not simply a reaction to colonial threat, but confirmation of the relative superiority of Siam (Thongchai Winichakul, 2000, p 529). Further, the Siamese were warned by government officials not to *tam kon farang* – literally, 'to follow the Westerners' behinds', or to 'tag along behind Westerners' (Thongchai Winichakul, 1994, p 7). In the words of a Thai scholar and member of the Thai nobility:

'It is not enough to go to a foreign country to acquire specific skills, but that it is more desirable to be able to imbibe that foreign culture in all its aspects so that one can glean out what is good for one's own country.' (Chetana, 1994, p xxxii)

However, the state banquet provided an ideal opportunity to challenge colonial stereotypes. The state banquet brought together Siamese and British officials at a very tense moment. Siam's relations with Britain were already strained following rumours of British invasions of southern Siam in the 1820s and 30s. Conflict between British and Siamese warships over Trengganu on the Malay coast in 1862 heightened the threat of colonial takeover. Moreover, Bangkok had become a major trading port. The number of modern vessels visiting the city increased from 146 in 1850 to 301 in 1862, the year Anna arrived from Singapore. The year after she left Siam (1868), commercial transactions had increased from baht5.6 million in 1850 to 10 million (Roussos, 1994, p 69).

Old Siam and the modern Thai state have expressed concern about how national identity is expressed within the country and represented outside. When individuals from different countries first come into contact with each other, they focus attention on certain cultural

practices or differences as indicators of levels of civilization. Foreigners in Bangkok in the 1800s expressed concerns about Siamese sexual practices, cannibalism, human sacrifice, nakedness and prostration (Turton, 1997, p 180). These rhetorical themes all appear in the Anna films and texts. Anna's entourage feared the Thai were cannibals, and during the banquet scene, King Mongkut's wives expressed a fear that their British guests were cannibals. But these practices are not framed as the outsiders' fears of the unknown, but represented and inscribed in the films as institutional practices defining the Siamese. Thus, prostration and harems become evidence of Siam's uncivilized status and the need for imperial guidance and colonial control. This is the context for the state banquets held in the 1850s and 60s in Bangkok.

When Sir John Bowring negotiated the Bowring Treaty in 1855 between Britain and Siam, reducing trade barriers and granting extra-territoriality rights to British citizens in Siam, food was implicated both in the trade agreement itself, and in the way the negotiators were fed. The Bowring Treaty prohibited the export of rice, fish and salt, the basis of the Siamese diet, during periods of scarcity in the country, a condition added at King Mongkut's insistence (the English Correspondence of HM King Mongkut with Sir John Bowring, 1855–1868, 1994, p 143).

When Bowring came to Bangkok, King Mongkut gave him tea, local preserves, fruit, cigars and sweetmeats covered with banana leaves on his arrival, and provided coconuts, sugar, fowls, pigs, eggs and rice for his crew. On 17 April 1855, Bowring writes of a memorable lunch:

'We found a lunch or tiffin laid out in perfect European taste, though the table was covered with Asiatic fruits and preserves. There were, however, American biscuits, and one dish at least that I tasted evidenced that the cuisine was (as I had heard reported) one of his Majesty's cares and that his cooks, if not Europeans, have at all events received European instructions. Everything was singularly neat and comfortable.' (Bowring, 1977, p 109)

The 'royal gift' of subsistence for Siam's guests included tea, sugar and fruit (and milk for the Americans) (Turton, 1997, p 144). King Mongkut considered provisioning the table for Siam's guests a significant royal gift. When the King sent fruit and money to pay for

provisioning, Bowring wrote to the King, 'Permit me to return these pecuniary gifts. . .' (Bowring, 1994, p 195), probably because he did not want to be indebted to the king during treaty negotiations. He may already have realized that gifts of food create special kinds of debts, as I have argued elsewhere (cf Van Esterik, 1996).

Consider now a related concept: political commensality.

Political commensality

Sharing food is the most basic means of creating and maintaining social relationships. Refusal to share is a clear sign of distance and enmity (Bloch, 1998, p 133). True at the level of individual and household, it is equally true of states. But what does the nation state eat? Moreover, how does the relationship between individual eating and 'eating the nation state' become established? In Thai, to rule is to *kin meuang*, to 'eat the state'.

State banquets are a formal means of establishing relationships between countries. To accept food offered without testing for poison, or insisting on the foods of home, are signs of trust and openness to other experiences of life. For there is always an inherent risk in eating the food and accepting the generosity of the other. Rituals and rules ease the transition somewhat, but nevertheless, political commensality can be risky. Thus, state banquets were fraught with tensions, as the palace officials balanced consuls, merchants and missionaries (Protestant and Catholic), who were easily offended by perceived slights (cf Roussos, 1994, p 83).

State banquets are transcultural encounters where public diplomacy and intimate personal acts collide to reveal asymmetries of power between individuals and states. To the British diplomats visiting Siam in the 1860s, the familiar order and sumptuous appearance of the banquet table would powerfully contradict the prevailing colonial representation of King Mongkut as a barbarian ruling over an uncivilized country undeserving of political autonomy, in need of imperial guidance.

The Thai remain exceptionally skilled in the games of political commensality. The Siamese 'outshone' other South East Asian courts in diplomatic courtesy, choosing not to humiliate visiting 'others', but rather to emulate them and provide whenever possible meals that would be familiar to them. This practice was so well established that Bowring had to ask to be served 'a genuine Siamese repast'. He writes:

‘On arriving, we found the table spread in the accustomed and approved European–Oriental style, with an abundance of plate, glasses, wines, soups, fish, roasted and boiled meat, hors d’oeuvres, with a variety of pastry, jellies, etc.; but, apart, the Prince had provided what he called a Siamese dinner for one, and I imagine the succession of dishes could have been scarcely less than sixty or seventy. He said he wished to gratify my curiosity, but that courtesy requires him to entertain me according to the usages of my country, and not of Siam.’ (Bowring, 1977, p 109)

King Mongkut regularly gave state banquets to celebrate his birthday and to mark the completion of important tasks (such as treaty negotiations). In fact, the king may have used the banquet as an opportunity to combine the indigenous Thai concept of ‘royal gift/bounty’ with the European standard format for state banquets as evidence of the state diplomacy expected of civilized nations. His choice of Western food was a continuation of past practices. Adopting the dishes of foreigners was considered a polite and civilized thing to do in the Siamese courts.

A guest at a state banquet in 1858 noted that King Mongkut was always very conscious of Western opinion of Siam and conscious of the influence that foreign visitors could exert abroad. It was Mongkut’s habit to give a banquet for foreign guests each year on his birthday and at the completion of business. The king, ‘instead of being seated, stood or walked round the table, chewing betel and addressing some pleasant observation to each of his guests in turn. The repast was served in a vast hall, from whence we could see a platoon of the royal guard, with flags and drums, drawn up in the courtyard’ (Moffat, 1961, pp 98–99).

Perhaps Margaret Landon built on these observations to develop the state banquet segments in her book and subsequent film versions of *The King and I*. Anna makes no mention of the banquets in her diaries. However, Margaret Landon, the wife of an American State Department official, often entertained Thai diplomats in her Washington home (Kepner, 1996), and would be very familiar with formal state banquets.

Anna transformed

Before returning to the transformation of the texts and films in which the state banquet was represented, there is an additional fiction to unravel – Anna’s own biography and autobiography. Her false past was unknown even to her family, who believed she was born in Wales

in 1834 to an officer's family, and not in 1831 into a poor Anglo-Indian family in an East India Company barracks, her father, an enlisted man who died before Anna was born. She successfully kept the secrets of her wretched past hidden from both the literary world and even her own family, as she wove the Wales story into the short autobiography she wrote for her children and grandchildren (cf Dow, 1991; Kepner, 1996; Fyshe, 1962; Smithies, 1995).

Anna Leonowens's autobiographies recounting her experiences as governess in King Mongkut's court (*The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, 1870; *Siamese Harem Life*, 1873) were sensationalized to increase sales, and borrowed incidents from earlier sources (Griswold, 1957). They offer fascinating glimpses into Anna's mind, but not the mind or practices of the Siamese. There is very little in her books on food or meals. Although she pines for a house of her own, she never complains about food or comments on state banquets, let alone orchestrates one. One gets the impression that she had no great interest in food. She has very little to say about palace food, except for an appreciation of Mongkut's control and temperateness:

'His breakfast, though a repast sufficient frugal for Oriental royalty, was served with awesome form. In an antechamber adjoining a noble hall, rich in grotesque carvings and gildings, a throng of females waited, while his Majesty sat at a long table, near which knelt twelve women before great silver trays laden with twelve varieties of viands – soups, meats, game, poultry, fish, vegetables, cakes, jellies, preserves, sauces, fruits and teas. Each tray, in its order, was passed by three ladies to the head wife or concubine who removed the silver covers, and at least seemed to taste the contents of each dish; and then, advancing on her knees, she set them on the long table before the king. But his Majesty was notably temperate in his diet, and by no means a gastronome. In his long seclusion in a Buddhist cloister he had acquired habits of severe simplicity and frugality, as a preparation for the exercise of those powers of mental concentration for which he was remarkable.' (Leonowens, 1870, p 97)

This scene of his wives carefully tasting the king's food is reproduced in the 1946 film and all subsequent versions, underscoring the devotion and servitude (expressed through prostration) of Mongkut's wives. The King is shown sampling one dish at a time with chopsticks.

The fear of poisoning was as significant during household meals as it was during state banquets.

In Margaret Landon's book, the 1946 movie, and all subsequent versions, the state banquet for British diplomats and merchants is featured as a way for King Mongkut to prove that he is not a barbarian, and deserves to take his place among the civilized nations of the world. The 1946, 1956 and the two 1999 films all use the trivial cliché that the proper use of a knife and fork, and use of European table manners during the state banquet, would demonstrate his 'civilized' status. His failure to do so adequately provides the humour in all versions, including the cartoon. This suggestion that Mongkut was not familiar with Western meal service was particularly irritating to Thai critics of the film. Many letters in the *Bangkok Post* in December 1999 stress the error of showing the king using chopsticks, a feature begun in the 1946 film.

Landon's book, *Anna and the King of Siam*, was a work of fiction based on Anna's diaries, and was not banned in Thailand. It has been through 13 printings, published in over a dozen countries, and condensed by *Reader's Digest*. The story of the state banquet is developed by Landon. She describes in detail the appearance of the table, the table settings, the food and drink, the toasts to the rulers, the conversation, and most of all, the appearance and behaviour of the dinner guests. The elaborate table setting was presented for the visual consumption of the visiting guests and their local counterparts. Landon's 1944 text describes the preparation for the banquet:

'Women appeared with a length of perfect heavy white silk, richly brocaded, that went from head to foot of the board and was to serve as a tablecloth. But there were no table napkins. While Anna hurried some of the women off to look for napkins, others arrived with a magnificent dinner service of pure gold in an antique pattern. She had never seen anything so superb even in a museum. There were plates, dishes, goblets, vases, stands, candelabra and ornaments of every form, shape, and size, all most exquisitely worked and inlaid with precious stones. Anna enjoyed setting the table with the beautiful service. It was worthy of a king when she had finished. But as yet there were no knives and forks or other silver. When she demanded these, the woman brought her instead a basket of chopsticks, also of gold. "No, no!" she said, "These will never do. You must find me some knives and forks and spoons. We Europeans couldn't eat soup or anything else with chopsticks.'" (Landon, 1944, p 191)

In spite of their trivial and inaccurate picture of palace life and unflattering view of King Mongkut, these preposterous Western texts by Anna and Landon were not sufficiently relevant to have any impact on Thai life that could be considered treasonous. They would have faded into obscurity were it not for the subsequent film and musical versions of the story. Charges of *lèse-majesté* were never levelled at the books or the film; these charges were reserved for treasonous actions such as speaking negatively about the right-wing state-sponsored Village Scout movement or writing critically about the royal family (cf Bowie, 1997, pp 31, 279).

But when Landon's text became image in the 1946 film, *Anna and the King*, starring Rex Harrison and Irene Dunn, the story became a black morality play, with the King portrayed as a truly barbaric tyrant with few redeeming qualities except for his love of children. The 1946 film develops the scene of the state banquet for the British diplomats and merchants, arranged by Anna in courtly style, including a scene with Anna rejecting the golden chopsticks offered by palace servants. When she offers to show the King how to use a knife and fork, he rejects her help, but practises awkwardly on his own, and nearly chooses the incorrect implement before he takes his lead from Anna, who also stops him from drinking his soup directly from the bowl. The late arrival of the silk napkins results in the King and Anna dropping napkins in the astonished laps of the guests after the dinner has ended and the entertainment has begun. Following the banquet, Anna and the King relax over a shared Chinese meal, since neither was able to eat at the banquet, intimately sharing food from the same containers. This insulting portrayal of a much-loved monarch was made even more unacceptable by associating his eating practices with the Chinese through the use of Chinese rice, serving bowls and chopsticks, and drinking soup directly from the bowl. Yet the film, *Anna and the King*, was not banned in 1946 and was shown in Thailand.

In 1951, Rodgers and Hammerstein recreated the splendid wicked oriental court in the form of a Broadway musical play, *The King and I*, using the screenplay from the 1946 movie. The original Broadway play included two songs that dropped out of later musical versions – one, *Shall I Tell You What I Think of You*, is a very critical tirade against the king; the other, *Western People Funny*, makes fun of Western ideas of what constitutes being civilized.

The 1956 musical film version starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr was banned in Thailand for public viewing (Smithies, 1995, p 135),

although it is not difficult to obtain video copies in Bangkok. I have found no direct evidence to explain why one version was banned and not the earlier one, but perhaps the pro-monarchy stance of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1959–63) was a factor. In the 1956 movie, more attention is placed on the threat of colonization through the map scene in the schoolroom. Once again, the state banquet is developed as the means to demonstrate how civilized and European the king and court are. As in the 1946 movie, King Mongkut shows concern and interest over Anna's daringly low-cut dress, as the camera pans over both Anna and the banquet table, identifying Anna as the object of his gaze, the woman who 'holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire' (Donaldson, 1992, p 38).

The 1956 musical version of the film did not cause an uproar among elite Thai, nor among royalty who reportedly were not offended by it. In fact, Queen Sirikit attended the musical in the USA in 1985 and met Yul Brynner who played King Mongkut (Peleggi, 1994, p 58). Thailand was much more exotic and compelling than *The King and I* could possibly represent in a musical with a Western storyline. Ignorant foreigners were not a significant threat to national security or identity in the 50s and 60s.

A children's cartoon was developed in 1999, which managed to reproduce the worst of all the earlier films. The state banquet is only a minor scene; however, it shows the King picking up his soup bowl to drink from it, with all the guests copying him, until Anna shows him how to use the correct spoon. The strange story twist has King Mongkut's eldest son, Prince Chulalongkorn, falling in love with a commoner servant, while the Prime Minister has become an evil magician. The New Age touches transform this colonial text into a European fairy tale with the Prince and Princess living happily ever after and the evil magician destroyed.

In November 1998, Thailand rejected the request by Twentieth Century Fox to film a remake of the 1946 version, *Anna and the King of Siam*, on location in Thailand, arguing that the script still portrayed King Mongkut as a 'brutal buffoon'. Allowing historical inaccuracies and distortions to persist was considered to show disrespect to the monarchy and defame Thailand (*Bangkok Post*, 12 November 1998). The movie is quite faithful to the 1946 version, but claims to have been based on Anna's diaries rather than the Landon book. However, Jodie Foster, interviewed in the video recording, *Anna Leonowens: Getting to Know You*, argues that the 1999 film 'tells a different story', creating

the character of Anna as a woman with more freedom. The colonial context is developed with greater subtlety. An early scene has Anna and Prince Chulalongkorn eating meals with their fingers. The banquet scene is equally elaborate in this version, with Anna orchestrating the event and training the servants (who break the dishes they were carrying by falling to their knees when the King enters the room). This version places more emphasis on the conversation during the banquet, followed by dancing, rather than the King's faulty table manners, although a short scene before the banquet catches him practising awkwardly with European cutlery. Once again, among the scenes the Thai officials took offence at is one showing King Mongkut eating with chopsticks instead of a fork following the state banquet, the scene also featured in the 1956 and 1946 films' banquet scenes.

The Thai government's position on *Anna and the King* may reflect new sensibilities about the country's national image, or the fact that filming would take place on the site of the palace. Pitak Intaraviriyant, the Minister of Tourism, supported having the film made in Thailand: 'Having them film here will mean we can have a thorough look at the script and urge them to co-operate in changing unsuitable parts' (*Mr. Showbiz*, 10 November 1998). However, in December 1998, Fox made the decision to move the filming to Malaysia, where Thai artists reconstructed beautiful palace settings in Langkawi, a location popular with Thai tourists; ironically, the streets of Georgetown, Penang, where Anna and her husband ran a hotel before they moved to Singapore, represented Bangkok in the 1860s. No Thai consultants appeared in the credits other than as dialogue coaches for the very awkward Thai speech (common rather than royal language) that the non-Thai actors used, in combination with subtitles.

A publication on making the film (Holland, 1999) demonstrates the attempts on the part of the filmmakers to be sensitive to the concerns of the Thai: 'the only way to bring this splendid epic alive was to film it in steaming South East Asia – lush and mysterious, thrilling and charming, ancient and always new'; 'every detail of the setting had to be authentic'; 'There is a tremendous responsibility that goes with recreating something as sacred as the King's Palace . . . to be true and respectful to the Thai people' (Holland, 1999, pp 2, 4). Yet the patronizing attitude towards the state banquet remains: 'Mongkut showed off his skillful use of tableware at birthday banquets' (Holland, 1999, p 82).

The 1999 remake of *Anna and the King* was banned from cinemas in

Thailand in November 1999. It would be a mistake to think that the banning mattered a great deal to Thai nationals. It was possible to rent the film on video if anyone wanted to see it. Evidently, a screen version was shown to the Thai royal family with no public reaction (*Nation*, 22 December 1999). A flurry of letters in the *Bangkok Post* and *Nation* expressed a range of views: 'the film will boost local tourism and won't change the way foreigners view the monarchy' (*Nation*, 27 December 1999); 'our culture is unique' (*Nation*, 23 December 1999); 'Mongkut wouldn't have banned the movie' (*Nation*, 25 December 1999); seeing the film in Sussex made one reader 'proud to be a Thai' (*Nation*, 14 December 1999); 'We are Buddhists and can judge for ourselves' (*Nation*, 16 December 1999); another reader considers Anna's books to be true, but later films false (*Bangkok Post*, 11 December 1999); and finally, an astute observation – 'the film should be shown to show other countries we are open-minded' (*Nation*, 18 December 1999), a comment reflecting a continuing concern with other countries' take on Thailand.

The Thai Foreign Ministry instructed its embassies to monitor the public's general reaction to *Anna and the King* (*Nation*, 18 December 1999). One indication of the movie's popularity might be that in its opening weekend in Los Angeles, it ranked number six behind a film about a talking mouse. Information provided by Thai embassies on the banning of *Anna and the King* includes the claim that the storyline was made up by Fox, and not based on historical events. The official reason for banning *Anna and the King* was that it portrayed King Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, the future King Rama V, as despotic, arrogant, barbaric rulers whose modernizing changes, such as the abolition of slavery and reformation of public administration, were inspired by Anna. 'In spite of five script revisions, the film intentionally tries to undermine the monarchy and seriously distorts Thai history, which could create unrest in Thai society' (*Nation*, 29 December 1999).

Conclusions

To explain why Anna should not be credited with orchestrating the state banquet featured in text and film, we need to return to the argument that Anna not only fabricated her relationship with the royal family and experiences in the palace, but also her own biography. She was clearly an extraordinary woman, but not one steeped in the intricacies of Victorian manners or court etiquette. The woman who was born in

an Indian army barracks of Anglo-Indian parentage, who invented and reinvented herself as schoolmistress in Singapore, a governess and teacher to King Mongkut's children, and an activist for women's rights in Halifax, was clearly remarkable. For a woman to be trained in ancient languages in a British army barracks in India in the 1840s was unusual enough. To be adept and current enough in contemporary scholarship to lecture on Sanskrit at McGill University, Montreal when she was in her seventies (Dow, 1991, p 132) is testament to her mental abilities and will. But an arbiter of Victorian court etiquette she was not. A keen observer of the manners of others, she was not high-born. The British colony of merchants and diplomats in Bangkok never included Anna in their circle, perhaps because of her low birth status. According to her son's biographer, she was probably unable to sustain her pretences of breeding either in her manner of speech or her manners (Bristowe, 1976, p 31). In addition, the British expatriate community in Bangkok may have considered the social gap between themselves and the royal government unbridgeable (Roussos, 1994, p 79).

Anna would not have possessed a sufficient knowledge of court etiquette to allow her to orchestrate such a delicate diplomatic banquet with consequences for two countries. But King Mongkut could have done so. He sent a Siamese diplomatic mission to England in 1857, and kept in close contact with them, instructing them to pay particular attention to the standards of the Victorian court. They could easily have provided the king with details about Victorian state banquets.

The films and texts of *The King and I* reverse the legitimate claim on the part of King Mongkut to civilized status by showing a governess/teacher of dubious past and class attempting to 'bring civilization to the barbarian'. The concept of *siwilai* is again important. Many of the nineteenth-century visitors to Siam failed to appreciate Siamese life because they measured civilization very differently. Elias (1978, p xiii) uses the civilizing process to describe changes in the feelings of shame and delicacy with regard to eating that developed after the Middle Ages in Europe. But consider the Malay context in which courts had a much longer and more intimate association with British ideas of *siwilai*. The British considered eating with the fingers evidence of a lack of 'civilized' status, while the Malays considered eating with the fingers cleaner than eating with a fork; as a Malay chief argued, he did not know the history of the fork. 'It has been in a hundred, perhaps a thousand mouths' (Gullick, 1995, p 194).

In the ethnocentric evolutionary logic of Victorian England, a state becomes civilized much as a child becomes civilized when it gradually learns manners, and courts set standards for civilized behaviour for the whole nation. The state banquet is an ideal event for examining this process. However, there are significant differences between Western and Siamese measures of civilization. Terweil writes:

‘Civilization was measured, not in broad, clean streets or in impressive stone buildings, but in knowledge of etiquette, in a dignified posture, in polished speech, and in a variety of other subtle signs imbedded in Thai culture. Comforts of life, in Siamese terms, were to be found in a pillow against which to lean, in being able to enjoy the rich cuisine, in the mild stimulus of chewing betel, in the appreciation of a dancer’s movement, or the sound of an orchestra.’ (1989, p 43)

King Mongkut mastered the art of political commensality without help from Anna, and in the process, preserved an exquisite cuisine, relatively unspoiled by culinary colonialism.

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