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Report

Thanks to the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I was able to travel to Bangkok this summer to catalog and preserve historical documents and photographs left by Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram that were under threat by an increasingly authoritarian government that wishes to eradicate the legacy of the 1932 revolution. The revolution, which changed Thailand's absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, ushered in an era where civilians were able to take an active role in the governing of the country. Since the rise of hyper-royalism in the late 1950s however, the history and accomplishments the revolutionaries were a part of have been suppressed as the nation has shifted back towards absolutism. Its erasure has taken with it examples of how those without royal blood have contributed to the country, making the task of preserving this cultural history vital to Thailand and Thai scholarship.

Two months before my arrival in Bangkok, the democracy plaque commemorating the 1932 revolution was secretly removed from its place in front of the parliament building in April of 2017. With the plaque's disappearance was a ban from the junta government of any public discussion of the missing democracy plaque. Officials and police overseeing the disappearance claimed they had no idea who had removed the plaque, and made no move to replace it. In its place importantly, was a new plaque that praised the monarchy. On June 24th- the anniversary of the 1932 revolution- the junta arrested an activist who tried to place a replica of the democracy plaque on top of the new royal one. The disappearance of the democracy plaque, whilst easily the most public move in recent years, has been part of a larger effort to suppress the history of the 1932 revolution and the civilians connected to it.

Working with one of the central revolutionary lineages-the Pibulsonggram family-I was able to catalog and scan letters, journals, photographs about Field Marshal Pibulsonggram who served for two terms as the Prime Minister of Thailand under the revolutionary government. Collecting historical items related to him was especially important not only because he was one of the most prominent and powerful figures from the revolutionary group, but also because his reputation was specifically targeted by monarchists' in Thailand who saw him as a rival to the throne. Pibulsonggram's personal journals were of particular importance, detailing his thoughts

and plans from civilian life to military tactics, and providing an inside look into one of the most controversial figures in Thai history. One of the journals, titled Phetchaboon, detailed the secret mission the Field Marshal led of moving the country's treasury to the Phetchaboon caves in the northeast. The purpose of the mission was to hide the treasury from the invading Japanese forces during World War II. This journal provides compelling evidence that rather than colluding with the Japanese, as present accounts report, Pibulsonggram was actively protecting Thai interests. The collection also included a letter from Winston Churchill-or rather a copy of it as the original had been destroyed by Thailand's National Archives-that stated that Thailand must find a way to defend themselves against the Japanese during World War II, as the British forces were too occupied to provide any aid. Thailand, lacking the military force to combat the Japanese, was thus left in the position to allow Japanese occupation or face ruin. Both of these documents are crucial to Thai history, as they offer a portrait of the revolutionary Prime Minister that differs from royalist accounts that mark him as an Axis sympathizer who supported the Japanese and betrayed the Allies.

Photographs following the revolutionary government also depicted a political life very different from the one today. Thailand leads the world in coup de tats, experiencing its 19th coup in May 2014. The rationale given for the frequency of these coups, given by the military and royal establishment, is that politicians are corrupt and that it is important that the country has "good," moral leaders. In the revolutionary photos however, the Field Marshal is seen surrounded by crowds of exultant petitioners, commanding the respect and love of the people. The relationship between the government and the people, at least as it is captured in these photographs, is not adversarial, providing another counterpoint to present day narratives.

These primary sources that challenge revisionist Thai histories are important to the nation because they provide evidence that civilians who were not of royal descent have made great contributions to the country. The revolutionaries, who are largely erased from Thai history books (within Thailand), established: the national budget, Department of Social Welfare, Food and Drug Administration, abolished the colonialist Bowring Treaty, founded or greatly contributed to Thailand's leading universities, and built hospitals and schools throughout the nation, to name but a few accomplishments. This cultural heritage must be protected, as it has currently been removed from Thailand's cultural and political institutions and the reputations of prominent members deliberately destroyed.

Examples of this erasure I witnessed firsthand this summer also included the artillery base that the Field Marshal had founded, and the museum at Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy where he was an alumni. At the Pibulsonggram Artillery Base, descendants of the revolutionaries have met annually to honor the Field Marshal on his birthday. The museum on the property holding documents related to Pibulsonggram however, had been emptied, with the descendants no longer having access to those materials. The Pibulsonggram family was also informed that the statue at the entrance of the base of the Field Marshal would be replaced by a Thai monarch. The Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, where the Pibulsonggram family had donated much of their personal family collection relating to the Field Marshal, had removed the majority of the collection from display and placed instead in storage where items had gone missing or were damaged.

As I left Bangkok on August 15th, the democracy plaque is still missing with no plans towards its restoration by the government. However, thanks to the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson award, I was able to preserve items left by Field Marshal Pibulsonggram for safekeeping at the University of Wisconsin-Madison library. My dissertation research on Thai identity has now been refined in focus thanks to this summer research, as I can now study how it has been shaped by the state in regards to what is included, and most importantly, omitted. I cannot thank the Jensen family and the Institute for Regional and International Studies enough for making this research possible.