



Digital cities and Their Commercial Aesthetics: The Celebration of Monarchy in Bangkok

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Abstract

This article argues that the expanding role of digital urban infrastructure in Bangkok has revitalised a visual aesthetic designed to uphold royal authority. This royal aesthetic permeates in intimate and widespread areas of city design and urban life, particularly in regard to everyday consumption. The article examines how digital infrastructures facilitate a cheap and efficient continuation of long-standing practices of publicising royal imagery. This politicised practice visually marks Bangkok with a conservative vision of *Thainess* inextricably tied to monarchy. The article engages with scholarly critiques of “smart cities”, scholarship of digital city imaginaries and the study of urban authoritarianism in Bangkok. Based in a visual anthropological approach, the article draws on ethnographic research, both in person and digital, to analyse digital visual propaganda including a campaign called *The Pride of Thailand*, eulogistic celebrations of King Bhumibol following his death and birthday celebrations of King Vajiralongkorn. The article argues that in Bangkok, digital infrastructures provide an efficient and cost-effective aesthetics that render urban inequality ordinary and bolster monarchical authority. Owing to the commercial basis of many mainstream digital infrastructures, these images are circulated regardless of consumers’ political preferences. The everyday encounters with images of the monarchy in commercial spaces and online platforms thus serve as an intimate and unavoidable imposition of royal influence.

Keywords

Cities, Digital, Smart, Visual, Thailand, Monarchy

Digital infrastructures are central to the management and visible experience of urban cities worldwide. The way that local political communities shape the use and experience of those infrastructures is however, diverse. In this article, I argue that the

cost-effective circulation of digital images, together with the strong political cooperation between government and corporate actors in Bangkok, facilitates a visual aesthetic aimed at sustaining royal authority. In this task I draw on ethnographic research with production workers in Bangkok and extended immersion in Thai commercial digital spaces. I draw on two sets of literature, firstly scholarship from urban studies that draws attention to smart cities and the politics of digital urban imaginaries and secondly, from Thai studies, the study of visual urban authoritarianism and the associated history of mutually reinforcing ties between the monarchy and leading commercial actors. In bringing these bodies of scholarship together with anthropological ethnographic research, my aim is to demonstrate how the digital infrastructures supporting commercial life in Bangkok allow for easy and efficient continuation of conservative political aesthetics across city spaces – both physical and virtual. Thus, owing to the efficiency of digital image making and close relationships between the Thai monarchy and leading corporations, the experience of Bangkok as a digital city is marked by an ongoing visual aesthetic reflecting conservative political interests.

Digital technological solutions for making cities more efficient and sustainable are sometimes presented by bureaucrats and planners as neutral market solutions. In fact however considerable scholarship in urban studies literature suggests this is not the case. As Cook and Karvonen (2023: 377) argue, in smart city planning, the “perspectives of the elite and powerful are readily storied as the . . . disembodied default position”. This can result in urban digital infrastructure development involving processes that include costly speculative financial risk taking (Fei 2025; Baykurt 2025),

data extraction to private corporations (Karich 2025) and building urban infrastructures that “perform reform” with digital aesthetics but reinforce the surveillance practices of authoritarian regimes (Borushkina 2025; Varró 2025) . This article builds on existing work in urban studies highlighting such forms of violence and inequality perpetuated through the spread of top-down urban aesthetics. In particular, the article draws inspiration from Datta & Odendaal (2019: 388) who use Mbembe’s (1992’s) concept of the “banality of power” to critique routine, normalising techne that operates as a dehumanising tool of smart city surveillance. As I will discuss, in Bangkok, an ongoing historical practice of state management of aesthetics normalises the portrayal of conservative, pro-monarchy symbols.

In Bangkok, urban aesthetics operate as a key techne for social and political management. Long-standing practices of surveillance and self-censorship amount to what Jackson (2004: 181) calls the “regime of images” expressed through the policing of “surface effects, images and public behaviors”. These includes the presentation of “civilised” bodily manners in public (Jory 2021), the use of Buddhist ceremonies as ritual displays of monarchical authority (Fong 2009), and extensive public relation campaigns designed to generate public support for the monarchy and the censorship of mainstream and alternative media (Viernes 2021).

These forms of surveillance and display overlap with what Rugkhapan (2022, 133) calls “urban authoritarianism” in which urban planning in Bangkok is used to align technocratic visions of beautiful public space and heritage conservation in ways that “justify authoritarian intervention” (see also, Herzfeld 2016; 2025). The purpose of such

authoritarian approaches to public space can be understood through an attempt to carve a version of “Thai style” democracy that is both anti-colonial and conservative (Hewison 1997; Fong 2009). The military coup of 2014, instigated by the “National Council of Peace and Order” (NCPO) against the democratically elected government of the time, is one such example. As Winichakul (2019) explains, the military government, led by General Prayuth, sought to establish a more conservative form of government in Thailand to manage the expected political turbulence caused by King Bhumibol’s impending death.

In 2016, the same military government adopted a digital planning strategy called “Thailand 4.0”. While this plan did not designate Bangkok as “smart city” per se, the “smart city” became both a “buzzword and a legitimate implementation plan for most, if not all ministries and departments in Thailand” (Taweesaengsakulthai et al 2019:146). Thus the political emphasis on Bangkok as a digital and smart city was a matter of local politics meeting globalising planning standards. As Joss et al (2019:12) demonstrate, “alpha” world cities (of which Singapore is the only southeast Asian example) hold themselves forth in planning and marketing documents as an elite standard of globalised commercial cosmopolitanism against which other cities’ digital infrastructures and visions are judged. This shapes the hierarchical politics on the ground in non “alpha” cities such as Bangkok.

As Thailand’s political and financial centre, Bangkok is treated by many commercial and state actors as Thailand’s alpha city. The city’s long history in hosting displays of authoritarianism and visual re-imaginings of citizen-state relationships, democracy and

monarchy continues to inform its symbolic and ritual power in sustaining its importance in shared urban “imaginaries” (Picon 2013). For example, Sanam Luang (the public park next to the King’s palace), operates as an “urban palimpsest” owing to the layering of different uses in different historical periods including ceremonial, democratic and monarchical (Noobanjong 2016, 88). This symbolic power bleeds into virtual engagements with the city landscape, such as the online activist magazine *Sanam Ratsadon* which looks back to more democratic uses of this symbolic and ritually charged park known as “Royal field” to be renamed “Commoners’ Field” (Renwick & Isaacs 2023: 677).

To understand how these layered politics and power inequalities in Thailand intersect with digital city infrastructures, this article brings visual anthropological perspective together with theory from urban studies. In particular, the article draws on Rose and Willis’ (2019: 412) analysis of the smart city as a space where “every aspect is intensely visualised”. Degen and Rose (2024) argue moreover that the digital visualisation of the city has deeply embodied effects. That is, digital urban aesthetics can be experienced as “textured” because “their spatial organisations invite specific embodied sensations” (Degen and Rose (2024: 2187). For example, fear of police or surveillance, as mediated through digital screens, is experienced in bodies differently marked by race, class, or other intersectional forms of identity.

The discussion that follows focuses on the ways in which political aesthetics permeate citizens’ experiences in Bangkok through the network of the ICTS and digital infrastructures that cover much of the city. Rabari and Storper (2015) highlight how this

infrastructure operates as a “digital skin” through which big data is collected for corporate interests. Some of the digital skin in cities such as Bangkok is unseen via broadband and hidden communication sensors that transmit data to private-sector firms. Other forms of digital skin are prominent and may be experienced as invasive, such as advertising across a wide range of digital devices, city buildings and forms of transport. Mobile advertising, for example, often uses images over text owing to the emotional and communicative possibilities of visual media while simultaneously collecting consumer data (Liu et al 2019). Thus, while this article focuses primarily on the intensely visual aspects of royalist urban aesthetics, the infrastructures or skin that support this visual display operates via layers. Some layers of digital skin are invisible, while others have prominent visual features, ranging from small thumb print scanners to interactive digital billboards.

Methodology

The primary methodology used in this research was anthropological ethnographic research¹. Between 2016-2017, I spent 18 months alternatively working with and shadowing small to medium sized production companies making digital advertising in Bangkok. Access to these companies was largely facilitated by academic contacts both in Thailand and abroad. My research was designed to “study up”, that is, engage in research with influential groups who are not traditionally studied ethnographically. The power dynamics of the research were shaped by my cultural capital as a foreign researcher (in particular, my European appearance and international education)².

¹ Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the Harvard University Committee on the use of Human Subjects (IRB14-1968).

² I am not Thai myself in either nationality or ethnicity.

The ethnographic approach was anthropological in design. Most of my research time was spent in “deep hanging out” with people, rather than pursuing interviews. Much of this time I did no more than observe people work and take part in everyday social acts such as eating, travelling, celebrating, chatting, dancing, complaining and sleeping – work and social activities often found in creative industries where young people work very long work hours. I sometimes assisted with tasks related to production processes such as coaching actors or translating documents. Interviews were not a key research method. I did however conduct 38 interviews, secured mostly through both snowballing and actively seeking interviews with representatives from various media companies and industries in Bangkok. My research was conducted in Thai, but some of the interviews were conducted mostly or partly in English. Throughout my research, I engaged in visual data collection in the form of videos, photos and also screenshots of publicly available posts on social media, which I continued to do after leaving Thailand in August 2017³.

Retail Royalism: The Pride of Thailand Campaign

In mid 2016, a producer of a video production company in Bangkok introduced me to his team’s work on a video campaign. The video was intended for a larger propaganda campaign called *The Pride of Thailand*, in which the Thai monarchy as a digital

³ This fieldwork was foreshadowed by shorter fieldtrips with digital and TV media industries in Bangkok between 2014 and 2016. Between 2018-2024 my ability to travel was restricted and I was not able to return to Thailand. I continued to immerse myself in digital spaces related to Bangkok. While most of the research on which this paper is based comes from my time in Bangkok, I also refer to digital content I continued to follow since leaving Thailand.

aesthetic for the smart city was on clear display. The stated focus of the campaign, as presented on the website of a luxury mall, *Iconsiam*, was to preserve a *klang sombat dijit* (digital treasury) for future generations, of important examples of Thai culture, craftsmanship and society. Social media, website advertising and physical displays at upmarket malls were used to direct people to a public website (Screenshot below at Figure 1) in which Thai citizens could upload photos, videos and “stories” or find where to send postcards relevant to *Thainess*. On the website, a 3D map of Thailand was rendered in gold, where each cultural *reuangraao kwaampaakpoomjai* “pride story” collected was geographically marked by the origin of its submission on the map.

[Insert Figure 1]

The campaign had public visual prominence in Bangkok in 2016 owing to participation by some of Thailand’s largest banks, malls, transportation companies and media companies who promoted the campaign. An ambitious statement on the website of *Iconsiam* (*Iconsiam*, n.d.) stated that the project was

“a national Public-Private initiative (sahn palang pracharath) to get all stakeholders nationwide from the public and private sectors and civil society to contribute to assembling and recording great and precious stories that are the source of Thai people's pride so as to be able to keep them as user-generated content about Thailand. This will be the first time in history that an effort is made on such a scale to record and pass on great stories from one generation to the next so that they live forever for the people of Thailand and for the knowledge of the rest of the world”.

This campaign continued a celebration of the monarchy that has long been central to Bangkok's commercial aesthetics. During the second half of the 20th century, there was a concentrated campaign by successive governments, both military and elected, to promote the royal family as a national symbol. Competing urban aesthetics, celebrating democracy and everyday citizens, were targeted for removal and refurbishment (Chotpradit 2018). Unchanam (2020) describes how during the 1980s and 90s moreover, the king's portrait and the royal symbol were increasingly used in marketing in news print, magazines and television commercials. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis the royal family's portrait and insignia was used by private companies to communicate nationalism and moralised commercialism that, in a nod to the King's philosophy of a "sufficiency economy" championed slow development ahead of greed (Unchanam 2020; Herzfeld 2025). The King's image as symbol of a "diligent", "hardworking" and as a "father" figure came to mark campaigns used by most of the largest commercial and financial industries in Thailand (Unchanam 2020). In this way, these marketing campaigns created aesthetic visions that marked the royal family's financial success and political authority as intertwined.

In this same tradition, the *Pride of Thailand* campaign was unequivocally a top-down campaign. The campaign announcement states that it is an initiative of *Siam Piwat Co. Ltd.*, a wealthy property developer with formal links to the royal family. The campaign announcement included the support of a long list of government agencies including the "*Prime Minister Office, Ministry of Defence, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, Royal Thai Army, Royal Thai Navy, Royal Thai Air Force, Ministry of Interior, Ministry*

of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Ministry of Culture, The Thai Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trader of Thailand. . . “ (etc).

Collaboration between public and private organisations, is of course, not unusual with regard to national branding campaigns (Graan 2013; Lucarelli 2018). The extent of senior government involvement in the *Pride of Thailand* campaign was, however, particularly telling during a period of military rule, in which conservative political actors were concerned about the upcoming royal succession.

Despite the campaign’s stated message as being a service for the “Thai people”, there was little evidence of “bottom up” participation. The new *Iconsiam* mall and residential development (recently built to the price of USD 1.65 billion (The Nation, 2018)), featured a large display featuring photos of “Thai” activities that were similar to those distributed on social media. In-person events to celebrate the campaign were held in the “Fashion Hall” of Siam Paragon. These malls are among the most exclusive in Bangkok and with prices outside of what the majority of Thais can afford. Walking around downtown Bangkok in late 2016, I also noted other luxury malls such as Central Embassy feature “Pride of Thailand” pop-up billboards. Significantly, and as will be discussed in more detail below, all of these commercial spaces, Siam paragon, Central Embassy, and IconSiam -- are owned, or majority owned by elite corporations and wealthy families with deep political and monarchical links in Thailand.

The participation of these companies was an unsurprising continuation of a decades long relationship between elite Thai families and companies in Thailand and the interests of the monarchy. As Wongsurawat (2019, 141) explains, this relationship was

particularly fostered during the cold war period when ethnic Chinese elite, targeted by anti communist US-Thai agenda “survived through its alliance with the conservative/royalist political elite”. In what is often referred to as a “network monarchy” relationship, the Thai monarchy effectively developed its political and cultural influence during the second half of the 20th century, not only through concerted public relations campaigns, but also through cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with families in business and an overlapping network of courtiers and minor royalty (McCargo 2005). Ünalı (2016: 159) meanwhile describes the historical actions of commercial elites in Bangkok as “working towards the monarchy” because the commercial elite families “seem motivated by a sense of mission— a sense of noblesse oblige” in their commercial development activities. As Bangkok developed into its modern iteration as the commercial and cultural heart of the Thai nation, the monarchy forged commercial partnerships with banks, property developers and others. These alliances enhanced the prestige and political influence of select families and businesses, while also increasing the monarchy’s wealth and support among the influential commercial elite.

Spectacle Without Spending:

The lack of bottom-up support for the *Pride of Thailand* campaign was mirrored in the relatively low-budget and uncreative work put into its campaign video. From where I observed the campaign alongside the production crew working on the video, it was clear that the participation of the production team members in the campaign was not optional. Some of the team members spoke positively about the campaign saying it was “good thing for Thailand”. Even prior to the flood of eulogistic material that entered Thai

social media following Bhumibol's death, some of the production team, especially the producer (and owner of the production company), would sometimes post positive images and messages about the monarchy on Facebook and Instagram. Other team members, however, held quieter, more critical views about both the monarchy and the military government which were not discussed in the office or around large groups of colleagues.

Commissioned by a large retail property developer and manager, *Siam Piwat*, the campaign video was produced with considerable volunteer labour. For example, team members who were not actors or models were called upon to stand in to create visual content. A member of the casting team stood in as a young woman playing with lights on the beach. In another scene, the man who worked as a security guard for the production company's home office building was prevailed upon to stand in and allow himself to be filmed playing the part of an anonymous Thai boxer. The official and patriotic nature of the campaign made it difficult to refuse participation, reflecting the top-down nature of the campaign.

The campaign was ostensibly about the duty to "preserve" Thai culture. Among the production team however it was understood that the campaign was particularly about honouring King Bhumibol. The aim of honouring the King applied even when requesting help from people abroad. I assisted the production team translating their request to use video footage produced by a French director. The message was sent via Facebook messenger. In explaining the reason and value of the campaign, the team

stated their motivation was to celebrate the monarchy. We translated the request in English as follows;

“...This project will invite the Thai population to participate in the preservation of Thainess by sending stories in the form of videos and photos etc. on the topic of Thainess [khwaam bpen thai], Thai lifestyle, Thai traditions, famous Thai places, and Thai people of renown etc. In collecting these stories together the intention is to celebrate the glory of the King. Accordingly, our company as viewed your video about Muay Thai boxing from Vimeo, . . . We consider this video to be ideal for use in our project. Therefore we ask for your permission to use this clip. . . “

In this case the team identified that while the project’s main task was preserving stories of Thainess, the reason for such work was celebrating the “glory of the King” (in Thai: *chalm praggiia radti prabaat somdet prajao yoo hua*). Even though honouring the King was not the stated purpose of the campaign on the campaign website, the long history of public propaganda in Bangkok, which combined Thainess and monarchy, and the widespread public knowledge of the king’s ailing health, made the link unsurprising. When the team wrote that the intention was to *celebrate the glory of the King*, they stated the obvious, that is, what pride in Thailand should publicly signify, even if it has not been explicitly stated by the government and private actors instigating the campaign.

The use of Facebook messenger to negotiate with stakeholders and participants in the *Pride of Thailand* campaign was typical of communication practices in the industry.

Production team members mostly used Facebook messenger and most commonly, LINE, a popular “super app” to conduct most communication regarding the project. The chat features of these apps were crucial for efficient organisation and cheap sourcing of resources and information. As a “super app”, LINE aims to centralise social and commercial communications into one platform. As with other popular mobile-based apps and services in the Asia, LINE offers a communication tool that highlights entertainment and makes heavy use of sponsorship (Steinberg 2020). The features of the app include chat, large group calls, short video editing, games, shopping, sending gifts, monetary transfers and banking, food delivery, accessing news content, and streaming TV. The use of these combined super app features speeds up communication and lessens the costs of making video commercials. Most production workers I worked with maintained a busy social profile across both LINE and Facebook. LINE was used to facilitate conversations with clients, organise employees, share creative ideas, shooting boards, send invoices and receipts. Facebook was more often used to publicise new content created by the team and generate a public virtual presence that would enhance the team’s reputation. Both LINE and Facebook derive income by advertising and thus Thai workers using such apps encounter the paid ads of Thailand’s largest, and often pro-monarchy companies, as part of their work communication. Using such apps also operated firmly within the “regime of images”. For example, in 2016, a set of cartoon stickers resembling the royal family was released on *LINE*, and were removed from the platform almost immediately (Prachathai 2016).

Another example of a lack of money spent on the campaign is the storyboard.

Storyboards were usually made by the production team to not only develop a shooting

plan for the crew, but also generate a shared visual medium that clients and production teams could refer to. A team member sometimes drew the storyboard as a series of Manga Japanese style cartoons, or would otherwise work hard at the computer to create a neat and even aesthetic look across each proposed scene. In the case of this campaign, however, the story board was quickly assembled using stock images and headshots of participating celebrities. A mixture of fonts and thumbnails of different sizes demonstrated the haste and lack of resources assigned to the project. Despite these cut corners and lack of monetary investment, by making use of external video sources, careful montage editing, and background music track, the tone and the aesthetic of the video looks polished. The final video interweaves stereotypical video clips of Thai tourist locations, food and traditional dance, with the voices of celebrities voicing their support in warm, clear tones. Celebrities were filmed using shallow depth of field along with basic post-production light effects to produce an airy, blurry light backdrop. These techniques are typical of professional interviews, and give the final video a more expensive look.

Surface Support, Subversive Aesthetics:

Without the digital infrastructure to share the content of the campaign, the otherwise shallow roots of the campaign would have likely failed to achieve the same level of public prominence. Some Thai citizens were presumably ideologically aligned with the campaign, but without the convenience of digital support, a lack of broad support or involvement would have been laid bare. Despite the campaign's stated importance, it was made cheaply with limited resources. Many Thai advertising production videos are increasingly created on shoestring budgets; Thailand is a preferred location for

international clients looking to produce “cheap” video content (Isaacs 2022). This particular video campaign stood out, however, in terms of the lack of resources invested, as well as the distinct lack of attention to original aesthetics. Participation in the *Pride of Thailand* campaign took on a shape that was widespread but shallow in terms of money, creativity or most other forms of investment. The team producing this video were well-known for their quirky aesthetic style. But nothing about the visuals of the campaign video were surprising. Digital infrastructure provided a cheap and horizontally far-reaching mode of communication which replicated pre-existing images. This allowed for the creation and circulation of commercial and nationalistic royalist aesthetics, with minimal investment or commitment. The lack of commitment is most clearly illustrated in that while the list of participants was long and featured prominent commercial firms tied to what McGargo (2005) calls “network monarchy”, there was little evidence of the campaign producing the intended ground swell of “user generated” content.

Bangkok’s middle class is sometimes stereotyped as the source of conservative online politics in Thailand. However, online expressions of support for monarchy and conservatism are not straight forward. As in other parts of the world, ethnicity and religion also complicate political affiliation and ideological support can cut across class lines (Kongkirati 2019). Some online expressions of conservative politics been proved to be inauthentic, including fake accounts created by cyber teams from the Thai army (Sombatpoonsiri 2022). As Sinpeng (2021) discusses, in her analysis of conservative politics, monarchical support by the Bangkok middle class is not necessarily stable, and for many, this support is tactical and without deep ideological commitment.

Tellingly, in regard to *The Pride of Thailand* campaign, although the stated intention of the campaign was to make a record of Thai culture to share in perpetuity, within a few years, most traces of the campaign, including the official *Prideofthailand.com* webpage were no longer available online. Participants' photos or stories were not available on the public website which had stated it would be preserved. A Facebook page dedicated to the campaign created in June 2016, it is still online as of June 2025, with 55 thousand followers. The posts made in the first year of the page include celebrations of "Thainess" such as dancing or cooking. These posts only persisted until July 2017. Since then, there have been no more pretences suggesting the campaign is anything but a tool to foster support for the monarchy (see Figure 2 below). In recent years, posts received only one to three comments each. Through cheap digital tools, the *PrideofThailand* Facebook page continues to reflect a measure of support that is tacitly widespread but where the roots are evidently shallow.

[Insert Figure 2]

Alternative political imagery circulating online, including that which is illegal and counter to state-sanctioned propaganda, has offered an important countervisual to top-down political aesthetics but until recently was rarely displayed in public. For example, Klima (2001) wrote about video cassettes with documentary footage of state violence against civilian protestors in Bangkok, which circulated in the black market in the 1990s. Since then, digital tools have increased the fluidity, flexibility and speed at which anti-state and anti-conservative political material can spread. Several scholars

including Phuaphansawat (2025, this issue) and Chaivaranon (2021) have explored how social media and its capacity for ambiguity and humour through visual communication provide new avenues for Thai citizens to question, discuss and use humour to unsettle the power of the monarchy. These youth-based, horizontal and often anonymous or semi-anonymous uses of digital platforms were a direct threat to the symbolic and political power of the monarchy in Bangkok and Thailand. These include popular YouTube channels that stream political content, digital visual artists who distribute political artwork Instagram, pages on Facebook dedicated to political memes and on Tiktok, activists (such as professor in exile, Pavin Chachavalpongpun), producing humourous anti-monarchy and anti-military content. Many of the aesthetics featured in these posts and videos on platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok and Youtube reference the Thai military and monarchy directly or indirectly. Visual symbols used to refer to the military, for example, include toy soldiers, guns and symbols of violence, such as blood. In referring to the monarchy, a frequent repeated symbol is “112” which refers to the *les majeste* law that activists want abolished. Another popular symbol is the three-fingered salute. Adapted from the Hunger Games movies by Thai protests during the military rule of 2014-2020, the sign of the three-fingered salute indicates resistance to authoritarianism. The popularity and resonance of the salute was further amplified by its adoption in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong democracy protests and protests against the 2021 Myanmar military coup. Other visual references to the monarchy in recent activism include examples of imitations and parodies of the monarchy and their royal aesthetics. In 2020 for example, students at Thammasat University in Bangkok screened videos of Professor Pavin against a glistening gold background reminiscent of the royal news bulletin, thus mocking and humanising royal aesthetics (Chaivaranon 2021).

These forms of digital alternative visual politics offered a creative cultural touchstone for the large youth-led student actions against the monarchy and non-democratic forms of government in 2020-2021. During this period, the Free Thai Youth movement developed into a public social movement unprecedented in recent generations in terms of the scale of involvement (hundreds of thousands of teenagers and young adults taking part both within Thailand and in Thai diasporas internationally), as well as the direct public calls made by youth to the reform of the *les majeste* law and non-democratic forms of monarchical authority (see Chachavalpongpun 2025 and Phuaphansawat 2025, in this special issue). As has been well documented however, state repression against such anti-monarchy visual and urban protests has been brutal. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights by the end of 2024, more than 1900 people were charged with protest related offences such as *les majeste* or breaching the “computer crimes act”. Several high-profile cases of *les majeste* in the Thai criminal courts include those of Natiporn, a democracy activist who died while on hunger strike in prison (TLHR 2024) and Mongkhon Thirakhot, a clothing vendor whose prison sentence sharing videos and other posts on Facebook deemed critical of the monarchy was increased to 54 and half (Bangkok Post 2024). This recent history of protest and state violence thus informs the layers, virtual and urban palimpsests and likely experiences of embodied textures of the city’s digital skin, where royal imagery continues to circulate online.

Returning to the *Pride of Thailand’s* Facebook page; as of February 2025, this page still exists, but since July 2017, there have been no posts about Thai culture. Instead, the only posts images of the royal family. The monarchy are presented in portraits, dressed in their formal attire and digitally altered with light colour pallets. The portraits are moreover all feature thick ornate frames and accompanied by backdrops in a single

colour (As seen in Figure 2, Figures 4 and Figure 5). There is strong continuity in this digital aesthetic with the style of portraits used in street scapes in Thailand, especially in Bangkok. Very similar portrait aesthetics have covered the Bangkok streetscape and walls of private commercial institutions for several decades (for example, Figure 3). The use of repetition in such images made them easier to circulate. They are easy to replicate, modify and post to social media platforms, street screens and websites. In the following section, I emphasise how leading Thai corporations intimately tied to the monarchy promote these media and royal aesthetics.

[Insert Figure 3]

Commercial Bangkok and Smart Inequality:

Bangkok is a city in which consumption practices and values are immediately evident in the spatial organisation and visual representation of the urban landscape. A variety of retail spaces including small shops, roadside stalls, markets and malls border the roads, ferry routes and subway lines meet in central downtown Bangkok, where a gaggle of high rise malls provide a geographical and symbolic centre to the city. Over the past decade, the rise of digital advertising, including digital branding, online videos, smart screens in public areas, alongside a move toward consumer created content has renewed aesthetic celebrations of monarchy and royal authority (Ünaldi 2016). That is, the digital infrastructures across Bangkok continue the longstanding practice of visual iconography and political ornamentation of the landscape, while also expanding surveillance and data collection. Iconsiam's electronic advertising screens include for example a 211m water fountain against which lights project advertising that the creators

describe as “rich Thai culture and heritage, as well as corporate advertising” (Ghesa Water Art 2019).

Over recent decades, the royal family has formed strategic and mutually reinforcing commercial partnerships, including leasing land commercial developers in return for lease income and shares. This strategy has been successful in generating wealth for these developers. Ouyyanont (2008, 186) explains that after diversifying its income streams following the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the Crown Property Bureau’s “annual income in the mid 2000s was around three times the peak level it had achieved prior to the crisis”. The Crown Property Bureau (estimated at that time to be at least 30 billion USD) includes land leased to many of Bangkok’s most prestigious shopping malls. In 2018, King Vajiralongkorn had this bureau of assets transferred to himself (BBC 2018) . Meanwhile, as Hewison (2021, 275) highlights, in recent years Thailand’s richest families outpaced “disproportionately when compared with both the national economy and even within the upper reaches of the capitalist class”. These families include the majority shareholder of Iconsiam (the Chearavononts family), who grew their wealth while continuing close ties with the military and monarchy during recent years of technological, political and monarchical transition. This centralisation and creation of wealth thus works through strong networks between the monarchy and leading private firms and families (Suriyapongprapai et al. 2022; Kongkiriati & Kanchoochat 2018).

The centralisation of wealth in Bangkok is thus overwhelmingly overwhelming expressed through geography, class and political hierarchy. Bangkok moreover operates

as an alpha or “primate” city that dominates all other Thai urban spaces as the prime centre of finance, politics and national symbols (Fong 2019). The historical patterns of economic inequality and the associated legacy of state violence that have reinforced these hierarchical relationships are now extended to expanding digital infrastructures, including the data hungry digital skin.

The visual rendering of the “digital skin” of the urban environment is also marked by access to differing qualities of technology. In Bangkok, the quality and size of digital screens, the neatness, prominence or invisibility of physical digital infrastructure speak to different levels of privilege and wealth and mark different parts of the city via a comparative aesthetic of the digital medium itself. Parts of Bangkok, especially around the wealthy centre of the city, visually present themselves as exclusive through their developed, expensive urban aesthetic that includes large digital marketing screens, accessible WiFi and a plethora of expensive handheld devices. These spaces can visually mark themselves as off limits to many working-class Thais even without needing signage or rules to mark this exclusion (Vorng 2011; Shelby & Renwick 2023). In many cases these “bubble smart urbanisms” are within, or adjacent to land owned for many years by the Crown Property Bureau (now owned by the monarch).

Urban studies scholars have shown that power relations informing aesthetic imaginaries and smart cities are more complex than simple hierarchies. Zanderbergen and Uitermark (2020) for example, argued that digital infrastructures can allow marginalised populations to engage with the city with an enhanced agency. Burns and Welker (2023) demonstrated that digital platforms can moreover allow city citizens to mark, move,

map, document and circulate information for political action. As outlined by Alizadeh and Prasad (2024: 434) however, one of the key perspectives provided by studying smart cities from the Global South is to better appreciate the deep vulnerability of global south city populations and the extent to which smart city visions can operate as a “placebo” to hide injustice and violence. Thus, while excluded populations may assert their embodied urban experience of “inventive lived space” (Degen and Rose 2004, 2184) against top-down planning visions, for many vulnerable populations the possibility of doing so is marked by great risk. In Bangkok, mourning for King Bhumibol’s extended across both physical and virtual representations of the city. The full power of state authority, oligarchical wealth and digital surveillance of public presentation provided little room for alternative forms of political display. Following the youth protests of 2020-21 and the government crackdown that followed, the link between banal royal authority and violence was tested. However, through acts of state violence, the banality of power was maintained, alongside the commercial and financial wealth of the royal family and their elite supporters.

The use of advertising in a city’s urban fabric can visualise economic inequality and explicit political visions about the city and citizens’ identities. Urban development processes also rely on digital visual technologies as mediums of “technical *and* affective agency” (emphasis original) to inform decision making across broad stakeholders (Melhuish et al. 2016, 239). These urban planning visions then shape existing social imaginaries with political effects. That is, imagination is shared through a “sequence of images through which meaning effects are propagated and developed to the point of becoming obvious” (Picon 2018: 265). This visualisation through repetition is

experienced differently according to intersectional facets of identity. For example, Unaldi (2013:234) documents how European architects' plans for *Siam Paragon* (the mall in Figure 3) to include a glass wall overlooking the palace home of Princess Sirindhorn, were rejected by executives of *Siam Piwat*, the royally connected development company building the mall, despite the Princess herself claiming she was in favour. In this case, urban planners altered the building plans because their shared urban imagination was for a mall that visualised the monarchy as a revered symbol but also maintained a clear hierarchy of social difference.

The use of digital commercial spaces as an extension of such shared urban imagination to visually celebrate the monarchy in Bangkok with a sense of hierarchy and decorum was on fullest display during the mourning period for King Bhumibol following the King's death in 2016. During this period, interviews with people working in Thai corporations and media companies revealed a strong corporate willingness to celebrate the monarchy using technological infrastructure to facilitate displays of digital mourning. For example, in an interview with a digital marketing firm in downtown Bangkok, the creative team revealed that team worked with flexibility and speed to make sure their clients' social media pages were following the expected conventions, "Two different teams- Facebook and LINE had to quickly co-ordinate together which is not normally how we work. At first, for a few hours, we changed clients' [social media profile] pictures to black. . . then we use photos in greyscale with special messages". For examples of similar grey scale images see Figure 4 below. Meanwhile, in a different interview, a manager at a media buying agency explained that the extensive amount of visual mourning material plastered across both physical and online space

following the King's death was motivated by the fact that the managers and owners of the "the biggest corporations" are "attached to the monarchy". As an example, the media buyer described how *Plan B Media* which manages a large real estate of giant billboards in Bangkok, arranged for all 50 billboards on the Bangkok expressway to be sponsored by companies willing to pay for a eulogistic poster celebrating the late King. According to the media manager Plan B worked with the "biggest sponsors on expressway billboards to make sure the entire collection of expressway billboards expressed condolences. All 50 billboards for a month".

[Insert Figure 4]

Meanwhile, many of Thailand's largest corporations not only added mourning banners to their social media pages and released eulogistic digital images in black and white, but several also added additional "gateways" to their websites, so that visitors using the website had to first encounter a memorial to the late King before accessing anything on their site. For example, the figure below displays two screenshots taken during the year of mourning for King Bhumibol. In both cases, visitors to the website must first encounter a memorial page to the late King before entering the website. Thus parts of the city's digital skin were dressed in digital mourning attire.

Since King Bhumibol's death, the use of the monarchy in everyday commercial aesthetics in Thailand has change to celebrate the new King. King Bhumbibol's legacy as "father" of the nation for over 70 years acquired a mythical and spiritual quality towards the end of his reign. The reputation of King Bhumibol's son, Vajiralongkorn

does not generate the same resonance (Winichakul 2019). The new King's reign has been more noticeably marked by both unprecedented criticism of the monarchy and brutal state retaliation, as discussed above. Despite the monarchy's changing reputation, the King's image continues to be used in promotional digital content by large private corporations.

At the time of King Vajiralongkorn's birthday in late July 2023 and in the weeks following, for example, many large corporations posted on their Instagram and Facebook feeds depicting the King surrounded by a wash of gold. The supermarket chain *Lotus*, posted an edited photo of the King in formal dress, wearing the traditional gold coat and headdress of a Buddhist King. A similar celebratory portrait, this time of the King in military-style dress was posted by the CPfood account on the King's birthday in 2025 (Figure 5).

[Insert Figure 5]

In these cases, where the King's personal charisma may not be strong, branding strategically continues the same aesthetics used in the formal images of King Bhumibol. Advertising images of King Bhumibol often portrayed him well-known action shots that evoked emotional responses in a broad section of Thai citizens that cut across class and to some extent, geography. There are no such images of Vajiralongkorn available to advertisers, but the associations with the national pageantry continue to prove adaptable. Just as in the case of the *Pride of Thailand* video, where the campaign's supportive roots were shallow, commercial aesthetics for Vajiralongkorn relied on digital media to

create a cheap but appropriately royal-looking aesthetic that provides Thai consumers with an unsurprising but nonetheless powerful commercial aesthetic.

The Branded City: Royal Aesthetics, Commercial Logics

This article has argued that highly commercialised functions of mainstream tech and digital media in Bangkok facilitate a revitalised urban digital aesthetic that bolsters monarchical authority. Bangkok's commercial aesthetics visually circulate images of the monarchy, supporting various modes of authority and rendering urban inequality ordinary. Upholding a vision of Thai nationhood centred around the monarchy, a modern global economy and Bangkok's symbolic status, the NCPO military government together with elite corporate interests promoted a future "digital Thailand" that was capital-city and symbolically enshrined by its most important resident, the reigning monarch.

The "Pride of Thailand" campaign was convenient partnership between a high-end shopping mall and a national foundation promoting Thai pride. Much like other inexpensive digital marketing efforts, including the digital eulogy images for King Bhumibol and the celebrations of King Vajiralongkorn, these images are presented to consumers without their choice or consent. A potentially rich area for future research in Thailand how different communities marked by age, politics or class manage their embodied experiences of royal aesthetics in everyday commercial and urban life.

Urban power dynamics, both in Bangkok and globally rarely fall neatly into straightforward top-down resistance patterns. Nonetheless, it is crucial that the exploration of complexities of does not overshadow the profound inequalities that exert

a gravitational pull at the heart of Thai political life, particularly in Bangkok. A notable difference between the alternative and the conservative forms of visual politics addressed in this article is the involvement or lack of leading commercial actors and institutions. As pedestrians navigate downtown Bangkok, the colours of the visual digital city that wash over them are the gold and pastels of royal portraiture, not the humourous anti-authoritarian images of alternative YouTube channels. When Bangkokians visit the websites and social media pages of banks, supermarkets and other leading Thai companies, they routinely encounter royal symbolism and portraiture - an intimate everyday encounter with a political assertion of elite authority. Individuals can choose to avoid such spaces or ignore pop-ups on their phone. and may intentionally flood their media feeds with alternative creative content. However, everyday commercial tasks completed online and movement through the city, make such encounters an unavoidable imposition and for some, a textured experience that stings of surveillance and violence.

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FIGURE 1: Screenshot of the entry page to the Pride of Thailand website, taken from <https://marketeeronline.co/archives/38376> in 2016. The script in the middle of the page translates, Add to the pride of the nation. Click to add pride here.

159x96mm (144 x 144 DPI)

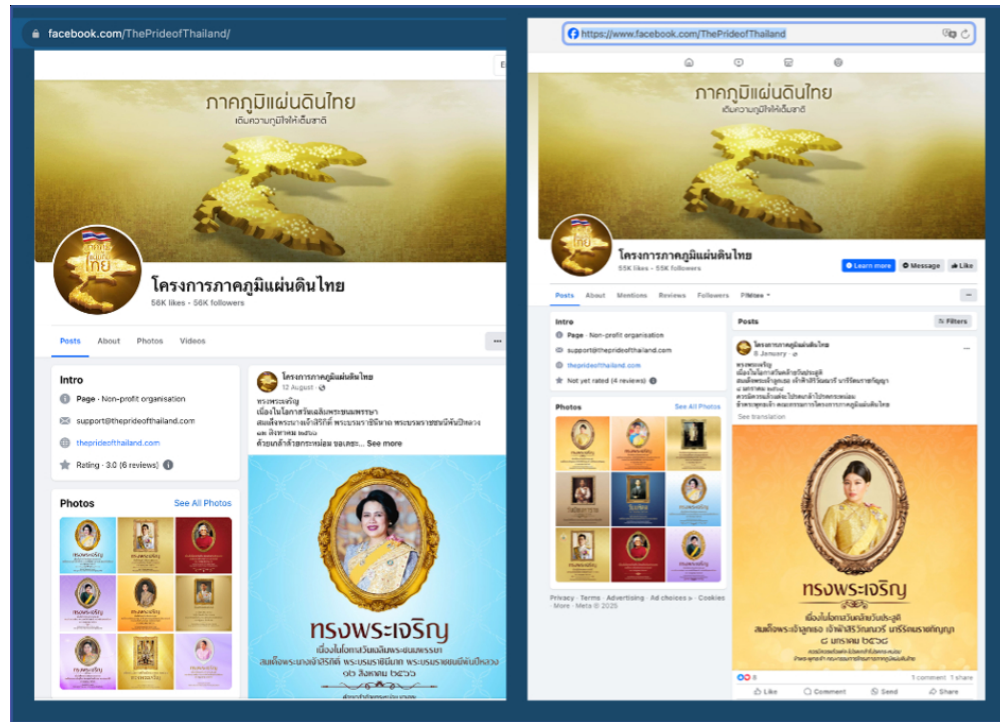


FIGURE 2: Composite image made by author comprising of two screenshots. First screenshot of the The Pride of Thailand Facebook page. September 2023. The most recent post at that time was a post celebrating the Queen Mother's birthday in August 2023. The second screenshot is from February 2025. The most recent post at that time celebrates the birthday of Princess Sirivannavari (daughter to the current King). Reviewing the posts on this page made during 2024, each post only received between 6 and 20 "likes".

159x114mm (150 x 150 DPI)



FIGURE 3: Digital and non-digital images of King Bhumibol after his death, outside Siam Paragon Mall in Central Bangkok, 28 October 2016. Photo by author.

159x119mm (150 x 150 DPI)



FIGURE 4: Composite by the author of two screenshots taken by the author of landing pages that serve as the entrance to a website. First screenshot taken on 19 May 2017, of the landing page of the National Library of Thailand. Second screenshot taken on 14 November 2016 of landing page of an upmarket store, Siliwai.

159x65mm (150 x 150 DPI)

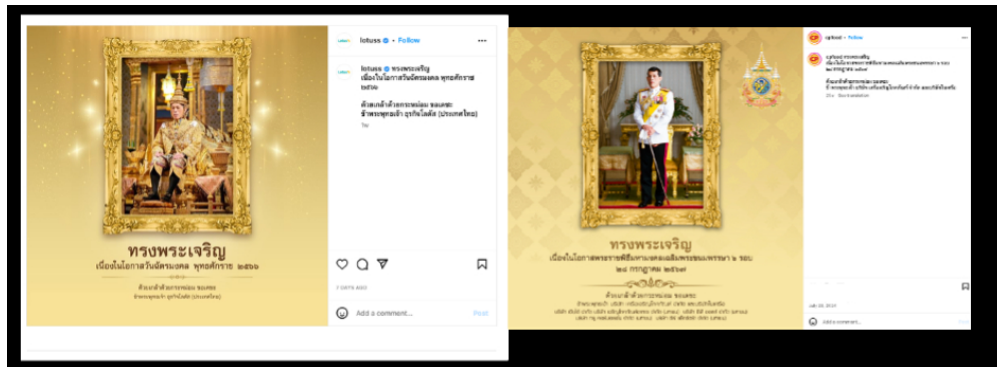


FIGURE 5: A composite image created by the author featuring two screenshots of Instagram posts. The first by supermarket chain Lotus on the occasion of the King's birthday on 28 July 2023 and the second by CPfood, on 28 July 2024. Both CPfood and Lotus are owned by the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group, Thailand's largest private company with 2024 annual assets of 16.5 Billion USD (as cited by Forbes.com).

159x58mm (150 x 150 DPI)