ONE

The Unsettled Layers of Bangkok

A genealogy . . . will never confuse itself with a quest for their “origins,” will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence.

MICHEL FOUCAULT, Nietzsche, Genealogy, History

ON OCTOBER 3, 1983, THAILAND BUSINESS, a bilingual magazine, published a five-page article entitled “Soi Bikes.” “Living in Bangkok nowadays,” the article began, “you must have seen many different groups of motorcyclists . . . operating a new kind of business by picking up passengers and taking them to their destination.”1 Harnessing widespread curiosity about the new service and its operators, the magazine set out to investigate “who they are, when it first started, where the idea come from, how they operate the business, and whether it is illegal or not to earn money by using motorcycles for public hire.”2 The article traced the growth of the system out of a Navy housing complex in soi Ngam Duphli, a few roads away from Bangkok financial center. It investigated the drivers’ daily lives, their organization in informal groups clustering around a station, the rules of their queuing system, as well as the cost of renting the vests which all the drivers wore to be identified.3 While motorcycle taxi groups had been developing an internal organization, the magazine revealed, they operated in a legal gray area in which local police officers extorted money from them, acquired control over the groups’ operations, and used the drivers as assistants in patrolling their neighborhoods. Even with the police involvement, the author concluded, the rapidly diffusing system offered potential economic rewards to local businesspeople willing to invest in it.

2. Ibid.
3. During this phase vests were distributed by local people of influence who collect money from the driver to allow them to operate uninhibited. See chapter five for more details.
While the promises of economic return enticed the business community, legal diatribes regarding the new enterprise animated state bureaucracy. Inside their offices a debate over the safety and legality of using motorbikes for public transportation took place in much drier language. The Ministry of Land Transportation, which had banned three-wheeled rickshaws from Bangkok in 1960 because of their outdated slowness, found the new system of transportation dangerous, undeveloped, and unfit for their dreams of Bangkok as a modern metropolis. Resolved to outlaw the proliferating motortaxis on the grounds of safety, throughout the 1980s the ministry produced a wealth of statistical data on motorcycle accidents. At the same time, across town, another ministry found itself preoccupied with the new transportation system. In June 1983, a committee headed by the interior minister and the director of the Office of Policy and Planning began considering the legality of motorcycles for hire. According to Thai law at the time, vehicles registered for public use, marked by a yellow plate rather than the white one reserved for private use, had to be either three- or four-wheeled, such as buses, taxis, tuk-tuks, and the recently banned rickshaws. Motorcycles, one wheel short, would not qualify. Experts in the ministry debated: Should the limits of the law be expanded to incorporate this new mode of transportation? Should police officers, at least for the time being, arrest motortaxi drivers? What about their supervisors and group leaders?

As the ministerial bureaucracy discussed the legal minutiae of the driving code, the number of wheels allowed to a vehicle for public use, and the kinds of urban flows it wanted to sustain or eliminate, thousands of young rural migrants continued to buy motorcycles and transform them into sources of income. Motorcycle taxis responded to the needs of a rapidly expanding metropolis and thrived in this niche, spreading faster than legislators’ decision making. Bangkokians grew accustomed to the sight of migrant men in colorful vests, perched atop their bikes, waiting to pick up clients. Their back seats became familiar to city dwellers and carried children, office workers, and local dwellers through smoky traffic during peak hours and poorly lit alleys late at night. Whether legal or illegal, this system had become part of

4. Robert Textor explored the lives of rickshaw drivers in Bangkok in the 1960s. Like motorcycle taxi drivers, they were for the most part male migrants from the northeastern provinces who struggled to participate in both the urban and rural life of the country (Textor 1961).

5. Mītāsai rap ḫāng, literally motorcycles for hire, is still today the Thai name for motorcycle taxis.
their everyday life. In this legal uncertainty, police officers and army officials thrived. Realizing the potential of the new business, they took the lead in operating new motorcyclists’ groups, rented out handmade vests that operated as drivers’ informal licenses, or simply demanded money from existing groups in exchange for directing their gaze elsewhere.

Lieutenant Somboon Boonsuckdi, a navy officer who assumed the role of administrator of the Ngam Duphli motorcycle transport service—often referred to as the first motortaxi group in Bangkok—was the first to seize this opportunity. He told the *Thailand Business*’s reporter that although the police refused him permission to open a station, he went ahead anyway and nothing happened to him, probably because he himself was a government official. His case was not unique. All across Bangkok, state officials like Somboon were expanding their hold over the new business, supplementing their meager official income with less transparent enterprises, as they had done and continue to do with prostitution, illegal casinos, and drug trade. In a dynamic known to Thai scholars as “using power/authority as influence,” these officials were transforming formal authority (*amnāt*) derived from their role in the state apparatus into influence (*itthiphon*), a form of control over the operations of the urban gray economy based on fear and indebtedness.

The diffusion of motorcycle taxis, therefore, raised questions well beyond transportation policy and road safety. Their presence engendered questions about who legitimately controls urban space; about freedom, desire, labor, and migration; about legal structures and economic relations; and ultimately about existing power structures, their brokers, and internal struggles. The new transportation infrastructure for Bangkok was much more than a solution for a traffic-ridden metropolis. It emerged as the result of political-economic, legal, administrative, technological, spatial, and epistemological transformations in the city. Yet, through its operations, it ended up solidifying, developing, and at times pushing back against those transformations.

In particular, four conditions of possibility, which came together in the 1980s, allowed the motorcycle taxis to appear. The first was a mode of administration: a set of formalized, yet often informal, interactions between state officials, citizens, and territory—the dynamic of transforming authority into influence—which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and continued to organize street life in Bangkok. The second revolved around a group

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7. Persons 2016, 156.
of actors: millions of young and relatively unspecialized migrants from rural Thailand who, from the late 1950s, provided the city with cheap labor. The third condition was technological: affordable motorcycles which flooded Thailand in the 1960s. Finally, a physical setting: the maze of long and narrow alleys, known as *soi*, which solidified in the 1970s and rendered extensive mass public transportation in Bangkok virtually impossible.

None of these elements emerged with motorcycle taxis in mind. They were not part of a unified strategy directed by state forces, government officials, local business people, or drivers. Rather they were the unexpected and unpredictable outcomes of a century-old struggle between aspirations to impose order on the city and the unbounded messiness of its everyday practices. The city in which the drivers started to operate in the 1980s was itself the product of this struggle, a material canvas on which state forces constantly attempted to superimpose new ordered layers but remained unable to erase or scrape away the stubborn persistence of existing practices.\(^8\)

The history of humankind is dotted by such canvasses, outcomes of the tension between scarce resources and the all-too-human pretense to leave traces and rewrite history. These objects are known as palimpsest. In antiquity, parchment was a rare and valuable commodity. As a consequence, the same piece of animal skin was reused, often multiple times, by erasing the previous layer and adding a new one. The results were called palimpsests, documents in which faint traces of the former writings remained visible between the lines. Over the centuries, these traces would resurface, enough to be readable, from the oblivion of history. Cities are like these documents. Favorable geographic position and easy access to resources, much like parchment in antiquity, have always been scarce. As a result, new urban conglomerates grow atop older ones, giant palimpsests onto which new configurations are constantly scripted. Walking around a city, any city, we are constantly faced by the traces of overlaying: warehouses that reveal the neighborhood’s

\(^8\) This dynamic has often been analyzed through the lens of Michele de Certeau’s contrast between strategies and tactics (de Certeau 1984, xiii–xiv). The first—the French philosopher argues—are calculations made by a subject that has control over a space that it can call as its own; the second by an entity that always operates in a space that belongs to another. As a consequence, he shows, when the first one succeeds it restructures space. On the contrary, when the second one does so, the victory is only temporary and, “whatever it wins it does not keep” (de Certeau 1984, xix). This distinction hardly fit what I saw in my fieldwork. Here no one—whether state forces, planners, city dwellers, or motorcycle taxis—had control over any space. Rather the territory of the city—and the state itself, as I show in the following chapters—were fields over which different groups, state factions, and people battled.
industrial past converted into yuppies’ apartments; grooved cobblestone roads that remind us of a time when people moved on carriages made into walking streets; spaces underneath urban highways turned into small parks. Those traces are ghosts haunting contemporary cities and showing us the doorsteps of their past while drawing the contours of their future. Especially in cities like Bangkok, where informality and extemporaneous responses have undermined any attempt to plan, regulate, and control urban life, those traces are concrete reminders that everyday practices always spill out of the tidy paths that urban institutions, planners, and builders try to draft for them. Those paths always present themselves as “a truly radical break with history and tradition,” and claim a clean departure from an imagined tabula rasa. Yet, they often fall short from these aspirations and show the signs of struggle between past and present, between the neat logic of blueprints and the concrete messiness of reality. The result is a different type of order, one

9 Simone 2010, 3.
10 Scott 1998, 93

11. These tensions remains always unresolved, always the fleeting product of failed anticipations, unsuccessful attempts, and pragmatic engagements. Reconstructing a history of these unresolved struggles, as Rabinow and Bennet have argued, “provide[s] a means of showing the contingency of the present and thereby contribute[s] to making a more open future” (Rabinow and Bennett 2010). This chapter aims at exactly this objective: revealing some of the cracks, a word dear to both Foucault and Gramsci (Foucault 1970, 1972; Gramsci 1988), into the material sturdiness of the present in the Thai capital. In this sense, I follow the methodological proposal developed by Michel Foucault in order to build a history of the present which “is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (Foucault 1970, xi). However methodologically similar to his explorations, this chapter operates outside the limits of the “particular fields [of] the history of ideas, or of thought, or of science, or of knowledge” (ibid.) to which the French theorist constrained his project. In so doing it differs both from Foucault’s project and from Kant’s quest for conditions of possibility to which Foucaultian analysis was a reaction. My investigation, in fact, does not rest either on the idealistic dimension of Kantian anthropology—a research of the conditions for the “regulative principle that can lead us from an initial condition of ‘a folly and childish vanity’ to ‘our destiny’ as a cosmopolitan society” (Harvey 2007, 44)—nor on the discursive analysis that animates Foucaultian archeology of knowledge—an illumination of the “epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge . . . grounds its positivity” (Foucault 1972, xxii). Rather, I focus on the material, social, and political-economic fields in order to explore the conditions of possibility in which a specific technology of mobility grounds its existence and continuous expansion. In this sense, I follow a deeply Gramscian approach, one in which tracing shifts in discourse, what Foucault called the “historical a priori” (Foucault 1970, 10), becomes part of the process as a way to identify and delineate the hegemonic power that sustained material, social, and political-economic transformations. Not the privileged locus for such a history, discursive shifts represent part of the fields in which reconfiguration of relations of production, center-periphery interactions, and (inter)national markets take place.

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generated through repetition, uncontrolled flows, and eruptions, rather than top-down plans, which itself is constantly challenged, exceeded, and reshaped, in an infinite cycle of thwarted plans, resilient practices, and contingent responses that make up the apparently stable—yet ever shifting—entity that people understand as Bangkok.

Motorcycle taxis were one of those responses. Started timidly in a small road, the system eventually came to be central for allowing the city to function regardless of its traffic jams yet remains a thorn in the side of city planners and their dreams of control. To explore the conditions of possibility for emergence of motorcycle taxis—whether in terms of physical forms, technological tolls, migrant bodies, or administrative relations—means therefore necessarily to excavate those Icarian dreams, their doomed attempts to control flows and impose order, the multiple layers they generate, and the struggles they underwent at each level. It means, in other words, conducting an archeology of the fragile history of urban layers, orderings, and practices that gave birth to motorcycle taxis in the 1980s but started with the founding of Bangkok.

The Birth of the Aquatic City

Bangkok began as a floating shop, moored near the mouth of the Chao Praya River, downstream from Ayutthaya, the capital city of the eponymous kingdom. The small trading and customs outpost of Bang Kok developed in the late fifteenth century as a Chinese-dominated node in the lucrative trade network that connected the Gulf of Siam to the Indian Ocean and Southern Chinese Sea. Its position guaranteed the town commercial success and strategic importance, especially after the Burmese attacked and sacked Ayutthaya in 1767. The following year, King Taksin (r. 1767–82), a warrior who had managed to push back the Burmese offensive, relocated the capital of Siam to Thonburi, an easily defendable area near the outpost, on the western bank of the river. Fifteen years later, Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke, later known as Rama I, staged a revolt against Taksin, ordered his beheading, and established the still-reigning Chakri dynasty. A new capital was founded on the

12. The etymology of the name Bangkok remains unclear. Bang is used to refer to a town situated on a riverbank, while the origins of the second part of the name remains debated. Some people think that it comes from Ko (island), as a reference to the landscape of the area. Another theory speculates that it is shortened Makok, the name for an autochthonous olive tree.
opposite bank of the river, by displacing a few miles south the Chinese traders who occupied the outpost. It was 1782, a year that was memorialized as the birth of Bangkok.

Relocating the capital across the river, however, was not enough to guarantee the legitimacy of the new dynasty. The new king needed to claim a direct connection with the previous sovereigns of Ayutthaya. With this in mind, the new capital was named Krung Rattanakosin Ayutthaya, which still remains as the name of Bangkok’s historical district. The connection between the new capital and the older royal city of Ayutthaya, however, was not just a matter of toponyms. While royal historiography was set in motion to link the new monarchs with the former rulers, the new city underwent radical topographic and architectonic interventions to mimic the previous capital. Ayutthaya was on an island, located at the confluence of two rivers, from which departed a maze of canals, connecting it to its hinterland. Major engineering was needed to carve an island into the river bend where Krung Rattanakosin was to flourish. In 1783, Rama I ordered the digging of a canal by Chinese workers, whom he rewarded with access to land along the waterway and south of the newly created island, in an area that would become the economic core of the city. From this first canal more and more branches were added during the first four reigns of the Chakri dynasty (1782–1868), coextensive with the expansion of the monarchs’ sphere of influence.

Once the terrain of Bangkok looked similar to that of Ayutthaya, its buildings followed suit. The spatial and symbolic layout of the former capital followed Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. Urban structure, organized to mirror their shared cosmology, revolved around a walled palace that housed the main religious sites, the royal court, as well as most of the population. Each of the main buildings was oriented according to astrological considerations, which the sovereigns of Ayutthaya had imported from Khmer Brahmins, together with royal rituals. The urban structure, cosmological tradition, and court rituals that had traveled westward from the Khmer

13. During the reign of Rama III, the city name was changed again to the present-day name. Nonetheless, the name of the previous trading post—Bang Kok—remained how the Siamese capital was known internationally. In this text I decided to refer to the city as Bangkok in order to accommodate an international standard. It is worth noticing, however, that none of my local interlocutors ever referred to the city as “Bangkok” but only as Krung Thep.
empire now traveled downstream to Krung Rattanakosin. Along with them, bricks from Ayutthaya’s most notable buildings were shipped and used in the new city. What the Burmese pillage had left standing, the Chakri dynasty disassembled and reconstructed in the new capital as a way to save money and as material evidence of Rama I’s self-professed role as the restorer of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.16

In the new city, as it had been in Ayutthaya, canals became the main channels for the mobility. Even if the early life of the new capital took place mostly inside the walls, its connections to the outside world were mediated by water. Commerce, ceremonies, transportation, war, political and cultural influence traveled, for most of the first five reigns of the Chakri dynasty, on water and made the city famous among European travelers as the Venice of the East. While rivers and canals guaranteed the functioning of the Siamese Kingdom, salty water carried a major challenge to its survival. In 1818, the British Crown—guided by the maritime expansion of the East India Company—acquired Singapore. By 1824, the whole of Malacca was under British control and two years after significant parts of what came to be known as Burma fell to the colonial expansion. In 1859, French forces conquered Saigon and by 1863 the Kingdom of Cambodia had become a French protectorate.

The kings of Bangkok found themselves surrounded by colonial powers that were slowly eating away the semiautonomous tributary reigns and sultanates around them. They responded by emulating colonial powers. This meant raising capital, purchasing military hardware, and constructing a transportation infrastructure necessary to establish and consolidate their control over areas and kingdoms they never previously cared to subjugate.17 The adoption of these colonial techniques would, inadvertently, set in motion three of the conditions of possibility for the emergence, a century after, of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok. First, they would grant local officials the immunity from legal scrutiny and repercussions that became the first condition of possibility for the drivers’ operations in a gray legal area. Second, they created the conditions of uneven development that fostered mass internal migration from the outer provinces to Bangkok. And third, they generated a network of roads, with a specific shape they retained from their previous lives as canals, which provided the terrain for the motorcycle taxis’ diffusion in the city.

In 1861, a group of foreign consuls wrote a courteous yet resolute letter to King Mongkut. Complaining of ill health due to the lack of leisure activities in Bangkok, they requested the construction of a proper road on which to drive their horse-drawn coaches, impossible to do on the existing murky paths around the palace. The king, resolute in his intention of giving an international image of civility to his reign, immediately ordered the construction of the first paved street in Bangkok. In 1863, Charoen Krung—literally “progress of the city”—was opened to traffic. The new road connected the royal palace to the southern section of the city and extended through Samphaeng, the area where the economically dominant Chinese population had been previously relocated. Charoen Krung quickly became the city’s main commercial thoroughfare. Soon after, several other streets were built around the palace. This marked the beginning of a slow shift in the orientation of the city away from water.

During the rest of Mongkut’s reign (1851–68) and that of his son Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), Bangkok led an amphibious life. The urban landscape was still crisscrossed by boats and swarmed with floating houses, yet Bangkok increasingly oriented itself toward land. The names of the new streets revealed this new trajectory. The three main roadways—Charoen Krung (progress of the capital), Fuang Nakhorn (diffusion of the city), Bumrung Muang (nourishment of the urban)—epitomized how progress and expansion were now discursively and spatially tied to roads and land rather than canals and water. Bangkok was shifting from what came to be seen as the unruly flow of waterways toward a civilized land-based city, one in which fluxes were ordered into established and fixed paths. As these paths expanded into a road network, new modes of transportation emerged. In 1872, Praya Choduek, a wealthy nobleman, imported the first rickshaws from Japan. They proved a success and spread rapidly across Bangkok, now a city of about 170,000 people. Pedaling them around were Chinese coolies, who constituted the majority of the urban labor force. Under their bodies, the...

number of rickshaws grew so significant that, to regulate their numbers, their use of street pavement and sidewalks, and their behavior in the street, the newly formed Ministry of Interior introduced the first traffic legislation in the country—the Rickshaw Act of 1903.

The kingdom’s reorientation toward land not only produced new roads, transportation methods, and legal deliberations, it also changed its ideological, economic, and political structures. The establishment of land as the dominant space for capital accumulation and the privileged channel for trade and political control was part of a larger attempt to centralize power. This plan posed a variety of logistical and political challenges, including that of framing it as a legitimate enterprise. For this purpose, royal elites produced and diffused a new discourse of *siwilai* (civilization), which presented the country as part of a world system in which European cities sat at the top of the pyramid followed by Bangkok, regional centers, rural villages, all the way to remote forests and their inhabitants resting at the very bottom. As a result, regional towns and villages were cast as urban backwaters, loci of uncivilized—both beastly and pristine—ways of life.\(^{21}\)

The new spatial and moral hierarchy reorganized the city and its relation to tributary statelets and, mirroring the French *mission civilizatrice* and the British white man burden, justified the expansion of Bangkok’s control over them as a civilizing mission.\(^{22}\) This narrative, which survived well beyond this period and still colors the relations between Bangkok and the rest of the country, allowed the monarch to reframe what had been semiautonomous states as Siamese provinces and expand his control over them. Paraphrasing Thongchai Winichakul, the monarch drafted the nation’s modern geo-body, a technology of territoriality that created Siam spatially by marking its borders and plotting its internal divisions. This process, however, also included a new temporal organization, one that discursively sunk regional capitals and villages into the past while it presented Bangkok as the location of Siam’s *siwilai* future.\(^{23}\)

The challenge was how to control and administer those formerly semiautonomous tributary principalities. At first this meant creating a new transportation infrastructure to expand military, administrative, and economic control over them as well as to extract taxes and resources, both agricultural and

\(^{21}\) Dayley 2011.
\(^{22}\) Thongchai 2000.
\(^{23}\) Thongchai 1994, 16.
human. While previous Chakri’s monarchs opted for canals and water transportation as their main infrastructural investments, King Chulalongkorn, responding to the amphibious shift in the capital and the strategies of colonial powers in the region, decided that railways would become the new nation’s circulatory system. Faster than canals and more easily subjected to centralized control than roads, the first railroads developed at the turn of the century. In 1893, the first line connected Bangkok to Pak Nam (water’s mouth), a commercial and military harbor thirty miles south of the city, on the delta of the Chao Praya River. In the following decade, the king ordered the construction of another two lines: one connecting the capital to the northern region, where British forces were starting to show their presence, the other from Bangkok to the northeastern region, at that moment ridden by local insurgencies and potentially the next frontier for French colonial expansion in Indochina after the invasion of Vietnam in 1887 and the blockade of Bangkok’s harbor in 1893. Over these years, not only were states waging wars in the area, but wars, or in this case the threat of colonial occupation, were making local states.

The new railways had a central role in the creation of the Siamese state: they brought the formerly semiautonomous territories closer to Bangkok and allowed the penetration of its forces in these areas while also making the circulation of rice and, to a lesser degree, other forest and agricultural commodities faster and cheaper. Siamese products started to flood global markets, swelling the king’s pockets. Agricultural land became, for the first time

24. “A few years before, in fact, the threat of French expansion had materialized in Bangkok. Following a dispute over the control of the territory of the Laotian Kingdom, on July 13th 1893, two French gunboats blockaded Bangkok’s harbor, forcing the Siamese government to accept a new territorial order. Even if the French retracted after signing a treaty, it became clear that Siam ran the risk of falling under colonial domination (Thongchai 1994). The Siamese response was twofold. On one hand, Siam played a delicate international game of equilibrium between England and France, which culminated in the 1896 Franco-British agreement to keep Siam as a buffer zone. On the other hand, the Siamese monarchs adopted forms of governance from colonial powers and applied them to the Siamese provinces. Among them, railways figured prominently, as was the case in colonial India (Prakash 1999) and Egypt (Mitchell 1988), “envisioned as both a technology of governance and social improvement” (Elinoff 2013, 92).


26. “If in 1890 it took 11 days to travel from Bangkok to the northeastern city of Khon Kaen, by 1932 the journey was cut down to two days. The same was true for the northern city of Chiang Mai, now reachable in one day and a half, as opposed to forty two in 1900” (Kakizaki 2005, 156).
in Siamese history, a desirable asset and a source of wealth. With the countryside turning into a space of production, land prices increased and Bangkok’s elites started to look at outlying territories as an opportunity for investment and extraction of resources. The largest among them was the monarch himself, who financed its military expansion with capital coming from these enterprises.

The shift from water to land was not just a change in ecology but a shift in the loci of economic accumulation that went hand in hand with the emergence of a territorial, and increasingly national, organization of power. In 1892, King Chulalongkorn initiated a restructuring of the Siamese administrative apparatus. Semiautonomous territories were organized into provinces, districts, and villages. While railways reorganized the flow of people and commodities toward Bangkok, a new class of administrators loyal to the centralized state, known as servants of the monarch (kha ratchakān), were needed to govern its territory. A new educational system was rolled out to create this new class and soon the emerging bureaucrats were sent out to administer the outer territories.

Chulalongkorn’s administrative reform was an attempt to impose centralized order and control the flows of people, commodities, and taxes around the newly unified country. Before the reform, local powerful people were left free to administer their territories, introduce taxes, and extract resources from the area under their control as long as their interest did not conflict with those of the monarch and they sent tributes and soldiers to Bangkok, when needed. While this configuration ran the risk of disenfranchising local residents and leaving too much power to local administrators, it saved the monarch some money and guaranteed him manpower, more important to the king in Bangkok than direct territorial control. With the expansion of colonial powers into the region, Chulalongkorn understood that this arrangement could not be sustained. The king needed to control the degree to which local lords were allowed to extract wealth from their subjects and to

27. In contrast to European feudalism, the sakdina system, which preceded the administrative reform in Siam, was predicated on controlling not territory but rather human power. In Siam, land was not considered a scarce resource, labor was. As a result land was hardly desirable and rarely part of economic transactions (Peleggi 2007). In 1892 a new property law was introduced and the concept of private ownership of land was formalized, to adapt to the growing value that agricultural land was acquiring as an effect of intensive cultivation (Askew 1993).

formalize their relation to Bangkok by making them politically and economically dependent on the capital, rather than on their ability to mobilize local resources.

Convincing them to agree and guaranteeing their loyalty proved a messy endeavor riddled with more difficulties and resistance than classic Siamese historiography has acknowledged. In the period between 1898 and 1905, a number of revolts exploded in provincial towns both in the northern and the northeastern regions of Siam. These revolts, especially in the northern capital of Chiang Mai, were often instigated by the same local powerful men who were to become the backbone of the new Siamese state but opposed its expansion. Although local resistance was choked on their own blood and the reform largely succeeded in unifying and centralizing the nation, control over bureaucrats remained partial and often rife with tension because of their relatively low pay and their strong local authority. As a consequence, new state officials retained broad room to maneuver, finding ways to establish themselves as local patrons. Familiar with local forms of patronage, the new administrative class ended up simply positioning themselves as local patrons. Patron-client relations were reorganized around access to state posts, which became the single most socially acceptable source of wealth and power. In this system, official authority (amnāt) went hand in hand with personal political, economic, and social influence (itthiphon) over local subjects. If this influence had previously been located outside the state, depending on personal ability to distribute resources, instill fear, and mobilize local manpower, now its source relocated in the state itself: official authority guaranteed control over locals. This new relationship between bureaucrats, their posts, and local citizens outlived the period, and provided state officials with the opportunity to transform their authority into influence over their subjects. A century later, as Thailand Business’s article reported, this opportunity guaranteed the first condition of


30. As Siffin argues: “The new and the old had more in common than appearances would suggest: the bureaucracy continued to serve as the chief source of status, security, and identity for Thais above the level of villages” (Siffin 1966, 148). Even with the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy, “control of the government passed to a shifting succession of cliques, nominally operating within a constitutional framework but in reality depending upon control of military forces. The bureaucracy continued” (ibid.). It was in fact after the 1932 revolution that the bureaucracy became the main power broker in Thailand. The concept of “bureaucratic polity” (Riggs 1966) was developed to describe this configuration in which most political leaders until the 1990s emerged from the ranks of state bureaucracy rather than through elections.
possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok and granted local officials immunity from legal scrutiny and repercussions, allowing them to operate motorcycle taxi groups in a legal gray area.

At the same time that the nation’s outer territories were reorganized through commodification of land, new modes of transportation, and centralized administration, its capital city underwent a reconfiguration along similar lines. In 1890 the king created the Privy Purse Bureau (PPB)—renamed Crown Property Bureau (CPB) after the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932—to administer the monarchy’s private possessions and direct investments, which mostly revolved around land development; two years later, he established the Ministry of the Capital to administer Bangkok. These two organizations composed a new governance apparatus that oversaw the city’s refashioning as a siwilai metropolis. In particular, they financed and built the web of new roads which, following European cities, reoriented Bangkok away from water.

In 1890, King Chulalongkorn ordered the construction of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, literally “royal procession,” a name inspired by Kingsway in London. If its name was a British inspiration, the avenue itself was part of an urban transformation modeled on Baron Haussmann’s remaking of the French capital and came to be known as the Champs-Élysées of Asia. The linear expansion of Ratchadamnoen broke down the previous structure of the city inspired by Ayutthaya. The new avenue physically directed the city away from the riverfront toward the European-influenced grid of the Dusit district, where Italian architects designed the new throne hall and royal palace. A new layer was added over the urban palimpsest in an attempt to impose a European, and therefore siwilai, urban structure over the aquatic city. This

32. Along these roads, the two institutions diffused a new architectural form, known as the shop-house. King Chulalongkorn had taken note of shop-houses—two-story structures with a commercial ground floor and a residential upper floor—during a visit to Singapore in 1870 and decided thereafter to import them to Siam. In the kingdom this structure was pushed by the Siamese monarchs, who became the main builders and renters in Bangkok. In a few years, shop-houses became the dominant architectural form in Bangkok and the monarchs accumulated immense wealth from their construction. While the architecture of the city obtained a more siwilai look, modeled on Southeast Asian colonial cities, its urban structure was reorganized following the European metropolis.
33. For a treatment of this break and its relation to previous mandalic urban structures see Herzfeld 2016b, 80–85.
34. Filippi 2008.
layer required new ways of circulating through the city. By the end of the
nineteenth century the first cars, which would become the dominant mode
of transportation in post-1960s Bangkok, traveled the capital’s newly created
road network. In 1907, internal combustion engine buses were introduced in
the Siamese capital, only thirteen years after Karl Benz—the founder of
Mercedes Benz—had built the world’s first prototype. Land-based transpor-
tation, in the early life of the capital, closely followed new developments
occurring in European cities and projected Bangkok into the splendor of a
colonial metropolis. Nothing materialized this progress and Bangkok’s
dreams of siwilai more than the tram, a new mode of transportation that was
conquering European cities from Paris to London. The first electrified sys-
tems of transportation in Asia appeared in Bangkok in 1893—only thirteen
years after the first tramline in the world was established in Saint Petersburg—and, in the elite imaginary, ferried Siam into the age of civilization.

By 1910, when Chulalongkorn died, Bangkok had changed its appearance
and initiated an expansion away from water that would continue well after this
period. Between 1890 and 1910, under the new system of local administration,
more than 120 roads and 30 bridges were built; new patterns of land develop-
ment, rent, and speculation had emerged; and new transportation technologies
(trains, trams, buses, and cars) were conquering the city and the nation. All of
these changes solidified the image of Bangkok as a modern capital firmly based
on land, kept in rhythm by the mechanical time of buses and trams and embell-
ished, as a British journalist reported upon visiting Bangkok in 1904, by the
“broad and well-kept roads, the row of new-built houses and rapidly spreading
shops, with the stuccoed walls of palaces and prisons, of barracks and offices,
displaying the Haussmann-like changes that King Chulalongkorn I (Rama V)
has effected in the outward appearance of his capital.”

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE CITY: LABOR
MOBILIZATIONS (1923–32)

If the outward appearance of Bangkok reminded the visitor of the grandeur of
European capitals, Chulalongkorn’s siwilai city was much less magnificent when
seen from street level. The everyday experience of the city hardly fitted the depiction of an epoch-changing rupture that contemporary writers and later Thai

35. Norman 1904, 124.
historians magniloquently presented. Chulalongkorn’s dream of siwilai remained largely an aspiration, an incomplete project haunted by the previous layers of the city, partial implementation, and unruly everyday practices. These realities would give Bangkok the fractured road network that provided, a century after, the background for the diffusion of motorcycle taxi drivers.

The trams, flagships of the new era, epitomized the contingency of this urban transformation and the contradictions that besieged it. When, in 1893, the Siam Electricity Company (founded by two Danish businessmen) acquired and electrified the failing horse-drawn tram, citizens responded less than enthusiastically. Initially, the marvel and terror of electricity nearly brought the tram’s operations to bankruptcy. Faced with diffused fear of electrocution, strengthened by two such accidents within the first days of operation, Siam Electricity decided to offer tram rides free of charge for the first four months to attract customers and get them accustomed to the new system. The strategy was successful, and after a few months the company started ferrying more and more paying customers. Bangkokians, however, remained wary of the siwilai nature of the trams, and nicknamed the new cars after one of their not-so-civilized characteristics. Formally named “cars on rail” (rot rang), the tram became known in the streets as “smelly cars” (rot ai), a moniker of the experience, introduced by mass transportation, of being packed with strangers inside a steamy box in the tropical heat. Aside from its odors, the tram regularly faced setbacks, electricity shortages, and accidents that forced riders back to the canals and water-based transportation in order to move through Bangkok. Not all of the tram stoppages, however, were due to infrastructural failures or accidents. Occasionally they were the result of political mobilizations that, rather than sending passengers back to Bangkok’s past as an aquatic city, envisioned a new future for the Thai capital, one in which internal migrants manned its labor force. A prolonged strike of tram workers in 1923—the first labor mobilization in the history of Siam—offered one such occurrence and a glimpse into the emergence of a politicized Thai urban working class, a class that would come to dominate informal economies of Bangkok and, sixty years later, drive motorcycle taxis.

The 1923 strike was the result of mounting tensions among the trams’ European administration, its Chinese middlemen, and Thai low-level workers. In mid-December 1922, Hui, a Chinese foreman, sacked a Thai tram worker. His fellow Thai employees appealed to the Danish owners of Siam

36. Brian Larkin has called this relation “the colonial sublime” (Larkin 2008).
Electricity, arguing that the worker had been fired without reasonable cause. When the owners backed Hui’s decision, Thai newspapers reported the Chinese executive saying to his Danish superior: “Sir, you should not take care of Thai workers since they are just like a bunch of dogs, running back to our company after hearing the knocking of coconut shells with dog food.”

These words, whether really uttered or not, sparked the largest workers’ mobilization in Siam and escalated the already palpable tension between Thai and Chinese workers.

Anti-Chinese sentiments had been mounting in the country since the early twentieth century and had been most famously voiced in 1914 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in one of the many editorials he published in the thriving popular press of early twentieth-century Siam titled the “The Jews of the Orient.” In this article the king—under the pseudonym of Asavabahu—responded to the mounting European and North American discourse of the “Yellow Peril,” stressing the difference between Siamese and Chinese. He referred to all Chinese people, regardless of how long they had lived in Siam, as “aliens by birth, by nature, by sympathy, by language, and finally by choice, ... utterly without morals, conscience, mercy, pity. [A population that] where money is concerned, ... like chameleon, change their color to suit their surroundings.”

Adopting an anti-Semitic repertoire familiar to European publics, the king cast the Chinese population as untrustworthy and devoid of any national loyalty—in short, a potential threat to the Siamese nation that should be monitored and kept under control. When 122 Thai tram-workers went on strike on December 31, 1922, they adopted xenophobic language to oppose the Chinese domination of the city’s labor market.

The workers gathered in front of Siam Electricity offices to demand fair wages, a clear set of rules to govern their working activities, as well as the removal of Hui, his assistant Phin, and Ericson, the Danish traffic manager, for cruel and exploitative practices. Faced with the company’s refusal to accept their conditions, they brought their demands to the minister of the

38. The discourse of the Yellow Peril originated in the late nineteenth century with the migration of Chinese population to Europe and the United States. The term was used to express the fear that the mass immigration of Asians threatened white wages and standards of living and that they would eventually take over and destroy western civilization, their ways of life and values.
39. Vajiravudh 1914.
interior, hoping that a fellow Thai would listen to their complaints. The minister agreed to negotiate with Siam Electricity and the workers went back to the company. To their disappointment none of the demands were met. On January 13, 1923, the workers went back on strike, for the third time in a month. This time three hundred workers, about 90 percent of the company’s employees, joined the protest. The minister, worried about his popularity, attempted once again to calm them by adopting the same nationalist discourse that the strikers had used. One of his aids, Phraya Phetphani, addressed the strikers, declaring that “the Minister wishes it to be known that he is a real Thai, as are [you] workers. Therefore the Minister fully intends to help you to the best of his ability and he will not show any favoritism to foreigners.”

Unimpressed by the minister’s empty message, the tram workers refused to return to work.

In the following days, the struggle turned violent. Groups of hooligans and boxers were recruited by the Danish owners to break the strike. On the other side of the picket line, the workers who did not strike faced violent attacks and accusations of being anti-Siamese and supporting Chinese domination. As Siam Electricity continued to ignore the workers’ demands and hire scabs, the attacks on trams intensified. Beatings and bombings replaced bad odors and electrocutions as concrete risks of a tram ride. By the end of January 1923, local newspapers reported that tram service was interrupted by bomb attacks that had damaged multiple tracks, shootings of passengers, and appearances of barricades across the tramlines. Although disruption of service and protests continued until the end of February 1923, the struggle died out by the beginning of March and most of its participants were replaced by new workers.

Aside from the historical importance of this strike for workers’ politics in Siam, the language of national belonging, ethnic inequality, and xenophobia revealed a mounting tension around the ethnic composition of Bangkok’s labor force in the first decades of the twentieth century, a tension that would eventually push the Siamese government to limit the number of Chinese migrants and foster internal migration from the outer provinces. The strike not only showed the fragility of Bangkok’s dreams of siwilai, condensed in the tram, but also foreshadowed a different urban future—one populated by a labor force largely composed by Thai internal migrants who would replace the Chinese in the underbelly of the city. The restructuring of the urban

labor markets, fueled by a nationalist turn in the country’s administration, would take three decades to complete. This process would eventually curtail international labor immigration and attract millions of migrants from the Thai hinterland into Bangkok. Their arrival provided the second condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: the availability of a cheap labor force made up of internal migrants for the northern and northeastern provinces.

THAILAND TO THAIS: CHÂTNIYOM (NATIONALISM) AND URBAN LABOR FORCE (1932–57)

On June 24, 1939, the Siamese National Assembly, instituted after the deposition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, changed the country’s name from Siam to Thailand. This decision was pushed vehemently by then Prime Minister Plaek Phibun Songkhram and his propaganda mastermind Luang Wichit Watthakan. The change was part of a larger Thai-fication of Siam that had been taking place since the 1920s and that accelerated with the fall of the absolute monarchy. Exactly seven years before, on June 24, 1932, a group of civil servants—of which both Phibun and Wichit were prominent members—had staged a bloodless coup that forced King Rama VII to accept a constitution and an elected government. With the formal abolition of absolute monarchy, the country required—as it did four decades earlier with Chulalongkorn’s reforms—a new hegemonic discourse to substitute the royal paradigm and its obsession with siwilai. Nationalism (châtniyom) filled the gap.

Even if nationalist rhetoric had emerged inside royal circles, most notably through the writings of King Vajiravudh, it was not until the demise of absolute monarchy that it became the driving force behind the state’s economic and social policies, first under government of Phahon Phonphayuhasena

41. Descendants of Chinese immigrants, the two men had met in Paris, where Luang Wichit was working in the Royal Siamese delegation as well as studying law and political science. Phibun, a young military officer, was also studying in France and was part of group of young Siamese who were later to become the main actors behind the 1932 deposition of the absolute monarchy. Among them, another Chinese descendant figured prominently: a law student named Pridi Banomyong, whose collaboration with, and later opposition to, Phibun would come to dominate Thai politics for the following three decades.

42. In particular, King Vajiravudh had employed a nationalistic discourse against the first attempt to remove him from power in 1912, suggesting that those “rebels” had been directed by the Chinese.
(1933–38) and later, more fully, with the election of Phibun as prime minister in 1938. Soon after becoming prime minister, Phibun instituted a four-person committee headed by Luang Wichit which would promulgate cultural mandates to remove what they saw as “flaws of Siamese society” that hampered the country’s progress. Central to this enterprise was a representation of Siam as an ethnically homogenous nation. With this in mind, the first cultural mandate suggested renaming the country Thailand.

The decision to connect the nation to a specific ethnic group—namely the Tai—claimed a direct correspondence between the dominant, but by no means sole, population in Siam and the citizens of the Thai nation. The committee’s declared goals were to promote cultural homogenization and to expel perceived outsiders from the national body, united under the slogan “Thailand to the Thais.” Highland tribes, southern Malays, and other ethnic minorities were to adapt and adopt Thainess (khwâm pen thai). Foremost among these were the economically dominant Chinese. Xenophobia and distrust of Thai-Chinese’s loyalties, which had colored the 1923 tram strike, reemerged under the government of Phibun and were magnified by an unfortunate international configuration. At a time when Thailand was knitting closer relations with Japan, China was at war with the emerging Asian power. In 1937, following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the second Sino-Japanese War broke out. Japanese forces blockaded the main southern Chinese ports in 1938 and Chinese merchants throughout Southeast Asia launched a boycott of Japanese goods. This put the Thai-Chinese population in a tight spot: while as Thai they were allied with Japan, as Chinese descendants they were presumed to be collecting money to finance the war effort and participating in the boycott. In a period of nationalist zeal, their double loyal-

43. As Thongchai Winichakul has argued, “in contemporary Thai, the word that connotes the Tai/Thai ethnicity is spelled in two ways. With exactly the same pronunciation—’thai’—one is spelled with a y at the end and the other without, respectively as ‘thaiy’ and ‘thai’. When spelled ‘thaiy’ the word denotes the modern nation-state and its citizens, although in its Romanisation as ‘Thai(land)’, the letter ‘y’ is dispensed with. When spelled without the y ending, it is a looser term denoting the ethnic peoples whose languages belong to the same Tai/Thai linguistic family. This ‘Thai’ (without a y ending) includes the Shan of Burma, the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong, and people speaking various Tai/Thai dialects in Thailand today, including the Muang people of former Lanna (Chiang Mai), the Tai Lue, the Tai Maung, the Tai Khoen in the border areas between China, Burma and Laos, the Black and White Tai in Vietnam, and others” (Thongchai 2008a, 576). In the writing of Luang Wichit the two terms were conflated, overlapping ethnicity and citizenship.
ties were considered unacceptable, bordering on treason. Non-Thai ethnic dress and surnames were forbidden, education in languages other than Central Thai prohibited, and the population was encouraged to support Thai products and refrain from buying foreign goods. All of these measures had a direct effect on the Chinese communities that controlled both commerce and labor markets in the capital. Thai-fication of the national economy, and in particular its manual labor, became a central objective of the Thai government. Distinct from other cultural mandates, this objective was supported both by the nationalist prime minister and his socialist alter-ego, Minister of Finance Pridi Banomyong. This unprecedented consensus initiated an enormous shift in the composition of Bangkok’s labor markets, away from the hands of Chinese coolies toward Thai bodies.

By the late 1930s, Phibun created national companies and restricted the access of non-Thais to the production and distribution of commodities deemed of national interest, such as petroleum, tobacco, salt, and livestock. Remarkably, among the markets reserved to Thai nationals were taxis and rickshaws, which were rapidly spreading across the city. Until that moment, transportation in Bangkok had been borne by the hands, feet, and shoulders of Chinese coolies. Now the government was resolute in giving control to Thai nationals, where it remains to this day. The proponents of these legislations knew that without changing the attitudes among Thais—who were seen as looking down on manual labor—their interventions would remain only on paper. Again, Luang Wichit stepped in. In a lecture at the Ministry of Defense on November 16, 1939, he credited the widespread disdain of manual labor to a royalist elitism that was a product of Khmer influences and not Thai culture. Luang Wichit called for a human revolution aimed at recognizing work as a source of joy, life, and honor, in an attempt to manufacture the compulsion to work among Thai workers.

Even if this shift in attitudes and policies were sidetracked by the Second World War—in which Thailand first allied with the Axis but was then invaded by the Japanese in December 1941—the idea that Chinese prominence over the Thai economy needed to be limited and their migratory flows

44. Once again, Luang Wichit played a central role in voicing these concerns. In July 1938, during a public lecture at Chulalongkorn University on the Nazi annexation of Austria, Wichit resuscitated the language of Vajiravudh and aligned it to the growing tide of German National Socialism. In his words, the Chinese were worse than the Jews and he suggested that time had arrived for Siam to deal with its own Jews, following the model of German racial campaigns.
controlled, survived the disastrous world conflict. In 1947, during the few months he remained prime minister, Thamrong Navaswadhi took a major policy decision, one too often overlooked in Thai historiography. On May 1, the prime minister signed a decree that established a yearly quota of ten thousand Chinese immigrants. In 1949 the quota was reduced to two hundred people, after decades of Chinese migration to Thailand on the order of millions. The numbers of Chinese migrants to Thailand dropped rapidly, both as a result of the new policy and of Mao’s rise to power, which blocked emigration from China. The importance of this change cannot be overstated. In the five decades before 1949, Bangkok had grown from around two hundred thousand people to more than six hundred thousand. Most of this growth was driven by Chinese immigration, which had peaked in the 1920s when 408,100 Chinese citizens had moved to Thailand. The city’s roads, shops, and factories were dominated by them. If you were to interact with urban workers in construction, commerce, industry, services, as well as transportation, you would be dealing, in all probability, with first-generation Chinese migrants. In Siam, rural wages had historically been higher than urban wages, making migration from the provinces unattractive for all but members of the regional elite looking for a way into the expanding state bureaucracy. Once Chinese migration was curtailed, businesses in Bangkok started to look for labor inside the national territory. Rural workers, however, had no incentives, necessities, or desires to move to the city. Phibun, who had orchestrated a military coup against his own government on March 1, 1948, set out to solve this problem.

In 1955, the military dictator introduced a new tax that would revolutionize the structure of the Thai economy and its labor markets. The rice premium, a levy on rice exports, was supposed to regulate the internal prices of the main food staple in the country and produce more revenue. Its effects, however, were much deeper and enduring. More than any other measure, this policy reorganized the relation between Bangkok and the Thai countryside. First, rural production was undervalued, forcing many farmers, impoverished by the burden of taxation on their main agricultural product, to move to the city in search of more remunerative occupations. If Luang Wichit’s human revolution tried to generate the compulsion to work, the rice premium forced workers into a compulsion to migrate. Once in the city, many of them found urban wages lower than they expected. Wages were calculated in relation to

45. Skinner 1957, 177.
the price of reproduction of labor—the cost of surviving in the city in a way that allowed the workers to keep working. By discouraging exports, the tax de facto cut the price of rice and consequently provided the Thai industrial sector with a cheap work force. At the same time, the money taken from taxing agricultural production was invested in fueling the industrial growth of Bangkok, rather than reinvested in the agricultural areas from where they were collected.\textsuperscript{47} The transfer of resources was immense and Thai villages were impoverished to develop Bangkok. An unprecedented quantity of human, agricultural, and economic resources were extracted from rural Thailand and used to finance Bangkok’s development. It was this dispossession that kick-started the country’s urban boom and forced millions of agricultural workers, who could not cope with the rapidly decreasing economic margins of agricultural activities, to join its labor force.

For the first few decades after the tax was put into effect, most of the migrants arriving in Bangkok were farmers from the central region. That would soon change.\textsuperscript{48} Within twenty years, the city was flooded with migrants from the northeastern provinces, traveling down a newly built road network that connected them to Bangkok.\textsuperscript{49} Their arrival radically shifted the composition of Bangkok’s labor force and restructured the social and economic geography of the Thai nation around the capital, transforming the northeastern provinces into a labor reserve for Bangkok. In the decade between the introduction of a quota on Chinese immigration in 1947 and the end of Phibun’s dictatorship in 1957, Bangkok’s population doubled, from 604,530 to 1,204,894, and the city established its economic primacy over the country. Most of its growth was led by young internal migrants who would

\textsuperscript{47} Feeny 2003; Parnwell 1996.

\textsuperscript{48} In 1960, 61 percent of migrants in Bangkok were coming from the central region and only 20 percent from the Northeast. By 1980 northeastern migrants composed more than 50 percent of Bangkok’s labor force (Sternstein 1971).

\textsuperscript{49} These roads, however, were not built with the aim of assisting the transferring resources, natural and human, from the outer provinces to the city; rather they were put in place with the opposite trajectory in mind. Starting with the Korean War (1950–53), Thailand emerged as the United States’ primary ally in a region seen as at the forefront of communist expansion. After the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, and the beginning of the Vietnam War, the American presence grew exponentially. Concern over the potential expansion of communist forces into Thailand drove U.S. funds into the country. This economic support materialized, among other things, through a capillary system of roads built to guarantee easy access to areas of potential risk, particularly in the northeastern region. The Friendship Highway, built in 1955 to connect Bangkok to the northeastern city of Korat, was the main infrastructural intervention in the area.
eventually start driving motorcycle taxis. At this time, however, they joined the available, underpaid, and often unspecialized labor force that sustained the booming Thai industrial economy. It was this boom that provided the third condition of possibility for the emergence of motortaxis in Bangkok: affordable motorcycles.

INDUSTRIAL BANGKOK: PHATTHANĀ (DEVELOPMENT) AND PRIVATE TRANSPORTATION (1958–80)

On October 20, 1958, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat led a coup d’état against a military government that he himself had installed just a year before. Sarit, a charming officer born in Bangkok and raised in the northeastern town of Khon Kaen, presented his seizure of power as a revolution. While the previous revolution in 1932 had removed the Siamese absolute monarchy and propelled the country toward what its leaders saw as the modern world of constitutional monarchies, Sarit’s revolution was faithful to the astronomical origins of the word and plotted a return to a political system that he saw as more Thai, one in which the monarchy regained its centrality. As Sarit looked to reverse the democratic turn of the 1930s, his revolution faced the same challenges encountered by its predecessors. A new hegemonic discourse was needed to support the emerging political-economic system and make its radical changes acceptable. Phatthanā, or development, was the answer. “Our important task in this revolutionary era,” Sarit declared in a brief piece he penned in 1960, “is development which includes economic development, educational development, and administrative development.” For Sarit, phatthanā relied on three principles: economic progress, order, and political obedience. His ideology focused on social and economic progress and dismissed democratization as a foreign influence, inapplicable to Thailand. Nonetheless, much of his economic policies were inspired by international developmentalist states. In particular, the first World Bank economic report on Thailand, which was carried out in 1957, became the blueprint for Sarit’s boost to industrial development through private investments, rather than through state investment as it had been the case under Phibun.

50. Thak 2007, 92.
51. Ibid., 151.
Under the newly created NEBD (National Economic Development Board), later renamed NESDB (National Economic and Social Development Board), the first national plan came into action in 1961, supported by money and expertise from the United States as part of their increased imperialist and anticommunist interventions in the region.52 The objectives of the plan were double: upgrading national infrastructure—for example, roads, water, and electricity—and promoting private industrial development. Sarit’s government—following the advice of the World Bank—focused state investments on infrastructural development while leaving manufacturing to private capital, domestic or foreign.53 In order to attract such capital, new economic incentives were introduced to subsidize industries considered essential for the national economy—including the automotive sector—and labor markets were deregulated. Four decades of labor organizing, which had started with a tram workers’ strike in January 1923, were erased overnight.

The new direction introduced by Sarit continued to dominate Thailand well after his death in 1963. Between 1960 and 1972, foreign investment in industry amounted to 32 percent of the total registered capital. Among them Japan was the largest investor, accounting for 38 percent of the total, followed by Taiwan (16 percent) and the United States (14 percent).54 An emerging local automotive industry attracted a significant percentage of these direct investments, particularly from Japan. In the years following the first national plan, the major international automobile manufacturers began opening production lines in Thailand. Nissan Motors paved the way in 1962, followed by Toyota Motors (1963), Honda Motors (1964), Ford Motor Company (1970), and General Motors (1972). Together, they slowly transformed the industrial outskirts of Bangkok into what came to be known as the Detroit of Asia. Inside the automotive industry, motorcycles played a central role. In 1966, the first motorcycle assembled in Thailand came out of the newly opened Siam Yamaha factory. Two years later, Honda—which soon came to dominate the Thai market—opened its first out-of-Japan motorcycle production line in the

52. In the period between 1962 and 1970, under the umbrella of USOM (United States Operation Mission), American funds to Thailand averaged 14.2 billion baht a year, roughly 12 percent of the total national earning from exports. Not only money, however, was offered to Thailand. Engineers, security experts, military personnel, agricultural and irrigation experts, urban planners: a whole transfer of expertise supported the alliance between the two nations.
54. Ibid., 187.
outsskirts of Bangkok, in one of the many industrial developments funded with tax revenues from the rice premium. The two other main Japanese motorcycle producers, Suzuki and Kawasaki, followed the lead and opened factories in 1968 and 1976.

Over this decade, cheap locally assembled motorcycles spread rapidly. The opening up of village economies, out-migration, and the growth of disposable income contributed to the diffusion of motorcycles. In particular, when the 1973 economic crisis drove up the global price of oil and Thailand’s inflation, motorcycles, with good fuel economy and affordable purchase prices, became an attractive option for the country’s mobility needs. The industry grew by a steady 30 percent a year in the mid-1970s and motorbikes became the preferred mode of transportation and status symbol for a new class of seasonal rural migrants who complemented their agricultural income with migration to the city. When Sarit first seized power in 1957, Thailand had 1,617 motorcycles—owned by elite families and imported mostly from the United Kingdom. By 1981, the number of motorcycles had skyrocketed to 307,168, of which 99 percent were produced domestically. The great majority of these motorbikes were not in Bangkok but rather in the Thai countryside, where unpaved streets and limited income made them the only viable means of transportation. It was on those muddy roads that many of the migrants who would become drivers learned to ride a bike.

If in regional centers and villages the era of phatthana was experienced atop a bike, cars driven by the growing urban middle classes crowded the streets of Bangkok, under the pressure of a new urban model that had traveled from the United States, together with funds, expertise, and urban planning techniques. In 1958, the USOM (United States Operation Mission) had sent a group of urban planners from MIT to Thailand to devise the first master plan for its rapidly expanding capital. After an extensive study of Bangkok’s urban infrastructure, economy, and everyday life, in 1960 the group presented to the Thai government a final document—the Greater Bangkok Plan 1990. The plan, even though never officially ratified, provided a framework for the development of Bangkok over the next three decades. Its main contribution was the transformation of the Thai capital into a car-based city, a model most famously realized in Los Angeles. Two main proposals, consistent with dominant principles of modernist urban planning, emerged from this document: building new highways to connect the central business dis-

strict directly to outer ring roads and introducing zoning practices to allocate different areas of the city to different functions—commercial, industrial, and residential. Both proposals demanded a departure from the urban structures and practices that had dominated Bangkok since the reign of Chulalongkorn. Once again, this new vision presented itself as a rupture which would erase the previous layers of the city to make space for itself.

Bangkok became a laboratory for the implementation of state hegemony. While Parisian boulevards and European-style public transportation—such as buses and trams—had shaped *siwilai* Bangkok between the 1890s and 1960s, the new *phatthanā* city was to be dominated by American-style high-speed highways and private transportation. Canals, which had played a secondary yet important role in the previous amphibious urbanism, were filled in to make space for new roads. The unruly urban flows were once again to be concentrated and controlled, this time into individualized vehicles. Similarly, the landscapes through which these flows occurred were to be divided and reorganized to make space for a new, top-down order. Residential, commercial, and industrial spaces, which had previously mixed, would be disentangled. In the plan, commercial areas would remain in the city center, residential districts would move beyond them, and industrial production would be segregated to the urban periphery.

As had happened with Chulalongkorn’s *siwilai* city, the grand plans, if coherent and definitive on paper, crashed against the messiness of everyday life and the fragmented state apparatus that was supposed to implement them. The dream of rewriting the city looked, in practice, more like a confused entanglement of scribbles than a tidy overlay. Flows remained fractured and unruly, landscapes entangled and mixed. The master plan was only partially adopted and large portions of its implementation were left to private developers, who only followed through on selected measures and left other aspects untouched.56

56. An example of this piecemeal implementation was the construction of shop-houses, which had dominated Bangkok in the previous century and represented the epitome of mixed use. These structures became less omnipresent in the city and were often replaced by concrete residential buildings, increasingly taller and spread out. Yet they did not entirely disappear. New shop-houses continued, and continue today, to be built in the center of the city and in its newly formed suburbs, displacing the suburban dreams and zoning principles that American planners had introduced to Bangkok in the 1960s. Similarly, the dream of moving the city through private means remained unfulfilled. As Bangkok sprawled, investment in buses was cut to the bone. For two decades, no new routes were added, and in that same period, other forms of public transportation were eliminated—rickshaws were banned in 1960, tramways in 1968. However, their presence—or rather their absence—remained...
In particular, where the master plan had imagined large investments to create a grid-like road network, private investors mostly developed secondary roads by filling in existing canals. The very name of the new roads—soi—had been previously used to refer to small waterways. If the names of the new roads hinted at Bangkok’s aquatic past, natural forces cyclically threw the city back into it. Floods, in particular, marked the history of the Thai capital and provided, and still provide today, a reminder of Bangkok’s complex relation with its previous life as an aquatic city, submerging the streets of the Thai capital, and inundating decades of land-based development. As a result, the traces of Bangkok’s past aquatic life shaped, challenged, and often impinged upon the dream of phatthanā Bangkok. Those traces shaped the final conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: a maze of disconnected and narrow soi that made motorcycle taxis indispensable for public transportation in the city.

The soi urban structure was the result of leaving urban development in the hands of private investors without regulating their activities. Land development, which had been directed by the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) and the Ministry of Public Works, emerged in the mid-1960s as a viable opportunity for private enterprises to turn a profit. Developers started to buy large portions of land, mostly on the outskirts of the city, and to transform them into residential plots. This urbanization of rural land proceeded according to a familiar script. First, the developers acquired the plot either from private landowners or from the public administration and carried out essential land and drainage improvements. Second, basic infrastructure such as roads, water lines, electricity, and sewage systems were put in place, at their expense. Finally, the land developers divided the area into smaller plots to be sold to housing developers or directly contracted to house builders. Once the construction was completed, the houses would be sold to individual buyers.57

While the reliance on private investors saved the Thai government heavy investments in road and land improvement, it also left developers free to

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engrained both in the collective memory and in the material features of the city. Not only did the nostalgic remembrances of the trams’ quiet pace and whistling sounds survive, but the very tracks on which the carriages ran remained—and still remain today—mounted on the road surface, reminders of a previous layer of the urban palimpsest. As every driver in Bangkok knows, these tracks still groove the road pavement and disrupt the smooth flow of new private means of transportation, causing drivers to slightly swerve their cars and motorcyclists to incur more serious accidents, reminders of the previous layers.
maximize the amount of land transformed into housing, which they could sell, minimizing the amount of space and money allocated to infrastructure. As a result, the city grew, and to this day it remains without any centralized service, no citywide sewage system, no gas grid, and no functional street network. Road surfaces in particular suffered greatly from this mode of financing. They, as the only portion of land that developers could not sell, were kept to a minimum and often obtained by filling preexisting small canals. These long, narrow, and often dead-end waterways, which were part of the agricultural land purchased, provided the basis for the secondary road system of contemporary Bangkok and created bottlenecks once they connected to larger thoroughfares. This soi system, spreading out like slender branches into the agricultural landscape without connecting one to the other, followed a different logic from roads in comparable car-based cities, more fit for boats than for cars and buses. Once again, previous layers of the urban palimpsest lingered into its present, haunting and orienting its future.

Inside this scant and disconnected road network, the number of vehicles in Bangkok grew rapidly. Traffic jams became a symbol of life in the Thai capital and called into question the dream of the efficient and smoothly developed city. Against the backdrop of this dream, the reality of Bangkok’s circulatory system was a bundle of a functional web of elevated highways and giant multilane streets that clashed with the confusing and dysfunctional maze of long, narrow, and often dead-end soi. It was this convoluted network of roads that created the excruciating traffic jams that set the scene for the diffusion of motorcycle taxis in the early 1980s. By that time, all the conditions of possibility of their emergence were in place: government officials able to use of their state authority to control and operate businesses in a gray legal area the dominated the streets of the clogged city; millions of rural migrants who flooded Bangkok looking for jobs; affordable motorcycles which spread in the 1970s in the Thai countryside and offered the only viable mode of transportation inside the growing traffic jams; and finally, a dysfunctional road system that had become impervious to cars and buses and blocked the city’s arteries.

A SOLUTION TO TRAFFIC: MOTORCYCLE TAXIS

In the era of phatthanā, Bangkok boomed both geographically and economically. Its area almost tripled from 125 square kilometers in 1955 to 330 square...
kilometers in 1981. The urban population expanded even faster, rocketing from just over a million in 1957 to over five million in 1981, owing to increased birth rates, life expectancy, and internal migration. By the early 1980s, more than 50 percent of the migrants who were flowing into the Thai capital came from the northeast regions. In 1983, when the first newspaper article reporting on motorcycle taxis came out, 11 percent of the nation’s population lived in Bangkok. The capital now housed a population fifty-five times larger than that of Chiang Mai—the second biggest city in the country. Seventy-five percent of the nation’s phones were in Bangkok, 32 percent of its GDP was produced in this area, and 61 percent of the national electricity consumed here. More than 50 percent of country’s motor vehicles were in the capital, with more than four hundred thousand motorcycles and around a million cars. In this period, Bangkok emerged beyond doubt as the heart of the Thai nation, pumping human, agricultural, and economic resources out of the countryside while threatened by traffic increasingly clogging its arteries.

By the late 1970s, Bangkok had risen to global infamy as a traffic disaster. The small soi operated as bottlenecks for traffic along larger roads. Private cars lined up in long winding queues at the entrance of these alleys. Buses and vans often did not even fit into the soi, which could hardly accommodate two cars traveling in different directions. Hours and hours were lost every day walking along these long roads to reach a bus stop or waiting in a queue of cars and buses. Millions of dollars were poured into foreign consultancies to create reports titled “Traffic Disaster” and “Bangkok Chaos” which continued to propose solutions that the Thai government was unwilling to implement. It was in these gridlocks, which came to characterize life in Bangkok, that the contradictions and contingencies of the new order imagined in the era of phatthanā were most evident. As public transport remained hindered by a lack of investment, the elimination of trams and rickshaws, and the impenetrable soi system, local government struggled to find a solution for the everyday mobility of a city with the highest car ownership per capita and the lowest road pavement per car in Asia. By the early 1980s, in the confused palimpsest of Bangkok, traffic had become unbearable. Out of necessity, a response started to emerge: a new informal solution that allowed people to cut through the traffic jams characteristic of life in Bangkok, to move, like water had once done, by finding gaps and rivulets in the midst of traffic. This solution was motorcycle taxis.

58. Between 1961 and 1967 the population of Bangkok grew by 40 percent, the number of vehicles by 125 percent, while the road surface only extended by 5.4 percent (Sternstein 1971, 214).